

# THE PHILOSOPHY OF DU MARSAIS'S *LE PHILOSOPHE*

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## 1.

César Chesneau Du Marsais's *Le Philosophe* is one of the most important texts of the so-called French clandestine philosophical literature of the first half of the eighteenth century. It was written in the early twenties and first published in 1743 in the groundbreaking collection of philosophical essays entitled *Nouvelles libertés de penser*. In 1765, a shortened and somewhat watered-down version of the text appeared as the article "Philosophe"<sup>1</sup> in the twelfth volume of Diderot's and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*. After that, it went through several editions before the end of the eighteenth century.

The collection *Nouvelles libertés de penser* – there is no name of the editor or the publisher on the title page, and "Amsterdam" is intentionally incorrectly given as the place of publication – consists of five shorter philosophical treatises, all of them anonymous: *Réflexions sur l'argument de M. Pascal et de M. Locke concernant la possibilité d'une autre vie à venir*, *Sentimens des Philosophes sur la nature de l'âme*, *Traité de la liberté*, *Réflexions sur l'existence de l'âme et sur l'existence de Dieu*, and – as the last one – *Le Philosophe*. While the authors of the first two treatises are still shrouded in mystery, the third essay was authored by Fontenelle,<sup>2</sup> and the fourth and the fifth are attributed to

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<sup>1</sup> Diderot in d'Alembert, eds., *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 17 vols. (Paris: Briasson, 1751-65), 12: 509b-511a.

<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, this is not the only Fontenelle's contribution to the corpus of clandestine philosophical literature. The perpetual secretary of the French Academy of Sciences has also authored a philosophical novel entitled *La République des philosophes, ou Histoire des Ajaoïens* (Geneva, 1768), depicting an idyllic island state Ajao somewhere in today's Sea of Okhotsk, embodying Bayle's society of "virtuous atheists." Reading Fontenelle's novel, one is left with the impression that it may have been the

Du Marsais, who presumably also assembled and edited the volume.<sup>3</sup> The volume is groundbreaking in that it is the first printed collection consisting entirely of the texts of the clandestine philosophical production that, moreover, all belong to "the most radical line of the clandestine thought of the first half of the [eighteenth] century."<sup>4</sup>

Philosophical historiography has known about this segment of philosophical production for less than a century, more precisely since 1912, when it was first described by Gustave Lanson, whose attention was attracted by philosophical manuscripts, scattered around various French libraries, which – due to their subversive nature – clandestinely circulated around France and have importantly shaped the philosophical scene in the first half of the eighteenth century and had a significant effect on the history of philosophical ideas in the second half of the eighteenth century. As a rule, the texts are irreligious, either deistic or atheistic; they argue for morals, which would be entirely independent of religion, and most often deny the existence of the spiritual soul, which would survive the death of the body. In 1938, Ira O. Wade listed 102 clandestine philosophical texts from this period,<sup>5</sup> while on a more recent list compiled in 1996 by Miguel Benítez there are already 269 titles, copies of which are to be found not only in France, but also elsewhere around

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source of inspiration for James Hilton's fantasy *Lost Horizon* (1933). Hilton's descriptions of the mythical valley of Shangri-La, hidden high in the Himalayas, closely resemble the island of Ajao, even the endings of both novels are alike: the main characters of both novels, Fontenelle's van Doelvelt as well as Hilton's Conway, are seen at the end – after deep disappointment they felt upon returning to Europe – as trying to find their way back to the wonderland they have left, and so forth. Unlike the state of Ajao, Shangri-La is not entirely atheistic: the spiritual growth of its inhabitants is being watched over by lamas from the nearby monastery whose "prevalent belief," that is, belief in "moderation" in all things, is such that it would most likely appeal also to the atheists from the island of Ajao: "We inculcate the virtue of avoiding excess of all kinds – even including, if you will pardon the paradox, excess of virtue itself," explains the lama Chang to the visibly thrilled Conway (James Hilton, *Lost Horizon* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960], 74).

