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No Happiness without virtue

In defense of Diderot's defense of virtue

It is generally acknowledged that the Enlightenment marks a turning point in the history of morality; it is the point at which the teleological world view which secured morality breaks down. Enlightenment philosophers, who contributed to its destruction, are often criticized because their naïve faith in reason, nature or sympathy lead them to underestimate the consequences of the revolution they were provoking. But if one philosopher should be cleared from this charge, it is Denis Diderot. His thought has the remarkable feature of having its roots in the teleological tradition that ended with the Enlightenment, and of having evolved into the doctrine that is often said to have ruined this tradition: atheistic materialism. To realize the potential consequences of this evolution, we only need to compare the morals of Shaftesbury, who was Diderot's first inspiration, with the morals of La Mettrie, whose materialism shares many features with that of Diderot. In his *Inquiry concerning virtue and merit*, Shaftesbury unfolds a deist world view, whose axiom is that there is no happiness without virtue; virtue is inscribed in all men by nature, and happiness culminates in the contemplation of the cosmic order. In the *Anti-Sénèque*, La Mettrie rejects any general definition of the good, defines happiness in terms of bodily sensations, and promotes an individualistic quest for pleasure. From virtue¹ to pleasure: these two texts, which are separated by less than forty years, seem to belong to different epochs.

Diderot's position relative to Shaftesbury and La Mettrie is uncomfortable: although he rejected Shaftesbury's teleology, he always maintained that there is no happiness without virtue, and relentlessly attacked La Mettrie's hedonism. He was acutely aware, however, that

¹ In what follows, virtue is used as the antonym of selfishness; to be virtuous is to be sensitive to, and have regards for, other's well-being and the demands of the world. I shall not, however, provide a detailed account of specific virtues. What is at stake is an overall conception of life: does my happiness demand that I think not only of myself? If the answer is yes, one then would have to specify *how* one thinks of others, what role is played by specific virtues, and so on: but this is beyond the scope of this article.

his commitment to virtue was at odds with new ways of thinking that were permeating, beyond philosophy, society as a whole; *Le Neveu de Rameau* testifies to his lucidity. In this text, Diderot stages a conversation between the philosopher (Moi), and the eponymous character (or Lui). I will argue later that Moi upholds Diderot's moral principles, and Lui is close to La Mettrie; yet Moi is mercilessly ridiculed by Lui. Such is Rameau's brilliance that Hegel, Marx, Foucault and MacIntyre (among many others) have admired him for exposing the truth of the Enlightenment; conversely, they regarded the philosopher as the incarnation of the Enlightenment's naivety, shallowness, narrow mindedness or dogmatism. However, Moi's failure to convince Lui does not necessarily imply that he is wrong; his moral principles could be both right and unconvincing. This interpretation is supported by a confession made by Diderot in the *Réfutation d'Helvétius*:

Je suis convaincu que, dans une société même aussi mal ordonnée que la nôtre, où le vice qui réussit est souvent applaudi, et la vertu qui échoue presque toujours ridicule, je suis convaincu, dis-je, qu'à tout prendre, on n'a rien de mieux à faire pour son bonheur que d'être homme de bien ; c'est l'ouvrage, à mon gré, le plus important et le plus intéressant à faire ; c'est celui que je me rappellerais avec le plus de satisfaction, dans mes derniers moments. C'est une question que j'ai méditée cent fois et avec toute la contention d'esprit dont je suis capable ; j'avais, je crois, les données nécessaires ; vous l'avouerez-vous ? je n'ai même pas osé prendre la plume pour en écrire la première ligne. Je me disais : « Si je ne sors pas victorieux de cette tentative, je deviens l'apologiste de la méchanceté : j'aurai trahi la cause de la vertu, j'aurai encouragé l'homme au vice. Non, je ne me sens pas bastant pour ce sublime travail ; j'y consacrerai inutilement toute ma vie. »²

I shall interpret *Le Neveu de Rameau* as an illustration of Diderot's prognosis: a philosopher who is rightly convinced that there is no happiness without virtue fails to convince his interlocutor, and eventually alienates him. My aim is to find, in the very defeat of the philosopher, evidence that his principles are right. But I shall first sum up the moral beliefs Diderot inherited from Shaftesbury, then see how they survive Diderot's conversion to atheism in the *Lettre sur les Aveugles*. I will then turn to La Mettrie's *Anti-Sénèque*, and read *Le Neveu de Rameau* in the light of the challenge posed by La Mettrie to Diderot.

1. Why should we be virtuous?

In the *Inquiry concerning virtue and merit*, Shaftesbury attempts to defend virtue against two doctrines: Christianity and atheism. He regards them as the two sides of the same coin: Christianity depicts man as a sinner who only rises above vice thanks to God, and atheism

² Diderot, *Réfutation d'Helvétius*, in *Œuvres*, ed. Laurent Versini, coll. Bouquin, vol.I, p.832 (unless where indicated, all subsequent Diderot quotes refer to this edition. For each, I give the volume and the page).

deposes God and therefore authorizes vice. Shaftesbury aims to demonstrate that the fundamental mistake of both clans is to regard man as inherently vicious. He suggests the implausibility of this view by inscribing man within a wider conception of nature.

