



(Why) does the Enlightenment matter?

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ABSTRACT

Starting from the reactions to the Charlie Hebdo attack in January 2015 and appeals to Enlightenment values (above all toleration), this article reflects on the meaning of the enlightenment today and how to study it. Several examples are discussed, which show the diversity and complexity of eighteenth-century thinking and the need to adopt a more nuanced and, where necessary, critical attitude towards it. This also applies to the notion of toleration. The study of the Enlightenment should help us think more critically about its implications and about the ambiguities inherent in our own attitudes.

After the attack on «Charlie Hebdo» in Paris in January 2015, Voltaire's *Traité sur la tolérance* became a best-seller and was distributed free as an e-book by the newspaper «Libération», and in April 2015 the Société française d'étude du 18e siècle (Sfeds) published a little book called *Tolérance: le combat des Lumières*. The book, composed of quotations from around 40 eighteenth-century authors (mainly, but not only, French) sent in by members of the Society, was sold in newspaper kiosks for the modest price of € 4.90. The Preface, by the President of the Society, emphasizes the need to defend freedom, above all free speech, and points out the relevance of the quotations in helping us to think about today's problems. She reminds readers that living in a country in which everyone can express, publish and broadcast their opinions freely, while respecting both others and the laws, is a reality which must be defended daily by all available democratic means, and she ends with the following words: «En dignes héritiers des écrivains des Lumières, sachons être à la hauteur,

comme citoyens, de la société à laquelle nous aspirons, voilà peut-être la leçon à tirer des textes qui suivent, le feu qu'il nous faut entretenir, le legs précieux qu'il nous revient de transmettre aux générations futures»¹.

It would be difficult to criticize such a publication or such sentiments, which express the horror provoked by the barbarity of what happened and the revulsion at the assassination of the journalists simply because of what they published. The immense demonstrations in Paris and elsewhere on 11th January reflected the same revulsion against unthinking violence and the feeling that it was necessary to defend the freedom of thought and expression. But, while the interest in eighteenth-century writers is obviously welcome, I think we do need to reflect more on the reference to the Enlightenment and to the combat of Voltaire and others in the context of these events. I would therefore like to discuss in this article some of the issues arising from this reference to the eighteenth-century campaign for toleration, and more generally to reflect on how we understand 'the Enlightenment' and read eighteenth-century texts.

In a recent symposium published by *Migration and Citizenship*, Philippe Marlière analyses the references to freedom of expression, including on the part of the French government, in the aftermath of the attacks². He looks at the rhetoric of the "universal values" of France and the French Revolution, in particular toleration and *laïcité*, and the extent to which they represent not universalism but a particular, "majority communitarianism" and "Franco-centred values and norms". He also points out: «Reducing the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks to a question of freedom of speech allows the government to ignore the disastrous socio-economic context in which some young French people become murderers»³. This is a very important point, but not the subject of my article. I do not wish to discuss here the reactions to

¹ *Tolérance: le combat des Lumières*, Société Française d'Étude du Dix-Huitième Siècle, 2015, p. 6.

² Ph. Marlière, *The Charlie Hebdo Sequel: the Making of a Republican McCarthyism?*, «Migration and Citizenship. Newsletter of the American Political Science Association Organized Section on Migration and Citizenship», 3, 2015, no. 2, pp. 18-24; <<http://community.apsanet.org/MigrationCitizenship>> (accessed 19.7.15).

³ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

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these events in France or the extent to which France has seen since then a greater attack on freedom of speech rather than its defence, as several observers claim⁴. Instead I would like in what follows to reflect on the reference to “the Enlightenment” and “Enlightenment values”, including the defence of toleration, to propose a different approach to enlightenment and to think about its relevance in relation to the challenges we face today⁵.

I would also like to link my remarks on the Sfeds publication to the similar feelings expressed in 2013 by Anthony Pagden in the book to which the title of my article refers: *The Enlightenment and why it still matters*. As the book’s title indicates, Pagden believes the Enlightenment to be relevant and to be at the root of much that is admirable today. He writes, for example:

If we regard ourselves as modern, if we are forward-thinking, if we are tolerant and generally open-minded, if stem-cell research does not frighten us but fundamentalist religious beliefs do, then we tend to think of ourselves as ‘enlightened’. And in thinking that we are in effect declaring ourselves to be the heirs, however distant, of one particular intellectual and cultural movement⁶.

Part of his aim is to oppose the arguments of critics who adopt the stance of Horkheimer and Adorno, generally considered to have rendered the Enlightenment’s emphasis on reason responsible for the horrors of modernity, in particular Fascism and Nazism. He refers to the post-colonialists who denounce the Enlightenment as the apotheosis of rationalism and claim its defence of universal emancipation is

⁴ Marlière cites E. Todd, *Qui est Charlie? Sociologie d’une crise religieuse*, Seuil, Paris 2015, and E. Plenel, *Contre la surveillance, la question démocratique*, «Mediapart», 29 April 2015.

⁵ It is indeed striking that references to ‘the Enlightenment’ proliferate, and they are used in sometimes surprising ways. To give but one recent example: in an interview for «Le Monde», Donald Tusk, as President of the European Council, declared in relation to the Greek crisis: «En Europe, nous avons trop de Rousseau et Voltaire et trop peu de Montesquieu. Voilà ce que je pense du débat aujourd’hui en Europe», «Le Monde», 18 July 2015.

⁶ A. Pagden, *The Enlightenment and why it still matters*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, p. vii.

a cloak for Western cultural imperialism⁷. For Pagden, on the contrary,

What can be attributed to [the Enlightenment ...] is the broadly secular, experimental, individualistic, and progressive intellectual world [...] – a world in which old and apparently unassailable forms of association, of belief and tradition, which had for centuries divided human beings into mutually suspicious and often brutally homicidal groups, were slowly and painfully, but irreversibly, abandoned⁸.