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed account on Du Marsais's presumed role in assembling the collection of essays and on circumstances leading to the publication, see Gianluca Mori, "Du manuscrit à l'imprimé: les *Nouvelles libertés de penser*," *La Lettre Clandestine* 2 (1993), 15-18. For more on Du Marsais and his place in the clandestine philosophical thought of the first half of the eighteenth century, see Mori, "Du Marsais philosophe clandestin: textes et attributions," in *La Philosophie clandestine à l'Age classique*, ed. Antony McKenna and Alain Mothu (Paris: Universitas/Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1997), 169-92.

<sup>4</sup> Mori, "Du manuscrit à l'imprimé," 15.

<sup>5</sup> Ira O. Wade, *The Clandestine Organization and Diffusion of Philosophic Ideas in France from 1700 to 1750* (New York: Octagon, 1967), 11-18.

Europe.<sup>6</sup> Without the texts of this production, it would seem as if nothing really significant happened in French philosophy between Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* and Montesquieu's *L'Esprit des lois*, with the exception of Voltaire's *Lettres philosophiques* and Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*.

A brilliant literary treatment of the "darkside" of the French Enlightenment can be found in the voluminous novel by Abbé Prévost *Cleveland* (1731-39). The title character of the novel, who is otherwise a convinced Cartesian spiritualist and a theist, in a certain period of his life when his travels bring him to Paris where he encounters some materialist and atheist philosophers, embraces *la doctrine impie*, the impious doctrine, according to which death of the body entails death of ourselves since soul is not really distinct from body but identical with it, and *le premier Être*, the first Being is nothing other than *chimère, dont l'existence renferme bien plus de contradictions que celle de notre âme*,<sup>7</sup> a chimera whose existence contains even more contradictions than that of our soul. Cleveland's interest in these ideas which closely resemble those disseminated at the time by the clandestine philosophical texts is aroused by *un homme célèbre par son esprit*, a man famous for his mind whom Prévost might well have modeled after Du Marsais who was once thought to have authored one of the most notorious clandestine texts on the subject, namely *L'Âme matérielle*.<sup>8</sup> There are also some other details that suggest that, through Cleveland's materialist episode, Prévost may be depicting the "hidden face" of the French Enlightenment and thus offering us a glimpse into the secret life of the philosophical ideas of that period. Like the authors of the clandestine philosophical texts, Cleveland and his philosophical friends keep their materialist belief to themselves; their meetings are held in the strictest secrecy, no one uninitiated in the secrets of their sect is allowed to attend, and so forth. While they are all inwardly convinced atheists, outwardly they do not want to attract attention to themselves and thus they still observe the established religious rituals. Just like the authors of numerous clandestine philosophic texts are unwilling to sign the manuscripts and reveal their names, so also Cleveland cautiously keeps the names of his materialist friends to him-

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<sup>6</sup> Miguel Benítez, *La Face cachée des Lumières: Recherches sur les manuscrits philosophiques clandestins de l'âge classique* (Paris: Universitas/Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1996), 22-61.

<sup>7</sup> Antoine Prévost d'Exiles, *Le Philosophe anglais ou Histoire de M. Cleveland, fils naturel de Cromwell*, ed. Jean Sgard and Philippe Stewart (Paris: Éditions Desjonquères, 2003), 965.

<sup>8</sup> See Alain Niderst, "Traces de la littérature clandestine dans la grande littérature de la première moitié du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle," in *La Philosophie clandestine à l'Âge classique*, 454.

self. The only materialist sage whose name Cleveland is willing to divulge, is the one who – after he has unexpectedly survived a supposedly terminal disease – relinquished the "impious doctrine" and entered the fraternity of Oratorians. It is, perhaps, no coincidence that his friend's example is soon followed by Cleveland who, before the end of the novel, again becomes a convinced spiritualist and a theist. A novel whose hero triumphantly clinged to *pernicieuse nouveauté*, pernicious novelty, as Cleveland in retrospect calls his one-time materialist belief, would probably – like some other materialistically inspired literary bestsellers of the period – itself end up in the corpus of the clandestine literature. That the extreme caution Cleveland's philosophical friends exercise when expressing their materialist belief, and Cleveland's own unwillingness to reveal their names, are not exaggerated, but a realistic depiction of the goings-on in the Parisian philosophical underground of that time, can perhaps best be seen from the real-life fates of the first two published materialist authors, La Mettrie and Diderot: it was on account of their disseminating the ideas which they often owe to clandestine philosophical texts that the former was exiled, and the latter sent to jail.

