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The Founding Elements of Enlightenment Philosophy: The Relationship Between Language, Knowledge and Society

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine the most important aspects of Enlightenment philosophy (and its main authors: Locke, Condillac, Diderot, Beccaria, Montesquieu) with special reference to the following topics: 1. The analysis of cognitive faculties and denial of the existence of innate ideas; 2. The criticisms of the concept of absolute authority; 3. The sovereignty and freedom of the individual; 4. Cartesian dualism between soul and body, between thought and matter. 5. The rejection of anthropocentrism led to criticism of providentialism; 6. The relationship between man and animals, and the discussions about the matter of animal language. This new formulation of ideas from the century of Enlightenment is of fundamental importance, and although not all of the hoped-for objectives were achieved – for example, those concerning human rights - their ideal was widely accepted, and those who criticise the existing order today do so in the name of Enlightenment.

Keywords: Philosophy of enlightenment, Political Science, Materialism, Philosophy of language.

Introduction

Criticism of authoritarianism

One of the themes of Enlightenment philosophy that remains particularly interesting today is the secular conception of man and his faculties, with its underlying denial of the existence of innate ideas, and rejection of the belief that there are innate principles in the human mind, present - explicitly or only potentially – from birth. Principles like, for example, the logical principle of non-contradiction ("A is not not-A"), mathematical principles (equality, proportion, etc.), or practical and moral principles like the ideas of Virtue and duty, and the ideas of Good and of God.

Among the most influential leading lights of the age of Enlightenment, John Locke dedicated the most thought to this theme in his fundamental *Essay on human understanding* (1690). He emphasised, on the one hand, the fact that we learn

everything from sensations alone, given that no cognition or idea springs from a principle that exists prior to experience, and on the other, how the denial of innate ideas can cast doubt on the principle of goodness, beauty and absolute perfection – a perfection rooted in something that precedes the existence of the subjects that contain it, and is thus eternal, immutable, necessary, primordial and independent of those subjects.

In Locke's view, then, man does not possess original or primary characteristics impressed into his mind from birth, because his mind, at the initial moment of his existence, is in fact a blank sheet, completely without characteristics or ideas (Locke 1690: 593). Locke observed that only successively, and very gradually, does a child begin to formulate ideas which, without presupposing anything remotely innate, are derived solely from two sources or fountains: sensation and reflection (or interior perception). There are no ideas in the mind aside from those that have been impressed there by these two sources, which constitute experience, the only thing that provides the materials of human reasoning. As all of 18th-century gnoseology - from Hume to Kant – would assert, there can be no use of the intellect outside of experience: contrary to Descartes, according to this viewpoint, reflection is a part of experience, and although not a true "sense," because it has no relationship with external objects, is something very similar. In fact, Locke defined it as "internal sense" (Locke 1690: 594).

The confutation of innatism had political significance, given its association with criticism of the concept of absolute authority. The denial of innate and incontrovertible principles was fused with the political and religious liberalism of which Locke was also a proponent[1]. This concept of privileging autonomous individual choices, unconditioned by the impositions of any external authority, is fundamental, and ties in with man's emancipation from dogmas and institutions considered untouchable, like religious ones, for example. The result of this emancipation is the possibility of open and free discussion; the Enlightenment stimulated the cultivation of a critical spirit, but one that must not be excessive, otherwise it would become a generalised denigration, and that must not be an end unto itself. Hence, it must always present a positive counterbalance: generalised scepticism and systematic derision only seem to make sense on a superficial level, deviating from the spirit of Enlightenment and creating an immense obstacle to its action (Todorov 2006: 48).

The tradition continued to be important in any case, but is not in itself sufficient to render a principle legitimate. Diderot, for example, defined the philosopher and the thinking man as one capable of thinking independently, without allowing himself to be conditioned by tradition, authority and prejudice. This is one of the

[1] A theme widely discussed in critical literature, for example in Hazard (1963), Venturi (1970), Moravia (1982: 128 ss), Casini (1994: 23-35), Franzini (2009: 37-47).

fundamental principles of the Enlightenment - *Sapere aude*! – emphasised by both Montesquieu (1748: I, 58) and Kant[1].