Unlike many other historians, he does believe that one can identify an ‘Enlightenment Project’, summed up more or less as secularism and belief in universal human nature⁹ or an ‘Enlightenment science of man’ represented by Condorcet’s cosmo-politanism, with which the book opens. For Pagden the Enlightenment «was about creating a field of values, political, social, and moral, based upon a detached and scrupulous understanding – as far as the human mind is capable – of what it means to be human. And today, most educated people, at least in the West, broadly accept the conclusions to which it led»¹⁰. One might consider this last statement to be somewhat optimistic, in view of the current dominance of narrowly economic over other considerations in the conduct of affairs and in the values defended today by many ‘educated people’, particularly in the West. In addition, note the qualification in that sentence: the belief in universal human nature and universal values seems to be the preserve of the ‘West’, and the Enlightenment seems to be the product of the Christian West, stimulated by the Protestant Reformation. Pagden goes on to discuss the history of the Moslem world, describing how the development of science and philosophy was interrupted at the end of the Twelfth Century by ‘the Muslim clergy’, so that there was no enlightenment in the Moslem world, with the results that we can see¹¹.

Pagden’s view of Enlightenment bears similarities to Jonathan Israel’s presentation of what he calls the ‘Radical Enlightenment’, viewed

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 13-15.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. viii.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 343.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 345-348.

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as the origin of everything that is valuable in modernity – despite the very many differences between the two authors’ interpretations, including their views on the link between Enlightenment and the French Revolution¹². They share nevertheless a hostility towards postmodernism and religion and, despite their universalist claims, a teleological view of the Enlightenment combined with a diffusionist view of it originating in the West thanks to the overthrowing of the power of religion, with a particular emphasis on events and thinkers in France. This of course brings us on to much broader issues than the simple championing of toleration with which I began. But these statements and attitudes seem to me to share a similar problem, if we look at the challenges faced by us today, in that there is an implicit assumption of ‘our’ superiority as heirs to the Enlightenment, seen as a clearly Good Thing. While I am far from sharing many of the postmodern criticisms of the Enlightenment, which are very often ill-informed and a-historical, I do believe that we need to think more critically about the past. The view that the only option we have is a choice between denunciation of the Enlightenment on the one hand, and defensive encomium of it on the other, is highly regrettable, quite apart from the very problematic belief in a single Enlightenment, embodying a unified Project, which is difficult to substantiate.

I would like to begin with this last question, namely the problem with the category of ‘the Enlightenment’, which has much exercised scholars in recent years. I do not wish to rehearse yet again the different arguments in favour of one or multiple enlightenments (whether national or radical, moderate and so on)¹³, which have arguably skewed a lot of scholarship. One might even argue that it might be better to abandon the label altogether in favour of a simple reference

¹² J.I. Israel, *The Radical Enlightenment*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001; *Enlightenment Contested*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006; *Democratic Enlightenment*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011.

¹³ Such as R. Porter, M. Teich (eds.), *The Enlightenment in National Context*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1981; J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. I: *The Enlightenment of Edward Gibbon, 1737-1764*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999; J. Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment. Scotland and Naples 1680-1760*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005, to name only the most obvious.

to the period under study (as in the title chosen for this journal), and perhaps look at what individuals actually meant when they referred to the age as ‘enlightened’. One can be equally sceptical about the existence of something called an ‘Enlightenment Project’¹⁴. It could doubtless be argued that there was a group of people in Paris in the mid-to late-Eighteenth Century who shared a common outlook and aims despite differences between them on particular points – as there was also a group of like-minded thinkers in Edinburgh in the second half of the century, or in Milan, for example – but the outlook and aims of these different groups, while similar in many ways, were not identical. There also existed a large number of thinking people who identified with a broad conception of ‘enlightened’ ideas and attitudes without buying into any particular ‘project’ and while disagreeing profoundly with the Parisian ‘philosophes’. There were many thinking people, in many different countries, who supported legal and other reforms, and who opposed absolutism and religious intolerance and oppression, while being sincerely religious. These people, often minor figures little-known today, arguably contributed powerfully to a gradual shift in public opinion, making it more receptive to certain reforms¹⁵. They espoused a variety of opinions covering a

¹⁴ See R. Wokler, *The Enlightenment Project and its critics*, in S.E. Liedman (ed.), *The Postmodernist Critique of the Project of Enlightenment*, Rodopi, Amsterdam 1997 (Poznan Studies in the Philosophy of the Sciences and the Humanities, 58), pp. 1-30.

¹⁵ This was the case for many of the Huguenots who played an important role in spreading more tolerant ideas, such as Pierre Des Maizeaux in London or Jean-Henri-Samuel Formey in Berlin, or lesser known figures such as Michel de La Roche, on whom see A. Thomson, *In defence of toleration. La Roche’s Bibliothèque angloise and Mémoires littéraires de la Grande-Bretagne*, in A. Thomson, S. Burrows, E. Dziembowski (eds.), *Cultural transfers: France and Britain in the long eighteenth century*, Voltaire Foundation, Oxford 2010 (SVEC 2010: 4), pp. 161-174. I have also discussed the Dijon scholar Jean Bouhier and his correspondence with the Neuchâtel scientist Louis Bourguet in *Questioning Church Doctrine in Private Correspondence in the Eighteenth Century: Jean Bouhier’s Doubts Concerning the Soul*, in A. Dunan-Page, C. Prunier (eds.) *Debating the Faith: Religion and Letter Writing in Great Britain, 1550-1800*, Springer, Dordrecht 2013, pp. 195-208, and the activities of the Lausanne aristocrat Seigneux de Cor-revon in *Traduction et journalisme chez les intermédiaires culturels au 18^e siècle* to appear in a collective volume published by Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht in 2016. But many other examples could be given.