If one wanted to find an approximate modern-day equivalent of the texts of the most radical line of the clandestine thought, such as Jean Meslier's *Mémoire contre la religion* and Nicolas Fréret's *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe*, one could, perhaps, see it in the two recent books by Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. Although the contrast between *The God Delusion* and *God Is Not Great* on the one hand, and the works of the clandestine thought on the other could hardly be greater – while the former are huge literary bestsellers, the latter clandestinely circulated in a few dozen manuscript copies at most and were so meticulously hidden from the public eye that the history of philosophy was long unaware of their existence – in those chapters in which Dawkins and Hitchens dissect the inner contradictions and absurdities of the Old and the New Testament, there is hardly anything that cannot be found already in, say, Meslier's *Mémoire*.<sup>9</sup>

## 2.

The notorious materialist conception of the human body as a machine (or clock) that "winds itself," that is, the conception which is generally associ-

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam, 2006), 237-54; and Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 97-122.

ated with La Mettrie and his work *L'Homme-machine* (1747), is without doubt one of the ideas that the latter might well have found in Du Marsais's *Le Philosophe*. When La Mettrie says that "the human body is a machine which winds itself up,"<sup>10</sup> what he means is, roughly, that organized body generates its movement by itself; according to him, "organized matter is endowed with a motive principle."<sup>11</sup> But when Du Marsais writes that *le Philosophe* [...] *c'est une horloge qui se montre pour ainsi dire quelque fois elle-même*, the philosopher is [...] so to speak, a clock that sometimes winds itself,<sup>12</sup> he seems to have something different in mind, namely: while all men are machines, only the philosopher is a machine that "winds itself." What distinguishes the philosopher from the majority of the (ignorant) fellow men is that he is *une machine qui par sa constitution mécanique, réfléchit sur ses mouvemens* (174), a machine which by its mechanical constitution reflects on its movements. According to the determinist Du Marsais, men are *déterminés à agir* (174), determined to act, which of course holds also for the philosopher; the difference between the philosopher and the ignorant is that the latter do not know the causes which determine them to act, and most often they are not even aware that any such causes exist, whereas Du Marsais's sage tries, to the best of his abilities, to discern these causes (175). Behind Du Marsais's distinction between knowledge and ignorance of the causes that determine our actions it is not hard to recognize the classical Spinozist theme: on the one side we have a sage who reflects on determinism and on the other the ignorant mistakenly believing themselves to be free. According to Spinoza, men mistakenly believe themselves to be free because they are conscious only of their actions but not of the causes by which they are determined; or, as he writes in the "Appendix" to the first part of the *Ethics*: "men take themselves free, because they are conscious of their volitions and their appetite, and do not think, even in their dreams, of the causes by which they are disposed to wanting and willing, because they are ignorant of [those causes]."<sup>13</sup> In Spinoza's view, this kind of mistaken belief in their freedom is so common and so typical of the ignorant that later on in the second part he uses it to illustrate the error

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<sup>10</sup> La Mettrie, *Machine Man*, in *Machine Man and Other Writings*, trans. Ann Thomson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>12</sup> [César Chesneau Du Marsais,] *Le Philosophe*, in *Nouvelles libertés de penser* (Amsterdam, 1743), 175. Quotations from this text will be referenced in the body of the article. The translation is based on Dena Goodman's English translation of the *Encyclopédie* article "Philosophe," which may be reached at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/did/index.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Edwin Curley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), 26.