Nature has inscribed in every animal two impulses; one towards its own good and one towards the good of its species. An animal is in the state most conforming to its nature, which is necessarily its state of greatest happiness, when it devotes itself in the appropriate measure to both. This applies to humans as well and, like all weak creatures, they are meant to live in close collaboration with their kin. Nature, then, is the root of human virtues. Unfortunately, a quick glance at human affairs is enough to see that they are not as they should naturally be:

The smaller creatures, who live as it were in cities (as bees and ants), continue the same train and harmony of life, nor are they ever false to those affections which move them to operate towards their public good (...). While man, notwithstanding the assistance of religion and the direction of laws, is often found to live in less conformity with nature and, by means of religion itself, is often rendered the more barbarous and inhuman.³

Shaftesbury's assertion that religion and laws have corrupted humans evokes the primitivism which was widespread in the 18th century, which pictures humanity as originally pure and progressively corrupt. But Shaftesbury is not a primitivist; it is inherent to human nature that we should exercise our reason and rise above instinctive goodness to knowledge of the good. The tragedy is not, therefore, that we have moved away from primitive life, but that we failed to evolve into the form of life that would suit us. Shaftesbury thus rejects two opposite theories; one that would view morality as immediately provided by nature, the other that would see it as artificial through and through, unrelated to nature.

Shaftesbury concludes that virtue *'is really something in itself and in the nature of things, not arbitrary or factitious (if I may so speak), not constituted from without or dependent on custom, fancy or will.'*⁴ 'Things' does not mean only physical objects, and Shaftesbury thinks we perceive virtues in human relationships in the same way as we perceive goodness in nature. It is this intuitive perception of goodness that is the foundation of deism. Shaftesbury readily grants that people can perceive goodness without their having ever wondered whether or not there is a God, but if they wonder why there is goodness, they will necessarily conclude that nature must be the creation of a benevolent intelligence. Shaftesbury concludes that *'whoever sincerely defends virtue and is a realist in morality must of necessity,*

³ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, Cambridge University Press 1999, p.199-200.

⁴ Idem, p.266-267.

*in a manner, by the same scheme of reasoning, prove as very a realist in divinity.*⁵ Our knowledge of God is thus grounded in our experience of the good. But once we believe in God, this belief complements the experience it originated from. Such experience can only be partial; it is unavoidable that a man will face hardships. But if he believes that the world is the creation of a benevolent God, he will be inclined to assume that even what he fails to see as good must be so. If a man succeeds in thus raising above the limits of his own limited perceptions and embrace the whole universe as good, he will reach ecstasy.

Although Shaftesbury insists on the naturalness of virtue, he does not deny that it demands great efforts: we are constantly prey to vicious impulses. But the fate of those who give in shows that only virtue can fulfill a person's true aspirations. This is what Shaftesbury establishes negatively in the second book of the *Inquiry concerning virtue and merit*, which exposes the misery of the vicious life. He gathers psychological observations showing that even the most vicious people confusedly search for pleasures which only virtue could truly provide: all thieves crave the esteem and admiration of an accomplice, prostitutes' clients generally want to believe that they are desired, people who fake bravery wish they were truly brave, and so on. Vicious people may be convinced that they have no need for virtue, but they are constantly chasing its shadow. This can only make their pleasures ephemeral, and breed restlessness and anxiety. Only virtue, then, can provide people with that to which they truly aspire; hence the indissoluble relation between virtue and happiness. Those are, arguably, fairly common arguments – which is not to say they bear no weight.

Altogether, the *Inquiry* presents us with a system that rises from biology to theology, *via* human psychology. It has, however, a peculiar characteristic; none of its parts is presented as its foundation, in the sense that it would secure the whole from a neutral, objective, indubitable standpoint. What makes all the parts of Shaftesbury's demonstration 'hang together' is, to a large extent, intuitions grounded in lived experiences; experiences of the pleasures of virtue and the frustrations of vice, experiences of the beauty of the world, and so on. In a sense, Shaftesbury uses the experience of the good as the premise for his defense of virtue. This could be seen as begging the question, and Shaftesbury's demonstration could be deemed a failure. This response, however, might be too harsh; it is hard to imagine how any defense of virtue would be possible from a perspective that would not presuppose a minimal acquaintance with it. By relating virtuous experiences to all facts of life, Shaftesbury guides his readers from a mere intuition to a full-blown world view. In return, the coherence and

⁵ Idem, p.267.

beauty of the world view confirms that we chose the right starting point. In other words, Shaftesbury's demonstration might be circular, but it is a virtuous circle. It remains to be seen, however, whether this circularity justifies Shaftesbury's final assessment of his achievement:

We have cast up all those particulars from whence, as by way of addition and subtraction, the main sum or general account of happiness is either augmented or diminished. And, if there be no article exceptionable in this scheme or moral arithmetic, the subject treated may be said to have an evidence as great as that which is found in numbers or mathematics.⁶

Shaftesbury claims that his comparison of virtuous and vicious affections has the same objectivity as a comparison of numbers. But his demonstration rests on two fundamental premises; that one has a minimal acquaintance with virtue (Shaftesbury thinks that all humans do), and that one considers that virtue is indeed real. This is why deism is essential to Shaftesbury's demonstration, and why atheism is a threat; it denies that nature has any intrinsic value and therefore reduces our perception of the good to mere fancies. In a footnote to the *Essai sur le mérite et la vertu*, Diderot expresses the same suspicion towards atheism:

S'il n'y a ni beau, ni grand, ni sublime dans les choses, que deviennent l'amour, la gloire, l'ambition, la valeur ? A quoi bon admirer un poème ou un tableau, un palais ou une belle taille ou un beau visage ?⁷

Diderot later became an atheist without losing his love of beauty, value or virtue. Yet he had to face his own question as phrased by La Mettrie. I shall now examine how Diderot renounced Shaftesbury's deism while maintaining his conception of virtue, and why La Mettrie rejected virtue altogether.

2. Virtue in a meaningless world

Diderot's first great atheistic text, the *Lettre sur les Aveugles*, is greatly indebted to another text by Shaftesbury: *The Moralists*. In the latter, Theocles (the author's mouthpiece) discusses the existence of God with Philocles. Theocles brushes aside traditional arguments such as the ontological proof and sticks solely to the argument from design: the world displays order and harmony, and must have been thus ordered by a benevolent creator. Yet this argument is not presented as full proof, and Philocles replies that even if the world as it is displays an order, this does not allow us to conclude anything about the coming about, or the subsistence, of this order – it could very well be the result of a random process.