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relatively large spectrum and often held beliefs which to us would seem contradictory. Religious or philosophical ‘radicalism’, for example, frequently accompanied political conformism or defence of moderate reforms. It is as a consequence difficult to classify educated or thinking people in the Eighteenth Century into pre-defined and homogeneous categories. At the same time, while there were clearly national differences (the ‘Enlightenment’ is not exactly the same thing as ‘les Lumières’, ‘die Aufklärung’, ‘l’Illuminismo’, and so on), there was also a circulation of ideas and works (and not necessarily a diffusion from a single centre); despite adapting foreign texts to local circumstances, many educated people undoubtedly felt themselves part of an international ‘Republic of letters’. National enlightenments were therefore not self-contained or watertight. In addition, in this context, the definition of the ‘nation’ is problematical for the Eighteenth Century, which further complicates the issue. I would therefore prefer – rather than attempting to define different types of enlightenment as a way of countering claims concerning the existence of a single ‘Enlightenment’ (in whatever language one chooses to express it) – to emphasize the diversity of opinions and values; in other words, ‘enlightened’ attitudes could correspond to a variety of combinations and permutations of individual positions.

One can however, I think, identify a certain number of questions that particularly exercised thinking people in the Eighteenth Century and to which a range of answers was proposed. These questions centred of course around the nature of mankind, and life in society and its organisation; this is what Antony Pagden defines as the Enlightenment’s science of man, while in the Eighteenth Century these questions were sometimes grouped under the heading of the ‘natural history of man’ (or mankind)¹⁶. The range of questions covered was large, from the functioning of the brain and the existence of the soul and the natural varieties of humans and their relations to animals, to the origins and history of societies, morality, society’s laws, political economy and government. The general aim was to understand the

¹⁶ See Pagden, *The Enlightenment*, pp. 17-18. In using ‘man’, I am adopting eighteenth-century usage, but the word should always be taken to refer to human beings as a whole or humankind.

functioning (often seen in terms of the laws governing the functioning) of human beings and human society. Rather than following customary views or those dictated by authorities of various types, those who considered themselves ‘enlightened’ tried to adopt a more scientific attitude, relying largely on observation. To that extent, the attitude was secular in that it did not start from religious principles and often put religion to one side, but that does not mean that it was necessarily antireligious. Many ‘enlightened’ thinkers believed that these observations and conclusions could be reconciled with the doctrines taught by their religion¹⁷. We therefore find a large diversity of conclusions from these observations. As a result, it is I believe more useful to talk of enlightened attitudes rather than an ‘Enlightenment Project’. It is also important to remember that these attitudes concerned behaviour as well as philosophical positions. For many, the natural extension of these attitudes was an involvement in concrete reforms, or ‘applied Enlightenment’, which increased as the century progressed¹⁸. At the least, a commitment to public debate and to informing and ‘enlightening’ public opinion was an integral part of enlightened attitudes. While not going as far as some recent scholars who have seen this as the essential aspect of enlightenment¹⁹, it is obvious that careful attention needs to be paid to it. It was of course at the heart of projects like the *Encyclopédie*, but also drove much of the development of journalism in the period. Amongst those who were particularly involved in informing the reading public and in contributing to spreading new ideas were French Huguenot exiles in various European countries, whose activity in the fields of journalism

¹⁷ Certain scholars have even recently attempted to reclaim the Enlightenment for religion, for example D. Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 2008. I do not however believe that it is useful to create yet another separate category of enlightenment.

¹⁸ See A.I. Macinnes, *Applied Enlightenment: its Scottish limitations in the eighteenth century*, in J.F. Donyach, A. Thomson (eds.), *The Enlightenment in Scotland: national and international perspectives*, Voltaire Foundation, Oxford 2015, pp. 21-58.

¹⁹ See for example C. Siskin, W. Warner (eds.), *This is Enlightenment*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2010, which defines Enlightenment as an event in the history of mediation.

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and translation has attracted quite a lot of critical attention²⁰. It is worth pointing out that the group of Huguenots around Pierre Des Maizeaux in England in the first part of the Eighteenth Century, and their contacts in Holland, organised the translation into French of works by English Latitudinarian theologians, and their distribution, as a way of counteracting intolerant Catholic arguments. In a similar vein, Jean Henri Samuel Formey, secretary of the Berlin Academy of Sciences in the later Eighteenth Century, who directed a large number of periodicals and translated many works, saw himself as a Christian philosopher combating irreligious *philosophes*²¹. He nevertheless developed his own project for an encyclopaedia, afterwards giving the articles he had written to the editors of the *Encyclopédie*²². It would be difficult to deny that he saw himself as espousing certain enlightened values, reconcilable with Christian belief.

That said, is the claim that these attitudes can be seen as the origin of what we value most about modernity – or that the Eighteenth Century has uniquely bequeathed to us a set of admirable values that we must defend – a valid position from which to approach the study of eighteenth-century works? As I have already indicated, many of those who admire the ‘Enlightenment’ adopt a teleological (or ‘Whig’) point of view, seeing the period as a crucial moment in a process of steady improvement, of which we are the heirs. This also encourages an uncritical attitude towards those ideas and thinkers defined as being part of the Enlightenment, however defined. Such

²⁰ See in particular J. Sgard (ed.), *Dictionnaire de la Presse*, 4 vols, Voltaire Foundation, Oxford 1991, 1999. On translation, see F. Oz-Salzburger, *The Enlightenment in translation: regional and European aspects*, «European Review of History/Revue Européenne d'histoire», 13, 2006, no. 3, pp. 385-409, and my articles: *Locke Stillingfleet et Coste: la philosophie en extraits*, in G. Imbruglia, R. Minuti, L. Simonutti (a cura di), *Traduzione e circolazione delle idee nella cultura europea tra '500 e '700*, Bibliopolis, Napoli 2007, pp. 135-162; *Des Maizeaux, Collins and the translators: the case of Collins' Philosophical inquiry concerning human liberty*, in *Cultural transfers: France and Britain in the long eighteenth century*, pp. 219-231.