Independence, however, did not mean self-sufficiency: relations with society and interaction with others are fundamental to man; he could not live without them, and human qualities and language itself ensue from them. Without relationships with others, we would be unable to have a perception of ourselves and our existence. This was a theme of great concern to Rousseau, who wrote that our existence is collective and our truest self is not entirely within us (Rousseau 1772-76: I, 813). De Sade has been much-stigmatised from this point of view, given that he made self-sufficiency a rule to live by and considered his own pleasure the only important thing, without any need to bear in mind what others thought or felt; for him, solidarity with others was something that hindered men from being independent. Todorov considers De Sade's position contrary not only to the spirit of Enlightenment, but also to common sense (Todorov 2006: 41-42) [2].

Enlightenment thinkers also maintained that in order for emancipation to be effective and concrete, there must be complete freedom to analyse, discuss and doubt. The individual must no longer be subject to precepts that are legitimised solely by the fact that tradition considers them valid; no authority, regardless of its solidity or the prestige it enjoys, is immune from criticism (Todorov 2006: 11).

This need led to the generation of two fundamental principles of Enlightenment philosophy that underlie the liberal constitutions of western countries today: the sovereignty and freedom of the individual. The former focuses on the fact that all power is derived from the people, and nothing is superior to the general will: as Rousseau clearly underscored, the origin of power is not divine, but human, so any form of power is not transmitted, but merely entrusted, and the people can always take back what they have temporarily lent to a government (Rousseau 1761: 170). The latter highlights both pluralism and the division of powers, with two important consequences: the first concerns the separation between religious and political power, based on the principle that the ultimate end point of free human action is no longer God, but men themselves. The second addresses the separation between legislative, executive and judicial powers; this is a fundamental point, because the separation of powers, from Locke onwards (Viano 1960: 223-25), has been at the core of modern constitutionalist doctrine, which guarantees that the people who carry out functions linked with each of these powers are subject to the law. The power that governs a society is obligated

[1] The famous "Answering the question: What is Enlightenment?" now in Kant (1965: 141)
[2] Todorov's interest in the Enlightenment is demonstrated by his fundamental *Nous et les autres. La réflexion française sur la diversité humaine* (1989), *Les Morales de l'histoire* (1991), and his monographic study on *L'esprit des Lumières* del 2006.

to govern through laws to which it itself is subject. These principles led to the condemnation of absolutism espoused first by Locke, and then by the authors of the *Encyclopédie*, who intended "absolute" to mean a government that does not concern itself with obtaining consensus and does not recognise that it has obligations towards its subjects, or a government that reserves the right to follow a political line even without the approval of those it governs, and to defend interests that conflict with theirs.

In this sense, the Enlightenment is a humanism (Todorov 2006: 15)[1] that acknowledges the inalienability of human rights, which are universal, and it is thanks to their universality that men can be considered equals, by right: equality stems from universality. An example is the right to life and to individual safety and integrity, due to which practices like the death penalty and torture – long accepted in Europe – came to be considered inhumane.

Over the course of the 18th century, jurisprudence itself went through a fundamental phase of theoretical reconsideration and revision of its own conceptual presuppositions; the essential reference on this point is Beccaria's treatise *Dei delitti e delle pene* (1764), in which the author advocated a secular, desacralized conception of law that broke with age-old tradition, differentiating crime from sin and establishing that the law must concern itself not with fault, but with damages wrought by individuals on society[2]. Polemical regarding the obscurity of law, Beccaria had argued in favour of the rule of law and the efficacy of juridical communication: he was a harsh critic of the use of Latin, which at the time was still widespread in jurisprudence, contending that laws, since they concerned the entire population, must be expressed in common language so as to be understood by all. In order to be truly useful, reason – the guiding principle of law – must be shared by the community[3].