(or falsity) which consists in "the privation of knowledge":<sup>14</sup> since their (inadequate) ideas of their actions do not include ideas of causes by which they are determined, they can be said to be like "conclusions without premises," as Spinoza's famous comparison runs. Insofar as Du Marsais's philosopher is conscious of the causes which determine him to act, he knows when and in what circumstances they can be expected to occur, and when they do occur he surrenders to them *avec connaissance* (175), with full knowledge. Thus, he keeps away from the objects he knows are going to excite in him "feelings" not conducive to his well-being and strives after those he expects to give rise to beneficent "affections." And it is in this sense that the philosopher – but not the ignorant – can be said to be "a clock that sometimes winds itself." In short, while the ignorant are "carried away" by their passions and therefore act without reflection, the philosopher, by contrast, is determined by "reason" (175). Reason determines the philosopher to such an extent that, like the Spinozist sage, he has a firm control over his passions; even in his passions he *n'agit qu'après la réflexion* (176), acts only after reflection. Du Marsais, who says that *ce qui fait l'honnête homme, ce n'est point d'agir par amour ou par haine, par espérance ou par crainte*, what makes a man honorable is not acting from love or hate, from hope or fear, but, rather, *c'est d'agir par esprit d'ordre ou par raison* (189), acting according to the spirit of order or by reason, cannot hide that his inspiration is coming from Spinoza, for whom, similarly, "acting absolutely from virtue" also means acting "by the guidance of reason."<sup>15</sup>

Du Marsais's philosopher is an atheist who in many ways resembles Bayle's celebrated "monstrosity," that is, the "virtuous atheist," whose existence is defended by Bayle as follows: "it is not stranger for an atheist to live virtuously than it is strange for a Christian to venture on every sort of crime. If we see every day this latter kind of monstrosity, why would we believe the other to be impossible?"<sup>16</sup> In Bayle's elaborate division of atheists, Du Marsais's philosopher could be classified as a "positive" or "speculative atheist," that is, placed alongside Spinoza, Epicurus, Vanini, and so forth. For Bayle, there are several kinds of atheism. People can first be divided into those who are convinced of God's existence and those who are not convinced of it, that is, into theists and atheists. The class of theists could be subdivided according to different ideas its members entertain about divine nature, and the class of atheists can be subdivided into those who have examined the

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>16</sup> Pierre Bayle, *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 214.

question of God's existence and into those who have not examined it. The class of the latter, whose attitude Bayle characterizes as *l'athéisme négatif*, the negative atheism, is composed of peoples who have no knowledge of God, for example, the native peoples of the Antilles, Canada, and so forth. The attitude of those who have examined the question of God's existence is called *l'athéisme positif*, the positive atheism. In order to distinguish the positive atheists from *les athées pratiques*, the practical atheists, that is, from common debauchees, Bayle characterizes them also as *les athées spéculatifs*, speculative atheists. Practical atheists are the flip side of Bayle's "virtuous atheists": while the latter are convinced that there is no God, yet they live as if they believed that there is a God, the former are *persuadés qu'il y a un Dieu, mais ils vivent comme s'ils ne croyaient point qu'il y en eût*,<sup>17</sup> convinced that there is a God, yet they live as if they did not believe that there is a God. Practical atheists, in short, are nothing other than sinful theists who, precisely on account of their belief cannot fully enjoy their debauchery: since "the fear of hell sometimes comes to trouble their repose," says Bayle, they realize that "it is in their interest that there be no God,"<sup>18</sup> and they, consequently, try to convince themselves that there is no God. The practical atheists are characterized as "the most vicious men in the world"; however, "they are not vicious because they are atheists," rather, "they become atheists because they are vicious."<sup>19</sup> Positive or speculative atheists are divided into those who find it as difficult to deny God as to affirm his existence and who therefore remain undecided, and into those who decide to deny God. The undecided ones are of two kinds, either sceptics or acataleptics: the former continue to examine the question of God's existence in the hope of finding some kind of certainty, whereas the latter declare the question to be incomprehensible and cease searching. Those who decide to deny God, do so either because they find the atheism more probable than theism, or because after carefully weighing arguments for and objections against God's existence they have come to see that "the existence of God is either false or problematic."<sup>20</sup>

Du Marsais's philosopher deals rather briefly with the Cartesian real distinction between body and soul, and, consequently, with his post-mortem

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<sup>17</sup> Bayle, *Continuation des Pensées diverses sur la comète*, in Bayle, *Pensées sur l'athéisme*, ed. Julie Boch (Paris: Éditions Desjonquères, 2004), 137.