²¹ This is currently being studied by Annelie Grosse in a doctoral thesis being prepared at the EU.

²² See for example F.A. Kafker, J. Loveland, *Antoine-Claude Briasson and l'Encyclopédie*, «Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie», 35, 2003, pp. 131-142.

an uncritical attitude can itself be seen as a betrayal of those very thinkers we profess to admire. It also runs the danger of imposing on the past our present conceptions of what we consider to be ‘forward-looking’ or ‘modern’ attitudes while ignoring both possible ambiguities inherent in them and the extent to which these attitudes and judgements have been shaped by more recent history. It is surely more useful to try to understand what eighteenth-century thinkers were trying to do and why they came to the conclusions they did, without ignoring or trying to explain away what may seem to us to be inconsistencies, contradictions or black spots.

In what follows I shall look briefly at some of the questions that preoccupied people in the Eighteenth Century and the different answers given to these questions, including their less welcome implications. However far this may apparently take us from my starting-point, it is important to look at particular examples in order to make my argument clear and to avoid misunderstandings. I hope it will be evident from what follows that my aim is neither to defend nor to attack these writers, but to try to understand them and what they were trying to do.

Thinking about humans

One important aspect of eighteenth-century concerns was, as we have seen, the science of man or the ‘natural history of man’, in other words, discussion of what it means to be human; this includes, on the one hand, the question of humans’ physical make-up and the existence of the soul, and on the other, and linked to it, that of human varieties, including perceptions of and behaviour towards the ‘Other’ and thus the toleration (or not) of perceived difference. The eighteenth-century discussion of human nature not only covered a wide variety of subjects but also led to a variety of conclusions. Those who attempted to explain all of human functions in purely material terms (i.e., those generally termed materialists) adopted a position in open conflict with orthodox Christian teaching concerning the existence of an immaterial and immortal soul and, by the mid Eighteenth Century, increasingly denied the existence of God. Thus these materialists

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have generally been considered as the most radical of eighteenth-century thinkers. Whether in a certain Marxist tradition or in studies of the ‘radical Enlightenment’, they have often been described as being at the origin of radically democratic ideas and ‘progressive’ thought in all fields²³. When one looks more carefully, however, it immediately becomes clear that such an interpretation, based on a teleological view imposing our modern conceptions on the past, is unsustainable. Firstly, none of the eighteenth-century materialists questioned the bases of society; in *Ethocratie* (1776) baron d’Holbach, the leading propagandist for atheistic materialism, made a series of reform proposals which, encouraged by Turgot’s administration, he looked to the monarch to apply²⁴. And although Denis Diderot did support the American revolutionaries, called in 1780 for a slave revolt in the sugar colonies, and finally looked to revolution as the only way to regenerate an irremediably corrupt society²⁵, this seems to have been mainly the result of despair at the failure of hopes for reform rather than an inevitable consequence of his materialism. Indeed, until at least 1765 (that is, long after he had elaborated the foundations of his materialistic conception of humans) he was a defender of absolute monarchy, as the sovereign represents the general will²⁶, and in the early 1770s, when he was denouncing tyranny and defending revolution, he continued to distrust the uneducated ‘people’²⁷. It is difficult to see that a materialistic view of humans led necessarily to a ‘radical’ or even a republican political position. The English chemist Joseph Priestley developed in the late 1770s a sort of

²³ This is of course the argument defended by Jonathan Israel (see note 9) as well as someone like P. Charbonnat, *Histoire des philosophies matérialistes*, Syllepse, Paris 2007.

²⁴ P.-H. Thiry d’Holbach, *Œuvres philosophiques*, vol. III, Éd. Alive, Paris 1998-2001, pp. 593-594.

²⁵ See G. Goggi, *Diderot et Médée dépeçant le vieil Eson*, and *Le dernier Diderot et la première révolution anglaise. Modèles de révolution dans l’Histoire des Deux Indes*, in *De l’Encyclopédie à l’éloquence républicaine. Étude sur Diderot et autour de Diderot*, H. Champion, Paris 2013, pp. 457-80 and 481-536.

²⁶ See A. Strugnell, *Diderot’s Politics: A Study of the Evolution of Diderot’s Political Thought after the Encyclopédie*, Nijhoff, La Haye 1973, p. 9; J. Proust, *Diderot et l’Encyclopédie*, Albin Michel, Paris 1995², p. 20.

²⁷ Y. Benot, *Diderot, de l’athéisme à l’anticolonialisme*, Maspéro, Paris 1981², p. 152 ff.

‘Christian ma-terialism’ independently of his radical political positions²⁸, while the deist Thomas Paine, author of *Rights of Man* (1791-92), was an authentic democrat and republican²⁹. And if we go back to the most deliberately provocative French materialist of the 1740s, Julien Offray de La Mettrie, his extreme form of physical determinism and denial of any moral values led him to support existing governments in order to ensure social order³⁰.