The assertion of the universality of rights also had the important consequence of drawing attention to peoples with different mentalities and customs than Europeans – not to the point of ending the prejudices with which scholars had considered other peoples, but it certainly contributed to changing their way of thinking and awakening interest and curiosity about other cultures, and keeping them from confusing their own tradition with the natural order of the world (Beccaria 1764: 17).

Materialism

[1] This idea is also developed in several points by Todorov (1991); see also Todorov (2002: 238-81).
[2] See Venturi's observation on this (1969: 698): "Beccaria thus ended up denying any connection between the religious conception of evil, original sin and sin in general with the science of legislation, fully deconsecrating the legal relationship and thus leaving man alone in the face of his own responsibility. Laws were his work, and their logic was completely human".
[3] See Beccaria (1764: 41 ff).

The Enlightenment movement also comprised within it a more radical line of thought which, taking cues from the denial of innatism, came to conceive of matter as the limit or boundary within which lie not only all of our knowledge, but our impulses and pleasures as well. Consequently, our desires and our sensations, including the more spiritual ones, never extend beyond the material, and even the most spiritual and imaginary and indeterminate happiness we might taste or desire is never, and can never be, anything other than material, and thus depends on the state of the body. Thought is tied to sensation (knowing is feeling); it is an attribute of matter, and with this, we have clearly transcended Cartesian dualism between soul and body, between thought and matter. Matter is active; it is not mere extension. Thought is not a spiritual or immaterial entity separate from the body, but is an integral part of it, because in man, matter itself is sentient and rational: the brain, not the soul (Timpanaro 1969: 160). For example, Holbach maintained that when we know something, we feel our body at the same time, and it is this body that feels, thinks, judges, suffers and rejoices, so all of its faculties prove necessary to its particular mechanism and organisation (Holbach 1770: I, 120).

For Diderot as well, the existence of the soul as an autonomous and heterogeneous substance, separate from the body, was unsubstantiated; thus in his writing he never spoke of union or harmony between body and soul like other "philosophe" (e.g. Buffon, Condillac, Helvétius) but of substantial identity (Moravia 1974: 158-60). Thus the soul cannot be considered a simple (i.e., immaterial and lacking extension), single and indivisible substance. The presumed immortality of the soul and the consequent belief in an afterlife is excluded without hesitation. Holbach also maintained that when a man dies, all of him dies, and that "l'esprit ou la soubstance inétendue et immatérielle, n'est qu'une absence d'idées" (Holbach 1770: I, 200)[1]. The most radical and original positions in 18th-century materialist philosophy were thus far removed from those that conceive of man first and foremost as an active, creative force, capable of overcoming his own finiteness, identifying in himself a Spinozian nature.

The most important exponents of French materialism were aware of the fact that man, as a natural and sensitive creature, cannot consider himself the purpose of all creation; hence the rejection of any anthropocentric bias and the derision of men's pretence of being created in the image of God with a different, more important destiny and role than other living beings. Likewise, the pretence of considering the earth to be the centre of the universe was also rejected.

The rejection of anthropocentrism led to criticism of providentialism, according to which man imagines himself favoured by God, and thus believes that the universe was created for him, and that his life and personal vicissitudes are at the

[1] Still fundamental in this regard, Timpanaro (1985).

heart of all of nature. The intention of Enlightenment thinkers – in particular Louis-François Jauffret, who in 1799 in Paris founded the *Société des Observateurs de l'homme*, which Cabanis and Tracy also joined – was, rather, to study human behaviour from the moral, physical and intellectual points of view, with reference to testable facts as opposed to abstract, spiritualistic theories. Todorov had great appreciation for the fact that the research carried out by these *philosophes* was based on the idea that the key to interpreting human behaviour and passions was habituation or conformability: nature provides man with a limited number of faculties which are developed through confrontation with various elements, like weather, so the weather/character relationship was one way to target investigation of the interaction between man and the environment, stripping principles of transcendence from man as much as possible (Gensini 1984: 36 n. 24);

The social and political organisation, the natural environment, etc., also constitute habits, lifestyles, customs, and varied and diverse languages. Habituation, then, is also an important element in the conformation and development of man's cognitive and linguistic faculties, which in turn depend considerably on circumstances and education.