⁶ Idem, p.229.

⁷ Diderot, *Essai sur le mérite et la vertu*, in *Œuvres Complètes*, ed. Hermann, 1975, vol.I p.322.

It is only a separate by-world (...) of which perhaps there are, in the wide waste, millions besides, as horrid and deformed as this of ours is regular and proportioned. In length of time, amid the infinite hurry and shock of beings, this single odd world, by accident, might have been struck out and cast into some form (as, among infinite chances, what is there which may not happen?).⁸

To this objection, Theocles provides no answer. What he does, however, is support his statements about the order of the world with an experience of its beauty. The experience takes place the following morning during a promenade; Theocles enthusiastically opens himself to the beauty of nature, receiving it with love and gratitude, and Philocles is swept away.

The *Lettre sur les aveugles* presents the same arguments as *The Moralists*. The apex of the *Lettre* is the dialogue between the blind mathematician Saunderson and the minister Holmes, the former rejecting the argument from design presented by the latter. Saunderson's response is largely borrowed from Philocles's objection to Theocles:

Imaginez donc, si vous voulez, que l'ordre qui vous frappe a toujours subsisté ; mais laissez-moi croire qu'il n'en est rien ; et que, si nous remontions à la naissance des choses et des temps, et que nous sentissions la matière se mouvoir et le chaos se débrouiller, nous rencontrerions une multitude d'êtres informes, pour quelques êtres bien organisés. (...) Mais pourquoi n'assurerais-je pas des mondes ce que je crois des animaux ? Combien de mondes estropiés, manqués, se sont dissipés, se reforment et se dissipent peut-être à chaque instant dans des espaces éloignés (...) ?⁹

In the *Lettre sur les aveugles*, as in *The Moralists*, neither of the arguments are presented as decisive. Yet there is little doubt that while Shaftesbury inclined the reader towards the providential hypothesis, Diderot inclines him towards the chaotic one. He does so by substituting the blissful morning walk with a radically different experience; a blind man seized with delirium on his death bed. Saunderson's infirmity is the strongest argument for the chaos hypothesis, and his decisive statement might not be the grandiose unfolding of a chaotic universe, but rather his question to the minister: 'Voyez-moi bien, monsieur Holmes, je n'ai point d'yeux. Qu'avions-nous fait à Dieu, vous et moi, l'un pour avoir cet organe, l'autre pour en être privé ?'¹⁰ Whereas Philocles was swayed by Theocles' rapture, Holmes is overwhelmed by his friend's tragedy and bursts into tears.

Quite apart from the question of God's existence, the *Lettre* leads us to consider the consequences of the breakdown between man and the world. Since the virtuous man instinctively relates to the world as value-laden, what happens to his virtue if he comes to see

⁸ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, op. cit., p.279.

⁹ Diderot, *Lettre sur les aveugles*, vol.I, p.167-169.

¹⁰ Idem, p.168.

the world as value neutral? In the context of the *Lettre*, the answer is that virtue survives. It is worth emphasizing that Saunderson and Holmes, like Philocles and Theocles, are both virtuous men. The difference is that in Shaftesbury's dialogue, the ultimate virtuous experience was bliss, whereas in Diderot's *Lettre*, it is now tragedy. Saunderson and Holmes demonstrate thereby their ability to feel compassion and grief, and the blind man is grateful for the minister's tears:

Monsieur Holmes, dit-il au ministre, la bonté de votre cœur m'était bien connue, et je suis très sensible à la preuve que vous m'en donnez dans ces derniers moments.¹¹

The *Lettre sur les aveugles* clearly marks Diderot's rejection of Shaftesbury's deism, but it also suggests that deism is not indispensable to virtue, and that its relation to happiness remains as strong, if not stronger: through a miserable life, Saunderson has enjoyed, he says, 'la consolation de n'avoir jamais affligé personne.'¹² Paradoxically, just as he had provided Diderot with his atheistic arguments, Shaftesbury also laid the grounds upon which Diderot could build an alternative defense of virtue. He argued that the deity is wise to expose us to perils and hardship, so that we may be forced to rely more on each other, thus developing the ties of family and friendship, the most pleasurable relations known to human kind. In a sense, Diderot brings this argument to its extreme consequences by taking out the deity altogether; it is precisely because no deity has planned for our happiness that we must rely upon one another. Saunderson's sufferings put him in an ideal position to exhort his family and friends (and of course the reader): 'Vivez aussi vertueux et plus heureux'.¹³

In a sense, it is irrelevant to the virtuous man whether or not there is a God; his moral sense is just as sharp either way. His commitment to virtue may, if anything, be even stronger. For Saunderson, it is rooted in the experience of happy human relationships; for those who are fortunate enough not to be afflicted as he is, it can find other roots. It must be emphasized that although Diderot rejected deism, he still valued the experience of the beauty of nature as a great incentive to virtue. In a letter to Mme de Maux, he describes his pleasure in the country in words that echo the deist's ecstatic reconciliation with the world:

Ici, d'instinct, on s'assied, on se repose, on regarde sans voir, on abandonne son cœur, son âme, son esprit, ses sens à toute leur liberté ; c'est-à-dire qu'on ne fait rien, pour être au ton de tous les êtres. Ils sont, et l'on est. Tout est utile, tout sert, tout concourt, tout est bon, on n'est rien

¹¹ Idem, p.168.

¹² Idem, p.168-169.