More surprisingly, perhaps, a materialistic view of humans could form the basis for a view of them as naturally unequal; one might even claim that those who paid attention to the ways we are affected by inherent differences in physical organization were more willing to accept a certain innate inequality in individual capacities. La Mettrie believed that only a few individuals with favoured organisms could attain both moral integrity and a certain intellectual capacity, while the great majority need to be controlled by organised religion and fear³¹. This belief in human inequality is echoed in d’Holbach’s *Système de la nature* (1770), the famous campaigning work in favour of atheism and materialism, which attributes differences in intellectual faculties to mainly physical factors, both internal and external. The resulting inequality is one of the foundations of society as it means that no-one can subsist alone and that we all need others³². In *Politique naturelle* (1773) d’Holbach argues that as nature has given people different capacities and strength, society should also treat its members differently according to their usefulness, faculties, and virtues; laws

²⁸ J. Priestley, *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit*, J. Johnson, London 1777.

²⁹ Paine’s *Age of Reason*, 1794, was a critique of the Bible from a deistic point of view.

³⁰ A. Thomson, *Materialism and Society*, Droz, Geneva 1981. However, he died young at the court of Frederick II in Potsdam and might possibly have changed his position in the circumstances of the second half of the century, and had he been less dependent on that monarch’s protection.

³¹ See in particular the «Discours préliminaire» to his *Oeuvres philosophiques*, in Thomson, *Materialism and Society*.

³² Holbach, *Système de la nature*, vol. I, Fayard, Paris 1990, pp. 150-151.

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should however ensure that no one takes undue advantage of their situation³³.

In addition, such arguments could be extended from individuals to human groups; it is therefore possible to link materialism to claims concerning the intellectual inferiority of particular 'races'. Although La Mettrie did not touch on this question, confining himself to his own society, others did. In this respect the thought of Denis Diderot is an especially interesting case. He criticised Claude-Adrien Helvétius's insistence on the essential similarity of humans, pointing out instead the great and irremediable variety of individual organization³⁴. Coupled with physiological determinism, this entailed a belief in the natural inequality of individuals. This analysis could be transposed to groups and encourage the idea that savage 'races' could not progress towards the same degree of civilization as Europeans, determined as they were by their physical make-up. Diderot does seem on occasion to have accepted the idea of the intellectual inequality of different human varieties³⁵. Such a view could be reinforced by the notion of an uninterrupted chain of beings³⁶ according to which humans are part of nature like other animals from which they differ only in degree not kind. This was one of the arguments used by materialists to deny the existence of an immaterial and immortal soul, said to distinguish humans from the beasts. La Mettrie had claimed that if one could teach a great ape or orang-outan to speak (which he seemed to think possible in view of the physical similarities between them) then there would be no difference between the ape and a human being, an idea echoed by Diderot in *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*³⁷. In the

³³ Holbach, *Politique naturelle ou Discours sur les vrais principes du gouvernement*, Fayard, Paris 1998, pp. 162-163.

³⁴ Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, éd. par H. Dieckmann, J. Proust, J. Varloot, Hermann, Paris 1975- (= DPV), vol. IX, pp. 308-309.

³⁵ Diderot, *Révolution de l'Amérique anglaise*, in Diderot, *Mélanges et morceaux divers. Contributions à l'Histoire des Deux Indes*, a cura di G. Goggi, Università di Siena, Siena 1977, p. 149; see Proust, *Diderot et l'Encyclopédie*, p. 417.

³⁶ See A.O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1936, ch. 6, 8, 9.

³⁷ La Mettrie, *L'Homme machine*, ed. A. Vartanian, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 1960, pp. 160-162; Diderot, DPV, vol. XVII, p. 206.

Encyclopédie article «Animal» Diderot rejected the distinction made by Buffon between humans and the rest of the animal kingdom (based in part on the fact that humans have a soul) in favour of an uninterrupted chain of beings, describing how the faculty of thinking gradually diminishes as one goes down the chain and disappears somewhere between the animal and vegetable kingdoms³⁸. Diderot refused to classify species, claiming it was difficult to pinpoint where humanity ends and ‘animality’ begins, and unlike Buffon he considered species to be artificial entities or mere names, as all beings come from one single prototype³⁹. In the *Rêve de d’Alembert*, Diderot makes the dreaming mathematician d’Alembert say that there is only one great individual – «totality» – and as everything is in a state of perpetual flux, other species may appear⁴⁰. The individual, who is composed of perpetually moving molecules, is a possibly changing part of the whole. To support this point of view, he invoked the authority of Dr Peter Camper, who in 1770 described how the different human varieties could be distinguished by measuring their facial angle; he provided drawings of the skulls of a monkey, an orang-outang, an African, a Kalmuck (whom he called «the ugliest thing in nature»), a European and a classical statue, although Camper followed Buffon in maintaining a dividing line between humans and animals⁴¹. In his medical notes, Diderot interpreted Camper’s ideas to fit his own belief in the continuity of nature, making the great ape an intermediary between humans and animals⁴².

Diderot wanted to show the unity of nature and the continuity of all beings, but the removal of the dividing line between humans and animals was used by others to demote to the level of animals certain human groups considered to be at the bottom of the ladder⁴³. It was

³⁸ *Ibidem*, vol. V, pp. 388-389.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, vol. IX, p. 37.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, vol. XVII, pp. 128, 138-139.

⁴¹ Petrus Camper, *Dissertation sur les variétés naturelles qui caractérisent la physionomie des hommes des divers climats et des différens ages*, Francart, Paris 1792, p. 19ff.

⁴² Diderot, DPV, vol. XVII, pp. 321, 326.