<sup>18</sup> Bayle, *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*, 220.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> For Bayle's comprehensive list of various forms of atheism, see *Réponse aux questions d'un provincial*, in Bayle, *Pensées sur l'athéisme*, 174-75; for a thorough analysis of Bayle's speculative atheism, see Mori, *Bayle philosophe* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1999), chapter 5.

fate, or the absence thereof. Not only is "the idea of thought" not incompatible with "the idea of extension," but, moreover, thought clearly belongs to the extended substance and stems from it, or in his own words: "only the substance of the brain" – that is, only a highly complex and adequately internally differentiated matter – "is capable of thoughts" (181). In accordance with the otherwise only implicit materialist belief that the soul does not survive the death of the body, the philosopher "neither hopes for nor fears anything after death" (193). The theism is dealt with even more briefly, as if the philosopher considered the subject unworthy of his attention. The philosopher, as portrayed by Du Marsais, is an already fully formed speculative atheist who has clearly already finished examining the question of the existence of God and has reached a satisfactory answer, that is, an atheist, who has already successfully dealt with all far-reaching consequences of his attitude. Hence the "astounding modernity" of *Le Philosophe*, whose title character acts at the beginning of the Enlightenment as if "the barely begun process of secularization is already accomplished."<sup>21</sup> Firmly convinced that "no supreme being demands worship from people" (173), the philosopher worships, as "the only deity he recognizes on earth" *la société civile*, civil society; "honor and probity" are *son unique religion*, his only religion (188). The philosopher worships *son unique Dieu*, his only God – that is, civil society – "by his probity" and "by an exact attention to his duties" (188). The philosopher is, in short, *un honnête homme*, an honorable man, who "acts in everything according to reason" (200), as Du Marsais's definition reads.

Du Marsais's atheist sage can not only be virtuous, like Bayle's speculative atheist, but, moreover, his rationally grounded morals are, perhaps, even more genuine and purer than that of the theists, for the simple reason that they are entirely disinterested or unselfish. His morals are independent from the system of post-mortem rewards and punishments, in which the theist's morals are grounded. Du Marsais's sage, who *n'attend ni peine ni récompense après cette vie* ([1]96), after this life expects neither punishment nor reward, does not abstain from those evil acts which escape human justice for fear of divine justice, that is, for fear of punishment in the afterlife. Thus, what leads him to be "honest in this life" is not the invisible hand of justice which would know all his thoughts and deeds and which would reward the good and punish the evil ones after death; rather, what leads him is a "purely human and natural" motive, namely "the pure satisfaction" he feels when he observes *les règles de la probité*, the rules of probity (193-94). Thus, virtuous acting, that

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<sup>21</sup> Gianluca Mori and Alain Mothu, eds., *Philosophes sans Dieu: Textes athées clandestins du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2005), 23.

is, observing the rules of probity, is in itself a source of philosopher's true, profound satisfaction.

Since Du Marsais's philosopher, like the Spinozist sage, wants virtue "for its own sake," we can, of course, be sure in advance that he is not going to break "the rules of probity" even when "no one is watching him" (195), that is, not even when someone who does not recognize the divine justice could, in principle, break them – this, at any rate, would be the thinking of those who abstain from sinful acting solely out of fear of the post-mortem punishment. This latter attitude is embodied by the heroine of Diderot's dialogue *Entretien d'un Philosophe avec la Maréchale de \*\*\** of 1774. One of the editions of this brilliant dialogue appeared in 1796 in a volume *Opuscules philosophiques et littéraires* together with the text of Du Marsais's *Le Philosophe*, which was this time published under the title *Le vrai Philosophe* and Du Marsais was given as the author.<sup>22</sup> The heroine, marshal's wife, asks her interlocutor, the philosopher who to some extent resembles Du Marsais's atheist sage: "But what motive can an unbeliever possibly have for being good, supposing he isn't mad?"<sup>23</sup> That is, she believes that one who knows no fear of post-mortem punishment can have no motive for being good; or, in other words, one who acts virtuously in spite of one's denial of God as a "terrible avenger" can only be mad.