¹³ Idem, p.170.

sans y tâcher. Est bien mal né, est bien méchant, est bien profondément pervers, celui qui médite le mal au milieu des champs.¹⁴

The need to be attuned to the world does not die with God, and is still aroused by nature. Conversely, the sense of injustice we feel when nature thwarts our aspirations only demonstrates the strength and depth of these aspirations; the world *should be* as Holmes (and Theocles) imagine it to be, and Saunderson should have been given eyes to see it. The fact that stories such as that of Saunderson arouse in us such a strong sense of injustice impresses upon us the demands of justice.

From the *Inquiry* to the *Lettre*, the description of the virtuous life has remained unchanged. What has changed, however, is the relation between virtue and the world. Whereas Shaftesbury regarded the virtuous life as the life that corresponds to the order of things, it is now only attached to some features of the world, and expanded into a virtual realm. A gap has opened between the demands of virtue and the demands of the world. When we recommend virtue, we no longer command obedience to the order of things, but invite others to work towards an ordering of human relationships that is inspired by a selected ensemble of lived experiences. This poses one embarrassing question : what guarantees the legitimacy of one's selection ? It also means that humans cannot be content with discovering virtue ; there must be an element of anticipation as to what life would be like, if lived virtuously. As Diderot writes to Landois, virtue is 'une maîtresse à laquelle on s'attache autant par ce qu'on fait pour elle que par les charmes qu'on lui croit'.¹⁵ But there are many other mistresses to whom one is drawn, whose charms are very real and who demand lesser sacrifices; why not embrace them? This is, in essence, La Mettrie's objection.

Diderot and La Mettrie are atheistic materialists. Their thoughts rests on the same axioms: there are, strictly speaking, only physical causes, and all that is in the mind comes from the senses. However, they draw very different ethical consequences from these axioms, which raises the question: how could the former could violently reject the latter's ethics; how could the same premises not lead to the same conclusions? To answer this, it is best to consider their psychological insights (how do humans behave? What makes them happy or unhappy), insights which are gained from observation of life as it happens, and could hardly be deduced from the very general materialistic axioms mentioned above. As a psychologist (or perhaps, to avoid anachronism, as a moralist), Diderot always remained faithful to

¹⁴ Diderot, letter to Mme de Maux, Octobre 1769, vol.V, p.985-986.

¹⁵ Diderot, letter to Landois, Juin 1756, vol.V, p.55.

Shaftesbury; the human condition is inherently collective and human well-being depends primarily on the quality of human relations; they care for each other's esteem, they long for trust, and so on. A person who renounces all these things and indulges in selfish impulses, who estranges himself from the community, can only be miserable. Thus a human's happiness depends not only on strictly material notions such as physical pleasure and pain, but also on notions that structure the relations between humans, such as esteem, shame, recognition, respect etc; notions that could be widely described as moral notions. Diderot often asserted that ultimately, moral relations are more important to the happiness of humans than physical ones.

Diderot's materialism means that he has to give an account of the emergence of the moral realm from strictly physical causes (an account which we need not consider here), but he certainly did not deny the existence and importance of the moral realm, which is an experiential fact. La Mettrie, however, reasoned differently. He defines happiness in terms of pleasurable sensations:

Nos organes sont susceptibles d'un sentiment ou d'une modification qui nous plaît et nous fait aimer la vie. Si l'impression de ce sentiment est courte, c'est le plaisir ; plus longue, c'est la volupté ; permanente, on a le bonheur.¹⁶

The aim is to reach permanent pleasure. Now, La Mettrie grants that there can be pleasures of very different sorts, and even moral ones: some people can enjoy 'plaisirs de l'âme', (pleasures which are not directly of a physical nature, and have to do with the conscience of having acted well, of being esteemed and so on). But he also considers that other people have no such pleasure, and have no need for them (he describes the people, for instance, as a mob enjoying a near-vegetative life). More generally, La Mettrie never suggests that humans might have common psychological needs or impulses, and he is happy to envisage natural murderers, natural thieves, natural rapists and to suggest that if it is in their nature to commit such deeds and enjoy them, then this is where their happiness lays. It is tempting to say that the limit of La Mettrie's moral system, which grants to every man the right to act according to his nature, is quite simply that it does *not* contain a psychology; is it *really* true that murderers and rapists are happy? Such question is never formulated. But it is actually made irrelevant in La Mettrie's system, because he considers that sensations are strictly private (so that no one could actually assess the happiness of the murderer, but for the murderer himself), and that we cannot be wrong with regards to our own sensations (if I feel pleasure, then it *is* pleasure).

¹⁶ La Mettrie, *Anti-Sénèque, ou Discours sur le bonheur*, in *Œuvres philosophiques*, Coda 2004, p. 296.

Tel est l'empire des sensations. Elles ne peuvent jamais nous tromper, elles ne sont jamais fausses par rapport à nous, dans le sein même de l'illusion.¹⁷

La Mettrie finds paradigmatic happiness in 'ces états doux et tranquilles que donne l'opium, dans lesquels on voudrait demeurer toute une éternité, vrais paradis de l'âme s'ils étaient permanents'.¹⁸ Acquaintance with reality is not a value for La Mettrie, and correlatively, neither are personal relations: he supposes that those who do not enjoy social pleasure make up for their loss with 'la satisfaction qu'ils ont de vivre pour eux seuls, et d'être à eux-mêmes leurs parents, leurs amis, leur maîtresse et tout l'univers.'¹⁹ Unsurprisingly, friendship and love are absent from La Mettrie's description of the state of perfect happiness:

Avoir tout à souhait – heureuse organisation, beauté, esprit, grâces, talents, honneurs, richesses, santé, plaisirs, gloire – tel est le bonheur réel et parfait.²⁰

Given La Mettrie's principles, the exclusion of friendship and love makes sense; however, the inclusion of honour and glory is surprising. Do these not imply virtue? Is the pleasure they give not that of being acknowledged for one's greatness? Not so for La Mettrie; what matters is only the praise, and not its cause. 'Qu'importe qu'une femme soit laide si elle passe pour jolie, qu'un homme soit bien sot s'il passe pour avoir de l'esprit, qu'un homme soit vicieux s'il passe pour vertueux ?'²¹ This question seems rather simplistic; is the sensation the same for a man who knows he deserves praises, and for one who knows he does not ? But such question makes little sense within the terms of La Mettrie's system, since he considers all kinds of pleasures as equivalent (or rather, as incommensurable).