⁴³ See e.g. J.Ph. Rousselot de Surgy, *Mélanges intéressans et curieux ou Abrégé d’histoire naturelle, morale, civique et politique, de l’Asie, l’Afrique, et des terres polaires*, 10 voll., Durand, Paris 1763-1765, vol. X, p. 166.

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of course later a frequent argument of nineteenth-century materialistic anthropologists, who did draw conclusions about the innate inferiority of certain races, and some of whom looked to Diderot as a precursor⁴⁴. Diderot himself did not draw racist conclusions from these arguments and, perhaps deliberately, chose not to develop these questions further, probably because of his opposition to slavery and because those who defended the institution increasingly used arguments based on the supposed natural inferiority of Africans⁴⁵. He preferred instead to turn to the historical question of the development of societies and the different stages of civilisation, which explain the observed differences between peoples. At the same time he emphasized the basic similarities of all human beings and their social development rather than what distinguished human varieties⁴⁶.

Before looking at this latter question, it is important to make clear the gist of my argument here, which is not that materialism led to racism. My purpose is simply to point out that a variety of conclusions can be drawn from a materialistic conception of humans, which did not automatically found a 'progressive', egalitarian or democratic political position. The natural history of man could and did on occasion lend support to hierarchical racial classification, and even, with someone like Bory de Saint-Vincent at the turn of the century, to polygenesis⁴⁷. But although *abbé* Grégoire, the pro-revolutionary campaigner against slavery, did claim that materialism favoured racial hierarchy and slavery⁴⁸, there was no lack of pro-slavery apologists who were dualists and Christians. J.J. Virey, for example, a vitalist opponent of materialists, published a *Histoire naturelle du genre humain*, in which he included La Mettrie amongst those quoted in support of his claim that savages belong to the monkey family, and dwelt

⁴⁴ Ch. Letourneau, *Science et matérialisme*, C. Reinwald, Paris 1879, p. 83.

⁴⁵ See A. Thomson, *Issues at stake in eighteenth-century racial classification*, «Studi Settecenteschi», 21, 2001, pp. 223-244.

⁴⁶ See A. Thomson, *Diderot, le matérialisme et la division de l'espèce humaine*, «Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie», 26, 1999, pp. 197-211.

⁴⁷ J.-B. Bory de Saint-Vincent, *L'homme (homo). Essai zoologique sur le genre humain*, Rey et Gravier, Paris 1827.

⁴⁸ See A. Thomson, *Grégoire et l'unité de l'espèce humaine*, «Revue française d'Histoire d'Outre-mer», 87, 2000, pp. 11-23.

at length on the superiority of the European race⁴⁹. It would hence be difficult to say that one philo-sophical position concerning human nature was inherently and consistently more ‘progressive’ than another.

As I have indicated, Diderot may well have realised the dangers inherent in extending arguments concerning physical determinism from individuals to groups of humans, and preferred instead to emphasize the similarities between all members of the human race. This is part of what is often referred to as ‘Enlightenment universalism’ and denounced by certain critics as simply a Eurocentric construction, imposing European views on the rest of the world⁵⁰. But this notion is again polyvalent and cannot be so easily classified. The belief in the inherent equality of all humans due to their essential physical similarity, despite individual variations, formed the basis, for many eighteenth-century thinkers, for treating all people equally and for condemning slavery and colonial exploitation. Diderot’s claim, in his *Encyclopédie* article «Droit naturel» that as we are by nature reasonable, unlike animals, we can discover the truth by reason, leads him to find the solution to the problem of morality in the general will of humans. This is the basis for natural law. This general will is found «in the principles of prescribed law of all civilised nations; in the social practices of savage and barbarous peoples; in the tacit agreements obtaining amongst the enemies of mankind», and even in instinctive feeling. This leads him to a certain number of conclusions based on the essential similarity of all humans all over the world, which all come down to the general interest and common human desires, discovered by the use of reason, as the foundation for laws⁵¹. Self-interest is combined with humans’ essential sociability, based on their physiology⁵². Elsewhere Diderot claims that the basis for morali-

⁴⁹ J.J. Virey, *Histoire naturelle du genre humain*, F. Dufart, Paris an X, pp. 91, 146-147.

⁵⁰ See the discussion in D. Carey, L. Festa (eds.), *The Postcolonial Enlightenment*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009.

⁵¹ Diderot, *Political Writings*, ed. J. Hope Mason, R. Wokler, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1992, pp. 18-19.

⁵² See Strugnell, *Diderot’s Politics*, p. 20. Jacques Proust emphasizes Diderot’s unchanging belief in natural sociability in *Diderot et l’Encyclopédie*, pp. 408-416.

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ty can be found in the similar physical organisation of all humans, which means that we have common needs. Thus «morality is enclosed within the species»⁵³. And in his *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville*, written in the early 1770s, one of the characters remarks: «Nous n'apportons en naissant qu'une similitude d'organisation avec d'autres êtres, les mêmes besoins, de l'attrait vers les mêmes plaisirs, une aversion pour les mêmes peines, ce qui constitue l'homme ce qu'il est et doit fonder la morale qui lui convient»⁵⁴. Diderot's belief in the existence of a universal morality based on a «constant, universal, physical cause» is behind the political positions he developed in the texts written for inclusion in abbé Raynal's *Histoire des deux Indes*. He talks of

la similitude d'organisation d'un homme à un autre, similitude d'organisation qui entraîne celle des mêmes besoins, des mêmes plaisirs, des mêmes peines, de la même force, de la même faiblesse; source de la nécessité de la société ou d'une lutte commune et concertée contre des dangers communs et naissant du sein de la nature même qui menace l'homme de cent côtés différents. Voilà l'origine des liens particuliers et des vertus domestiques; voilà l'origine des liens généraux et des vertus publiques; voilà la source de la notion d'une utilité personnelle et publique; voilà la source de tous les pactes individuels et de toutes les lois; voilà la cause de la force de ces lois dans une nation pauvre et menacée; voilà la cause de leur faiblesse dans une nation tranquille et opulente; voilà la cause de leur presque nullité d'une nation à une autre⁵⁵.