The heroine of Diderot's dialogue simply cannot see how the character of the "virtuous atheist," embodied by her interlocutor, is even possible. If she had "nothing to hope for or fear in the next world," she admits she would act differently in this one and would not deprive herself of several "little indulgences" from which she is currently being deterred by the fear of post-mortem punishment.<sup>24</sup> The attitude of the one who would forsake virtuous acting in the absence of post-mortem rewards and punishments, surely cannot be entirely uncalculating. Marshal's wife allows the possibility that people who believe act as if they did not believe, that is, sinfully; in her view, however, it is not possible for the people who do not believe to act as if they believed, that is, virtuously. Thus, in her eyes, there can be sinful theists, but not virtuous atheists. The philosopher now explains the attitude of the virtuous atheist she is unable to understand by giving perfectly rational reasons for people to be good independently of post-mortem rewards and punishments. It is possible, he says, that we might be *si heureusement né*, so fortunately

<sup>22</sup> See *Opuscules philosophiques et littéraires, la plupart posthumes ou inédites* (Paris: Chevet, 1796), 73-110 and 133-68.

<sup>23</sup> Diderot, *Conversation with a Christian Lady*, in *Diderot's Selected Writings*, trans. Derek Coltman (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 254.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

born – that is, such by our nature – *qu'on trouve un grand plaisir à faire le bien*, that we find a great pleasure to do good. That is, for Diderot's philosopher, "doing good" is in itself a source of "great pleasure," like observing "the rules of probity" is in itself a source of "pure satisfaction" for Du Marsais's sage. It is possible, the philosopher goes on justifying the viability of the atheist morals, that in our youth we receive "an excellent education calculated to strengthen this natural inclination toward the good," while later in life we have learnt from experience that "we are more likely to achieve happiness in this world by being honest than by being rogues."<sup>25</sup>

In the eyes of both atheist sages, Diderot's as well as Du Marsais's, the ways of virtue are not necessarily as hard and painful as they might seem to those who, like the marshal's wife, are willing to stick to them solely in the hope for the promised post-mortem rewards. Likewise, the ways of vice are not necessarily as easy and pleasant as they might seem to those who, again like marshal's wife, avoid them primarily out of fear of the threatened post-mortem punishment. On the contrary, for both atheist sages the ways of virtue are in themselves a source of genuine "pleasure" or "satisfaction." The same holds true also for the ways of vice, from which Du Marsais's sage is not deterred by the thought of the threatened post-mortem punishment; rather, he finds the sinful acting repelling in itself: since the "sense of probity" is as much a constituent part of "mechanical constitution of the philosopher" as "the enlightenment of the mind" (188-89), any "action contrary to probity" is also contrary to the philosopher's very nature and "the idea of the dishonorable man" as incompatible with the idea of the sage as "that of the stupid man" (197).

### 3.

When the heroine of Diderot's dialogue hears that in spite of the fact that "he doesn't believe in anything," her interlocutor's moral principles are the same as those of "an honest man," she says, shaking her head in disbelief: "What? You don't steal? You don't kill people? You don't rob them?"<sup>26</sup> Du Marsais anticipates a similar reaction to his character of the atheist sage on the part of his readers. He expects the philosopher, who "neither hopes for nor fears anything after death" to arouse in them fear for their own lives and possessions (196). That is, since he knows no fear of the "terrible avenger,"