La Rochefoucauld, or any decent psychologist, would probably find La Mettrie's psychology hopelessly simplistic. Diderot certainly found it so, judging by harsh assessment in the *Essai sur les Règnes de Claude et Néron*. It is worth quoting it extensively, because La Mettrie's portrait shares many resemblances with Rameau's nephew:

La Mettrie est un écrivain sans jugement, (...) qui prononce ici que l'homme est pervers par sa nature, et qui fait ailleurs, de la nature des êtres, la règle de leurs devoirs et la source de leur félicité ; qui semble s'occuper à tranquilliser le scélérat dans le crime, le corrompu dans ses vices ; dont les sophismes grossiers, mais dangereux par la gaieté dont il les assaisonne, décèlent un écrivain qui n'a pas les premières idées des vrais fondements de la morale; (...); et

¹⁷ Idem, p.301.

¹⁸ Idem, p.300.

¹⁹ Idem, p.306.

²⁰ Idem, p.297.

²¹ Idem, p.306.

dont la tête est si troublée, et les idées sont à tel point déçousues, que dans la même page, une assertion sensée est heurtée par une assertion folle, et une assertion folle, par une assertion sensée ; en sorte qu'il est aussi facile de le défendre, que de l'attaquer.²²

Much as he despised La Mettrie, Diderot was, however, deeply worried by him – perhaps because he recognized him as a sign of the times. The interest of La Mettrie's philosophy is that it pushes to their extreme a number of philosophical confusions that ran deep in the 18th century (the privacy of sensation, psychological solipsism, the infallibility of the subject's assessment of his happiness). But the most disturbing, however, is what we may call the democratic appeal of La Mettrie's hedonism. Shaftesbury demanded from all men tremendous efforts if they were to reach happiness, and his picture of the happy man was unmistakably gentlemanly; La Mettrie, on the other hand, asserts 'que le bonheur est, comme la volupté, à la portée de tout le monde, des bons comme des méchants, que les vertueux ne sont pas plus heureux'.²³ This promise of happiness, and its exhilarating emancipation from moral constraints, correspond to an aspiration that runs deep in the Enlightenment. Diderot was well-aware of the ambiguities of this aspiration, which he masterfully exposed and analysed in *Le Neveu de Rameau*.

3. Why should I not be vicious?

The resemblances between the above portrait of La Mettrie and the eponymous character of *Le Neveu de Rameau* are so numerous that it is hard to think they are merely coincidental. Rameau says that he is vicious by nature, and that it is only fair that he should be what nature made him; he is sometimes wise and sometimes mad, so that his interlocutor is astonished to hear 'des idées si justes pêle-mêle avec tant d'extravagance'.²⁴ But Rameau goes further than La Mettrie who, says Diderot, is an author 'dont on reconnait la frivolité de l'esprit dans ce qu'il dit, et la corruption du coeur dans ce qu'il n'ose dire'.²⁵ *Via* Rameau, Diderot unfolds all the consequences of La Mettrie's principles which, 'poussés jusqu'à leurs dernières conséquences, renverseraient la législation' (Rameau asserts that lies are always beneficial and truth detrimental), 'dispenseraient les parents de l'éducation de leurs enfants', (Rameau asserts that girls need only to be seductive, and plans to incite his child to vice), 'renfermeraient aux petites-maisons l'homme courageux qui lutte sottement contre ses

²² Diderot, *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et Néron*, vol.I, p.1118-1119.

²³ Idem, p.331.

²⁴ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, vol.II, p.642.

²⁵ Diderot, *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et Néron*, vol.I, p.1118-1119 (idem for the following quotes)

penchants déréglés' (Rameau regards virtuous men as 'des êtres bien singuliers'²⁶), and 'assureraient l'immortalité au méchant qui s'abandonnerait sans remords aux siens' (Rameau has ambitions to achieve fame as a great criminal).

There is another, essential quality that Rameau has in common with La Mettrie, whose 'chaos de raison et d'extravagance ne peut être regardé sans dégoût, que par ces lecteurs futiles qui confondent la plaisanterie avec l'évidence, et à qui l'on a tout prouvé, quand on les a fait rire'²⁷; he is endowed with such an extraordinary wit that his interlocutor often finds himself exhilarated by his immoral discourse. Although I must restrict myself to restating his arguments, it is essential to keep in mind that they are always presented in a humorous and provocative manner. Let us then examine Rameau's rejection of virtue as the path to happiness. He professes to be 'un sot, un fou, un impertinent, un paresseux, (...) un fieffé truand, un escroc, un gourmand',²⁸ and hopes to find happiness by cultivating his vices:

Puisque je puis faire mon bonheur par des vices qui me sont naturels, que j'ai acquis sans travail, que je conserve sans effort, qui cadrent avec les mœurs de ma nation, qui sont du goût de ceux qui me protègent (...), il serait bien singulier que j'allasse me tourmenter (...) pour me donner un caractère bien étranger au mien, des qualités très estimables, j'y consens, pour ne pas disputer, mais qui me coûteraient beaucoup à acquérir, à pratiquer, ne me mèneraient à rien, peut-être à pis que rien, par la satire continuelle des riches auprès desquels les gueux comme moi ont à chercher leur vie.