Belief in a universal human nature was not, however, shared by all the French materialists. Helvétius, who considered individual human organisation to be so similar that innate individual differences were insignificant, nevertheless believed that humans were determined by external factors, above all education and laws. As a result he did not believe in a common universal human nature. Such a belief is never-

⁵³ Diderot, DPV, vol. XVI, pp. 87, 201-205. In the *Rêve de D'Alembert*, however, Diderot imagines the appearance and disappearance of species, which are not fixed, which might undermine this basis for morality.

⁵⁴ Diderot, DPV, vol. XII, p. 630. See Proust, *Diderot et l'Encyclopédie*, p. 387.

⁵⁵ Diderot, *Pensées détachées, ou Fragments politiques échappés du portefeuille d'un philosophe*, éd. G. Goggi, Hermann, Paris 2011, p. 112, and see Goggi's commentary on this passage, pp. 32-35.

theless often considered to be an essential element of ‘the Enlightenment’, linked in Condorcet to the idea of indefinite perfectibility⁵⁶. It is, as I have said, at the basis of opposition to slavery and to colonial exploitation, including on the part of Diderot. However, at the same time, one cannot dismiss out of hand the observations of certain critics who claim that it was driven by specifically European notions of human nature and could form the basis for colonial enterprises aimed at bringing ‘savage’, or later ‘backward’, peoples up to European standards. Here again we see the ambiguity of such conceptions, which are neither good nor bad in themselves, but could be put to different uses depending on a variety of circumstances and interests. To give but one example of the dangers of generalising about European views of other peoples and colonial ambitions, one could quote a passage in Raynal’s *Histoire des Deux-Indes* which calls for a European expedition to North Africa to free its inhabitants from the Ottomans in order to ‘civilise’ them; this appeal is immediately followed by another passage, written by Diderot, insisting that if this expedition is only to result in the exploitation and barbarity exercised by the Europeans in other non-European countries, then they should abandon such a project and stay in their own harbours⁵⁷.

I shall not go into the polemics concerning eighteenth-century attitudes to slavery, which have been the subject of widely divergent and often ill-informed evaluations⁵⁸. Thinking about slavery needs to be understood in the terms of the Eighteenth Century, avoiding interpretations based on our own views. Slavery was indeed for a long time accepted with few qualms by many thinkers, including John Locke, and was not condemned by Christians until well into the century – not even by the Quakers who in the second half of the century

⁵⁶ On this, see for example J.P. Schandeler, *Condorcet et l'invention de la perfectibilité indéfinie*, in B. Binoche (éd.), *L'homme perfectible*, Champ Vallon, Seyssel 2004, pp. 221-251.

⁵⁷ *Histoire des Deux-Indes*, vol. VI, Pellet, Genève 1780, pp. 56-61.

⁵⁸ See for example the polemical works by L. Sala-Molins, in particular *Le Code noir, ou le calvaire de Canaan* (1987), Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 2002; the evidence for the opposite point of view has been laid out by J. Ehrard, *Lumières et esclavage. L'esclavage colonial et l'opinion publique en France au XVIII^e siècle*, A. Versaillé, Bruxelles 2008.

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were amongst its most vocal and active opponents. But the leading thinkers in many different countries came in the course of the Eighteenth Century to condemn slavery, often adopting a gradualist stance, beginning with attempts to abolish the trade, in the hope that this would lead to the abolition of the institution itself. As we have seen, opposition to slavery was behind Diderot's wariness at going down a path which might emphasize innate differences between humans. At the same time, the main antislavery work of the Eighteenth Century, read all over Europe, Raynal's *Histoire des Deux-Indes*, is traversed by many contradictions, due in part to the number of contributors and the fact that Raynal copied and adapted passages from many different sources. On the one hand, we find that from the first to the third edition, the discussion of the reasons for the physical differences between humans changes, as the condemnation of slavery is developed and extended; in the first edition (1770), skin colour is explained by innate physical differences, but in the later editions it is described as the effect of climatic and environmental factors. The aim is clearly to undermine any arguments for slavery based on a belief in the natural inferiority of Africans. On the other hand, many other passages seeming to condone the slave trade remain unchanged⁵⁹.

If we come, finally to the question with which we began, namely toleration, the situation is no less ambiguous and contradictory, and it is significant that the notion has recently attracted increasing study. Many scholars now point out that the notion of 'toleration' needs to be re-thought for today's world, to take account of the complexities involved in guaranteeing respect for others instead of wishing to make them to conform to our viewpoint, while at the same time reflecting on how much freedom to accord those who are themselves intolerant⁶⁰. The terms in which the question of toleration was most

⁵⁹ The uncompromising denunciation of slavery is to be found in Book XI, in what becomes ch. 24 in the 1780 edition (vol. VI, pp. 186-222). Other anodyne references to slavery, which seem to condone it, are scattered throughout the work's different volumes.