The question of the human/animal relationship

The rejection of anthropocentrism also engendered interest in the relationship between man and animals, and in the problem of whether animals have souls, long debated in 18th-century philosophy[1], and also tied to discussions about the matter of animal language. This was a particularly important question if we consider the theoretical context in which 17th-century rationalism had initially raised it – a context of deep-rooted scholarly identification between rationality and the immortal soul, and in which Descartes, in his 1637 *Discours de la* methode, had asserted the clear separation between animals and man, denying any form of language and creativity in the former. Descartes used the denial of animal language to counter the Gassendian scepticism and materialism that undermined the idea of man's primacy in the natural kingdom and contested his position at the centre of the universe. Against this conception, which had also been espoused by Montaigne, Descartes countered with a radical anthropomorphism, considering human communication as a privileged, unique and exclusive activity, and language the dividing line, the insuperable boundary between humans and all other living beings. Clearly separating the soul from the body, Descartes asserted that the latter - and by extension beasts, which do not have souls – is purely mechanical, and machines, without some outside influence, are inert. In the context of this view, the human body is activated by the soul,

[1] For an examination of this theme, see Prato (2012: 23-38).

which is also the seat of language, considered exclusive to man since animals lack the spiritual principle of the soul.

The Cartesian position was contested by Enlightenment philosophical and scientific thinkers with the aim of demonstrating that even beasts possess a form of language that allows them to communicate with animals of their own species, as well as other species. And the debate began with Locke's *Essay on human understanding* in the part (the third book) dedicated to language. Locke acknowledged that human language is made up of general signs constructed through a process of abstraction. Abstraction, to Locke, mean separating an element from its context; whiteness never appears on its own, but is presented as the simple idea of a perceptible quality found, for example, in the milk we drank the day before. When we eliminate everything that ties that idea to that particular situation, it becomes representative of all other similar qualities that can be found in the most disparate elements that one can see or experience (Locke, E II/XI, 9).

The existence of general terms allows language to be understood by all those who utilise it, regardless of different individual mentalities; this is the condition of intersubjectivity, and thus of language itself. Generality or universality does not pertain to the real essence of things, but to the activity of the intellect; and here we can grasp the difference between Locke's concept of abstraction and that of the scholastic philosophy with which it is polemically contrasted, precisely because Locke did not believe that human intellect could grasp the real essence of things. By creating abstract ideas and marking them with names, people "enable themselves to think and talk in bundles, as it were" (E III/III, 20), and this facilitates the organisation and communication of representations. General ideas formed in this way are the nominal essence of things, the only essence that we can know. The real essences of things – which we must certainly presume exist in that the perceptible quality on the basis of which we distinguish and catalogue things springs from them -, are unknown to us. If there are constant and indissoluble causal connections that bind together the substantial structure of reality, the English philosopher maintained that they can only be determined by God's intellect, and not by man, and in any case – and this is the most important thing -, they have no part in the mechanism of signification. As Hume also affirmed, concepts are relations of ideas, and not actual substance.

The abstracting function of the mind is the criteria that differentiates man from animals, because the other mental faculties (memory, discernment, judgment) are, in Locke's opinion, common to all sentient beings, which possess them in different forms and degrees (Locke E II/X, 10). Only the faculty of abstraction is man's alone, not all of the faculties of the soul. So there are no grounds of principle to exclude the possibility that animal species have some form of sense,

albeit different from and more limited than the nominal essences conceived by the human mind (E II/XI, 11).

This led Locke to attribute some form of language to animals, certainly much less developed than human language, but commensurate with their needs and awareness.

Locke's considerations contributed to fueling the debate on the language of animals, which in the 18th century became an opportunity for considered reflection on the relationship between man and animals. Ascribing animals with their own, admittedly far less-evolved form of language thus meant liberating reason from its theological burden and inserting man into a natural continuum in which beings differ in terms of level, as opposed to essence. This entails posing the question of the relationship between body and soul in new terms once again, evaluating the possibility that matter has more than a merely passive function in the formation and development of knowledge (Locke E IV/III, 6).