He says that he 'représente la partie la plus opulente de la ville et de la cour'²⁹ and, judging from Diderot's dreadful picture of French high society in his *Mélanges pour Catherine II*, he certainly has a point. It is a society pervaded by superficial hedonism: 'On garde deux ou trois équipages et l'on néglige l'éducation de ses enfants. On a un bon cocher, un excellent cuisinier et un mauvais précepteur. On veut que la table soit somptueuse et l'on ne marie pas ses filles.'³⁰ Rameau is metonymic of this way of life:

Aujourd'hui, en linge sale, en culotte déchirée, couvert de lambeaux, presque sans souliers, il va la tête basse, il se dérobe, on serait tenté de lui donner l'aumône. Demain, poudré, chaussé, frisé, bien vêtu, il marche la tête haute, il se montre, et vous le prendriez pour un honnête homme.³¹

²⁶ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, vol.II, p.650.

²⁷ Diderot, *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et Néron*, vol.I, p.1118-1119

²⁸ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, vol.II, p.631-632.

²⁹ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, p.647.

³⁰ Diderot, *Mélanges philosophiques, historiques, etc., pour Catherine II*, in *Œuvres*, vol III, p.295.

³¹ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, p.624.

In such a society, even the fundamental bounds between members of a species are undone, and Diderot predicts that family ties will soon become meaningless.

On n'ose pas tout contre les pères qu'on ne croit pas disposés à tout supporter. Mais les successeurs de ces ministres de la tyrannie seront des tigres qui se croiront nés de tout temps pour déchirer, et nos enfants des moutons imbéciles qui se croiront nés de tout temps pour être déchirés.³²

Rameau's principles seem merely to anticipate what society will become. But it is essential to note a paradoxical feature of his discourse: his attack on the ways of society grounds his justification of his own behaviour and, ultimately, becomes a justification of society itself. Because everybody does wrong, he is right in doing the same; anybody who does not act like him is wrong, and therefore everybody is right to do wrong. This paradox culminates in a reversal of justice: all rich people are thieves, so it is just to punish them by stealing their riches – a theft which will be punished when the newly rich thief is robbed in turn. Rameau concludes that the law is a superfluous institution :

Nous faisons justice sans que la loi s'en mêle.³³

Rameau eventually describes the violence of society as a natural law, both in the sense that it is inexorable, and in the sense that it regulates society for the better. He draws an analogy between society and animal life, which differs from that of Shaftesbury in one crucial respect: whereas Shaftesbury compared the relations between humans in society to relations between animals within species, Rameau compares them to relations between species in nature.

Dans la nature, toutes les espèces se dévorent; toutes les conditions se dévorent dans la société.³⁴

What characterizes a species is the convergence between the particular and the common good; but what characterizes the relations between species is, of course, mutual destruction. Rameau describes man as a predator among predators:

Tout ce qui vit, sans l'en excepter, cherche son bien-être aux dépens de qui il appartiendra.³⁵

It is essential to note that what determines our adherence to Shaftesbury or Rameau's analogies between nature and society is not their depictions of nature, for Shaftesbury and

³² Diderot, *Mélanges philosophiques, historiques, etc., pour Catherine II*, op. cit, p.217.

³³ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, p.646.

³⁴ Idem, p.646.

³⁵ Idem, p.685.

Rameau are both correct; animals of the same species collaborate, and different species feed off each other. What is decisive is the analysis of society. If we regard societies as inherently violent, Rameau's analogy seems accurate, but if we regard them as inherently harmonious, Shaftesbury's analogy works better.

Shaftesbury wanted to construct a virtuous circle; capitalizing on our virtuous impulses, he related it to other facts of life, and showed that the virtuous perspective was the one that allowed us to construct a beautiful world view. Within this world view, our vicious impulses seem empty and shallow. Rameau, on the other hand, draws a vicious circle; from his vicious impulses, he constructs a world view that may not be beautiful but is undeniably realistic, and within which virtues impulses seem to be fanciful and pointless. His interlocutor feels sorry for him, and his attitude echoes Shaftesbury's grim remark: few societies have human laws, and few men are truly human. But such a reaction can seem altogether superficial: should we not face the facts, see society and men as they are, nurture the vices that correspond to the world we live in, and renounce virtuous aspirations that amount to little more than wishful thinking? Shaftesbury thought that these aspirations could *not* be eradicated, that we could not help aspiring to a happiness inseparable from virtue, which is the proof that men do not live according to their nature in societies that are dysfunctional. Everything rests, therefore, on how we conceive of human happiness. The opposition between Rameau and the philosopher (Moi) is condensed in the following exchange:

LUI. – Mais selon vous, il faudrait donc être d'honnêtes gens ?

MOI. – Pour être heureux ? Assurément.

LUI. – Cependant, je vois une infinité d'honnêtes gens qui ne sont pas heureux, et une infinité de gens qui sont heureux sans l'être.