⁶⁰ See for example H.E. Bödeker, C. Donato, P.H. Reill (eds.), *Discourses of Tolerance and Intolerance in the European Enlightenment*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2009 (UCLA Center for Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-century Studies & the

often posed in the Eighteenth Century involved the rights of religious minorities and the question of whether the state could impose a particular belief on its subjects. John Locke, one of the main references on the question, while arguing vigorously against interfering with private beliefs and advocating the free organisation of religious communities within a state, nevertheless did not accord toleration to Catholics and atheists, on political grounds⁶¹. It is also noticeable that many European advocates of toleration condemned the intolerance of established churches while pointing to the greater toleration afforded to religious minorities in the Ottoman Empire⁶². This, it could be argued, underlines the fact that toleration was seen as a grant from the state authorities to subject minorities, or charitable behaviour towards those who held erroneous views, provided they did not disturb public order or question the authority of the rulers. It was only during the Eighteenth Century that toleration took on more positive connotations⁶³. The eighteenth-century campaign was primarily directed against fanaticism and religious persecution (the event that sparked Voltaire's pamphlet was of course the judicial murder of the Protestant Calas) and in favour of the freedom of individual belief and thought rather than an unrestrained right to print whatever one wished. At the same time, Voltaire and others did use the weapon of mockery directed against superstitious religious beliefs and practices in order to undermine the power of their country's

W.A. Clark Memorial Library, series 8); J.C. Laursen, M.J. Villaverde (eds.), *Paradoxes of Religious Toleration in Early Modern Political Thought*, Lexington Books, Lanham & Plymouth 2012; *Toleration Reexamined*, special issue of «Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy», 14, 2011.

⁶¹ See John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration and other writings*, ed. Mark Goldie, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis 2010, pp. 49-53. For the early Eighteenth Century, see more generally J. Marshall, *John Locke, Toleration and Early Enlightenment Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006.

⁶² See R. Minuti, *Tolleranza e islam. Aspetti di un dibattito tra '600 e '700*, in G. Abbatista, R. Minuti (a cura di), *Le problème de l'altérité dans la culture européenne. Anthropologie, politique et religion aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles*, Bibliopolis, Napoli 2006, pp. 195-217; and *Orientalismo e idee di tolleranza nella cultura francese del primo '700*, Olschki, Firenze 2006.

⁶³ See H.E. Bödeker, *Prologue: Towards a Reconstruction of the Discourse on Tolerance and intolerance in the Age of Enlightenment*, in *Discourses of Tolerance and Intolerance*, pp. 17-26.

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church. This could on occasion take the form of what many of their fellow-countrymen considered to be (and what many Christians would still see as) blasphemy. We can all agree with Voltaire's denunciation of intolerance and insistence that we are all 'brothers', but we need to remember the circumstances inside Europe to which it was a reaction. It could sometimes, and can today, lead to intolerance for those labelled as fanatics⁶⁴. Luisa Simonutti argues that today, instead of emphasizing toleration, we should look to the value of the notion of 'empathy', linking it to David Hume's discussion in the *Enquiries concerning human understanding and concerning the principles of morals* (1751)⁶⁵. One might add that a view like Diderot's, underlining the physical similarities between humans all over the world, which form the basis for sociability and a common morality, while approaching the question from a different direction, is entirely compatible with such a viewpoint. As I have already indicated, respect for others and their difference is an essential part of the debate, and one which received varied answers in the Eighteenth Century. It is impossible to go into the details of these arguments here, beyond pointing out the complexities involved in discussions of toleration, including the danger of seeing ourselves as the 'civilised' tolerant people opposed to the 'fanatics' or the 'barbarians'.

Empathy includes attempts to understand the others' point of view, to 'see things their way'⁶⁶. It might help us to understand why in many parts of today's world, which were subjected first to colonisation and more recently to invasion by the West in the name of 'civilisation' and sometimes 'enlightened values', the defence of these values can often be received with a certain amount of scepticism. Declarations that the 'fundamentalists' hate democracy and civilisa-

⁶⁴ See for example J.C. Laursen's analysis of Hume in *Intolerance of Fanatics in Bayle, Hume, and Kant*, in *Paradoxes of Religious Toleration*, pp. 184-186 and J.C. Laursen, *Blind Spots in the Toleration Literature*, «Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy», 14, 2011, pp. 307-322.

⁶⁵ L. Simonutti, *Paradigme de la modernité: de la tolérance à l'empathie* (forthcoming article).

⁶⁶ A. Chapman, J. Coffey, B.S. Gregory (eds.), *Seeing Things Their Way: Intellectual History and the Return of Religion*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 2009.

tion miss the point; for many of those young people attracted to the violent rhetoric of the extremists, the West's defence of such values is pure hypocrisy. We should not ignore the possibility that 'our' appeals to the 'legacy of the Enlightenment' and praise for its campaign in favour of toleration might be seen as merely a cloak for our own feeling of superiority and even for expansionist ambitions. However misguided such impressions may be, it is a mistake to close our eyes to their existence and ignore the possible ambiguity in our own attitudes.

Does this mean that we should abandon such values? Of course not. Simply that in putting the works of the past on a pedestal, in adopting an uncritical stance towards them, we are in fact betraying the principles defended by those we admire. We need to look critically at these thinkers and their works, without closing our eyes to their possible ambiguities and contradictions, and to understand them as products of their time without passing value judgements on them. This will help us to see how far analyses and proposals for action elaborated in very different circumstances can be relevant for today's world. Only in this way, in addition, can we examine critically our own assumptions and beliefs and avoid the dangers of self-congratulation visible in many of the reactions to the fanaticism of others. That is why the study of 'the Enlightenment' matters, but it must be a study informed by a deep historical understanding which enables us to see why the vitally important questions posed by eighteenth-century thinkers were posed in the way they were and received the variety of answers they did. A realisation of the ambiguity inherent in certain of their answers can open our eyes to the diverse implications of the notions we have inherited from them. Books emphasizing the complexity of eighteenth-century thinking are less likely to become best-sellers than ones either praising or condemning the Enlightenment, but they are arguably more useful in helping us to understand the past and hence the complexities and contradictions of our own times.