In the course of the 18th century, thanks in part to prospects opened up by Locke's system, there was an increasing tendency to consider animal language as a fully autonomous communications system with its own rules, in many ways analogous to the human language system. This was due in particular to two different but interrelated factors. The first was the change in perspective concerning man's place in the universe, whereby man was no longer considered to be nature's ultimate purpose, the most perfect of all living beings, created in God's image. The second factor, mentioned above, was the different conception of sensation asserted by the *philosophes*, starting with Locke's criticism of innate ideas, i.e., that sensation was not simply an opportunity for knowledge, but its very foundation, confuting the traditional distinction between inferior and superior forms of humanity. Reason was no longer considered an incommensurable faculty compared to sensibility, as it moulds the mind to achieve its most complex manifestations of knowledge and thought. Reason thus began to be considered a more complex form of sensibility, and no longer a specifically human attribute.

In the *Histoire des animaux* (1749), Buffon individuated two meanings for the term "feeling": a movement corresponding to a shock or a resistance, and the faculty to perceive and compare perceptions. In the *Animal* entry written for the first volume of the *Encyclopédie* published in 1751, Diderot added a third meaning related to the sentiments of pleasure and pain and self-awareness (Diderot 1751: 101). In fact, Diderot plainly acknowledged the substantial continuity between man and animals based on the "sensibility" that pertains to the entire sphere of living beings, of which man is simply a particular case; and La Mettrie, in *Homme machine* (1751), attributed animals, to a certain degree, with both a form of reason and the faculty of imagination, effectively corroborating the

thesis of man's savage, natural origin so detested by spiritualist philosophers and the Church.

Cartesian philosophy had established a scission between these different forms of sensibility: the stimulus response mechanism was considered totally different from perceiving and felling emotions, and in fact was associated with the *res extensa,* while the other two forms of knowledge were linked to the *res cogitans*. The outcome of this distinction was the concept of the *bête machine*, capable of sensation but incapable of feeling and comparing emotions. In 18th-century philosophy, on the other hand, these three meanings of "feeling" were brought back together, leading to the complete revision, if not the total abandonment, of the *bête machine* concept. Even Buffon, who in many respects continued to utilise the Cartesian theoretical model, demonstrated in various parts of his work that he considered Cartesian animal automatism outmoded, and even came to suggest that animals were conscious of their own existence, considerably reducing the distance that separated them from man.

In his *Traité des animaux* (1755), Condillac emphasised sensation as a matter of awareness that lay in the spiritual sphere as well as the physical, and then outlined a picture of the development of animal faculties deriving from sensation in an analogous way to the development of human faculties, but asserting that animals' abilities cannot reach human levels because animals have limited needs and a differently formed phonic apparatus. In the human mind, the passage from the simultaneity of thought to the seriality of speech develops through an analytical process in which we can observe what we do when we think. This led Condillac to consider languages as analytical methods. Language is thus not structured solely for the purpose of communication, but is also a crucial tool for analysing thought and breaking it down into discrete segments (Simone 1992: 155). Condillac's interest in signs stemmed from the form of empiricism itself: mental activity can occur only if it has a perceptible material support. As long as one is standing before a rose, or a dog, thought consists of the sensation derived from the subject's relationship with this element of the real world; this is a process that man has in common with animals. But when the object of thought is the number 2, or a dog in general, there is nothing in the real world that can elicit that particular sensation. It is arbitrary language that designates ideas that are not given in nature, which is very different from the natural language of animals. In this case, language is necessary for thought, because otherwise there would be no way to dominate the diversity of phenomena, and because certain objects of thought do not correspond to sensations, i.e., ideas. The key to activating the faculties of the soul, from memory to imagination, is the "liaison des idées".

This new formulation of ideas from the century of Enlightenment (concerning materialism, human rights, political science and linguistics) is of fundamental importance, and although not all of the hoped-for objectives were achieved – for

example, those concerning human rights - , their ideal was widely accepted, and those who criticise the existing order today do so in the name of Enlightenment.

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