MOI. – Il vous semble.³⁶

Rameau (in accordance with La Mettrie) starts from the premise that people who enjoy the pleasures of wine, sex, power and glory are happy, regardless of how these pleasures are obtained. Since virtue often demands that we give up these pleasures, especially in a society where they can rarely be obtained honestly, he sees his interlocutor's commitment to virtue as pointless. The philosopher answers (in accordance with Shaftesbury's analysis) that vicious people are restless, anxious, drowning their misery in hollow entertainment; only virtue can provide peace of mind. The ideal life would be to obtain sensual pleasures and social honours in a virtuous way; but if this is not possible, one should live the withdrawn life of 'le

³⁶ Idem, p.650.

philosophe qui n'a rien et ne demande rien'³⁷ rather than compromise one's sanity by indulging in vice. But Rameau cannot take the philosopher seriously. Who would endorse such principles, but a fool or a hypocrite? Rameau hesitates, with regards to Moi, between the two hypotheses. On the one hand, he insinuates that Moi is merely promoting virtue to defend his social position, and notes that he has 'du foin dans [ses] bottes'³⁸; but on the other hand, he regards the philosopher as a loser, 'dont la modestie est le manteau de l'orgueil et la sobriété est la loi du besoin'.³⁹ And even if the philosopher is sincere, he would be absurd to think that such odd principles apply to everyone. After all, why should everyone find happiness in the same thing? To each his own, argues Rameau:

Vous croyez que le même bonheur est fait pour tous. (...) Mais la vertu, la philosophie sont-elles faites pour tout le monde ?⁴⁰

Moi's attempts at defending virtue make him appear as dogmatic, and Rameau is all the more inclined to resist his arguments since he perceives them as infringements on his freedom. By the end of the text, Rameau is even further entrenched in his vicious principle.

LUI. – Adieu, monsieur le philosophe, n'est-il pas vrai que je suis toujours le même?
MOI. – Hélas! Oui, malheureusement.
LUI. – Que j'aie ce malheur-là seulement encore une quarantaine d'année. Rira bien qui rira le dernier.⁴¹

These last words seal the defeat of virtue at the hands of vice. Diderot's prognosis in the *Réfutation d'Helvétius* is verified; having failed to show that 'dans une société même aussi mal ordonnée que la nôtre, où le vice qui réussit est souvent applaudi, et la vertu qui échoue presque toujours ridicule, (...) à tout prendre, on n'a rien de mieux à faire pour son bonheur que d'être homme de bien', the philosopher has eventually promoted vice.

Conclusion. Rediscovering virtue

One of the most intriguing aspects of *Le Neveu de Rameau* is its final prophecy: in forty-odd years, Rameau will have the last laugh. Even more fascinating is the fact that the prophecy was accurate. *Le Neveu de Rameau* is based on an encounter between Diderot and Jean-François Rameau that took place *circa* 1761; forty-seven years later, Hegel gave Rameau his

³⁷ Idem, p.692.

³⁸ Idem, p.640

³⁹ Idem, p.647.

⁴⁰ Idem, p.647.

⁴¹ Idem, p.695.

first triumph in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. It is of course true that Rameau's discourse contains striking insights, and the commentaries it has elicited demonstrate its fertility. Rameau's admirers, of course, do not condone his principles; he embodies a crisis in morality, but does not have the solution to the problem he poses. But what is striking is how clear it is to most commentators that whatever this solution may be, it cannot be Moi's commitment to virtue. They always endorse Lui's vision of Moi, who is described as a narrow-minded *petit bourgeois* defending his social status. This is precisely the triumph Rameau aspired to: he does indeed have the last laugh.

This view of the philosopher seems to me, however, to be profoundly mistaken. It is essential to remember that he is not only an interlocutor in a conversation, but also the narrator; it is he who emphasizes the significance of Rameau, comparing him to 'un grain de levain qui fermente et qui restitue à chacun une portion de son individualité naturelle. Il secoue, il agite, il fait approuver ou blâmer ; il fait sortir la vérité ; il fait connaître les gens de bien ; il démasque les coquins ; c'est alors que l'homme de bon sens écoute, et démêle son monde.'⁴² Moi even allows us to love Rameau more than he loves himself; his descriptions of the wild pantomimes which punctuate Rameau's discourses are crucial to this end. These extraordinary performances have fascinated readers from Hegel to Foucault; they reveal Rameau's creativity, his living and suffering humanity. But these performances are of course only accessible through the mediation of Moi's descriptions of them, and their power comes from his narrative genius first and foremost (Moi actually often credits Rameau with feats that are simply physically impossible, such as singing with three voices at once – hence the numerous failed attempts to stage *Le Neveu de Rameau*).

Moi also allows Rameau to confide in him, and eventually go beyond the boasting and moaning of an immoralist who sees himself as the proud victim of the world. Rameau progressively reveals elements of his life that reveals him to be less brilliant, perhaps, but also more human and less vicious than he thinks he is. He was born in a provincial town and went to Paris in the hope of becoming a great musician like his famous uncle. When his uncle rejected him, he slid towards misery, and only embraced the vicious life out of necessity. When the conversation takes place, he has just been thrown out of the decadent household of Bertin and Hus for having made a joke too close to the truth – that his protectors are '*duoi coglioni*'.⁴³ Virtuous impulses are still at work in him: he confesses how repellent his life is to

⁴² Idem, p.624.

⁴³ Idem, p.663.

him, and although he looks back upon what little comfort he enjoyed with melancholy, he cannot make up his mind to beg his way back. He expresses deep frustration and disgust for having to serve people he deeply despises. Besides, Rameau is still perturbed by the desire to achieve genuine excellence, rather than living like a fraud. His dream of acquiring fame and prestige as a great musician still haunts him, to the point that he sometimes confuses fiction and reality: having mimicked a virtuoso violinist, he is convinced that he has demonstrated real virtuosity.

Considering Rameau's present situation, it seems doubtful whether he will indeed reach happiness by cultivating vice. He wishes to take the place of his masters and enjoy money, wine, women and power, but suspects he will never succeed. Moreover, he paints brilliant satirical portraits of his persecutors which show them as miserably unhappy. They depend on flattery; they are gullible and constantly exploited by the likes of him. Their lives seem highly unappealing, and Rameau himself wittily remarks:

Celui qui serait sage n'aurait pas de fou; celui donc qui a un fou n'est pas sage ; s'il n'est pas sage, il est fou ; et peut-être, fût-il le roi, le fou de son fou.⁴⁴

It seems, in the end, that even if he becomes the master, he will not be much closer to happiness. Yet, Rameau seems strangely unable to draw the lesson from his own observation of others and from his own emotions.

All things considered, Lui may be insightful when it comes to the analysis of society, but he shows a terrible inability to understand either his interlocutor or himself. Conversely, the philosopher demonstrates an exceptional capacity to understand Rameau better than he does himself – and although he refuses to bow down to Rameau's conception of society, nothing suggests that he fails to understand it. If this is right, this poses a problem: the exegetic tradition that praises Rameau over Moi is too impressive to be simply brushed aside as a series of misreading, and we must wonder why we tend to follow Rameau's lead. It would be impossible to give a clear explanation, since the many readings that describe Moi as blind to Lui are all different. I shall, however, venture two suggestions. The first has more to do with readings of the text that were widespread from the 19th century to the 1950s: one reason why Moi fails to convince is that he offers no remedy to the evils of society as exposed by Rameau. If Rameau has shown that virtue is impossible in society as it is, Moi's persistent defense of virtue seems to amount to a form of denial. But Moi's own relation to society is actually difficult, and he cuts a lonely figure, speaking only with himself of politics, taste,

⁴⁴ Idem, p.662.

love and philosophy. His advice to Rameau is to ‘se refermer dans son grenier, boire de l’eau, manger du pain sec, et se chercher soi-même’.⁴⁵ Moi seems, then, acutely aware that society is inhospitable to virtue. But is this enough? Is it not his task to offer a solution, to point the way forward, as did Hegel or Marx? Perhaps not. The very fact that he does not promise a happy ending could testify to his lucidity. Moral crises must be analyzed at the social level; but the painful truth is that their solution can only be found in the individual’s ability to rise above social forces – if possible. Seeing Rameau, we might conclude that when economic, political and moral factors are too strong, there is no escape; the recognition of such a tragic possibility can only incite us to cling to virtue with all our strength.

My second suggestion concerns more recent readings of *Le Neveu de Rameau*. After the 18th century, the notion of virtue virtually disappeared from moral philosophy; it is often said that the fundamental question shifted from ‘what person should I be?’ to ‘what should I do?’ Rather than assuming that one needed to be a good person in order to know what was right, we assumed that we needed to know what was right in order to know who was good. From this perspective, Moi desperately fails; he never demonstrates that his principles are the right ones. How dare he, then, claim to be virtuous? It must be that he is incapable of even recognizing the groundlessness of his beliefs. He must also be incapable of recognizing the refutation put forth by Rameau who, on the other hand, argues that he has every right to act as he does. Since he stands unrefuted, then we must acknowledge his claim.

Interpretations that run along these lines perhaps rest, however, on the assumption that virtue stands in need of a justification beyond itself. But this assumption is debatable, and the rebirth of virtue ethics over the last half of a century would probably provide us with a philosophical framework better suited to the understanding of Diderot’s philosophy. Everything suggests indeed that Diderot is, in crucial respects, a virtue ethicist, and that he granted virtue epistemological functions; it is from virtue itself that moral knowledge proceeds. Such claim is, however, often met with scepticism; if virtue allows us to determine what is morally right, what will allow us to determine what is virtuous? I shall conclude with a few suggestions.

If we consider Moi in *Le Neveu de Rameau*, what demonstrates his virtue is perhaps the quality of the attention that he pays to his interlocutor. If morality aims at determining how best humans can live, then it requires knowledge of human nature, of our aspirations, our weaknesses and our strengths – a knowledge attested by the philosopher’s capacity to turn a

⁴⁵ *Le Neveu de Rameau*, p.687.

generous, loving and perceptive gaze on others. That his gaze is indeed generous, loving and perceptive is demonstrated, quite simply, by the fascination and even admiration that Rameau, as depicted by Moi, has elicited. Conversely, Rameau's sarcasms, belittlements, denunciations, have made many readers incapable of recognizing Moi for what he is, which constitutes an epistemological failure. The distinction between the two perspectives can be prolonged at the reader's level. It would be absurd to suggest that only vicious readers will be inclined to adhere to Rameau's point of view; what may be closer to the truth, however, is that it will seduce readers who have grown suspicious of the discourse of virtue, who look not for the good but for the right. If, however, they end up feeling compassion for Rameau's pledge, the process might begin which will lead them to reread the text from the point of view of virtue, and reconsider the worth of the arguments produced by Rameau, and of the kind of arguments they thought necessary to refute him.

These remarks should be further developed. They suggest that for Diderot, the capacity to see things from the other's point of view is perhaps the cardinal virtue of the moral philosopher; and the possession of this virtue is demonstrated by one's ability to make sense of the other's point of view. This explains perhaps Diderot's recurrent recourse to dialogues, as a form of writing most suited to this kind of demonstration. In cultivating this form, he was once again following a principle he had learned from Shaftesbury's *Soliloquy*, which he restated in his *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et Néron* :

Celui qui se sera étudié lui-même, sera bien avancé dans la connaissance des autres, s'il n'y a, comme je le pense, ni vertu qui soit étrangère au méchant, ni vice qui soit étranger au bon.⁴⁶

Perhaps writing *Le Neveu de Rameau* (a text which he never published, nor mentioned to anyone) was a form of exercise in self-knowledge: Diderot attempted to give voice to vice, to show it in all its seduction. But the peculiar form of the text also fulfils a function for the reader; as he slowly sees through these seductions (*if* he does), he rediscovers, thinly veiled beneath Rameau's vices, the virtues that lay dormant in all men, and is reminded of how precious – and how fragile – they are.

⁴⁶ Diderot, *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et Néron*, t.I, p.1103.