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

they may soon fall prey to the atheist philosopher. Only the one who considers religion to be the only "brake," only the one who oneself abstains from evil acts for fear of eternal perdition and acts virtuously in the hope of reward, is able to think in this way. And when he is faced with the possibility that the rewarding and avenging God may not exist, he begins to wonder why even act virtuously or why abstain from evil acts when there is nothing one could hope for or fear after this life. Where marshal's wife and Du Marsais's readers – in the absence of post-mortem rewards and punishments – see an opportunity for unpunished vice, Diderot's as well as Du Marsais's atheist philosopher acts virtuously without being able to expect any reward for it. Instead of thefts, murders, and robberies that the readers fear from the atheists, they are offered benevolence, friendship, and gratitude. That is to say, not only do the atheists not sin although, without the fear of hell, they could, but moreover, they act virtuously without any hope of reward. From the standpoint of someone whose morals are grounded in the system of post-mortem rewards and punishments, it must seem utterly absurd to give up unpunished vice on account of unrewarded virtue.

Incidentally, it is the same disinterested attitude of the materialist philosophers that, in the above-mentioned novel of the same name, enraptures Cleveland so forcefully that he converts to materialism and embraces their philosophic belief. When Cleveland meets the materialists for the first time, they fascinate him not with arguments – although some of them are original and persuasive – but rather with their sincere and uncalculating attitude. Although, on the one hand, on the basis of the enthusiasm with which the materialists persist in their philosophic belief and on the basis of their eagerness to win Cleveland over to "the impious doctrine," it seems as if they are motivated by some kind of self-interest, on the other hand, on the basis of the fact that they kept their materialist belief secret from the public, and on the basis of the principles of the materialist philosophy themselves it is clear that they could not hope to derive any benefit from their philosophic belief neither in this world nor in the next.<sup>27</sup>

Marshal's wife, who expects her belief to bring in a considerable gain, in accordance with her calculating attitude asks the philosopher about a possible payoff of his atheist attitude: "What do you gain by not being a believer?" Astonished by the fact that one can be "a believer from motives of profit," the philosopher candidly admits that by not being a believer he gains "nothing at all." While the philosopher expects no benefit from his unbelief, the purpose of her belief is nothing less than *d'attraper le ciel*, to get into heaven.

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<sup>27</sup> See Prévost, *Le Philosophe anglais ou Histoire de M. Cleveland*, 957.

"No matter how vast the amount we invest, it is still as nothing to the return we expect,"<sup>28</sup> she believes. That is, while marshal's wife expects the virtue she has invested during life to yield a disproportionately high return after death, that is, "heaven" and eternal happiness, the philosopher invests his virtue "without any guarantee of returns."<sup>29</sup>

Clearly, the interlocutors cannot both be right. It is either the philosopher's materialism and atheism or the spiritualism and theism of his interlocutor that is true. Yet, strictly speaking, none of the two can be said to know any better than the other that it is his or her philosophical position that is true; the philosopher knows no more that there is no life after death than his interlocutor knows that we will have to face the rewarding and avenging God in the afterlife. If it turns out that the philosopher is right and that there is in fact no life after death, then his interlocutor would not gamble away anything substantial apart from those "little indulgences" she deprives herself of in this life for fear of post-mortem punishment, while he himself does not expect to gain anything if his belief proved to be true. If, on the other hand, it turns out that her interlocutor is right and that there is in fact life after death, then what awaits her is heaven and eternal happiness, while what awaits the philosopher is hell and eternal perdition. Thus, marshal's wife now asks the philosopher how he can be so untroubled by his unbelief, when everything he believes to be false may well prove to be true and he will therefore be damned, that is, condemned "to burn for all eternity." The philosopher's untroubled attitude is based on a version of Pascal's wager Colas Duflo calls "pari 'à l'envers',"<sup>30</sup> a wager turned upside down: although the philosopher, as an atheist, believes that there is no God and no afterlife, in case it turns out that nevertheless there is a God and afterlife, he need not fear the eternal perdition because God is most likely just and good and will therefore pardon the philosopher who was virtuous in this life although he denied God. It was in good faith that he denied God, and no just judge is likely to punish him to eternal perdition for that.

The philosopher illustrates the soundness of his wager argument with a story of a young Mexican,<sup>31</sup> who did not believe his grandmother's stories about a country which supposedly existed somewhere far across the sea; he finds the existence of this country improbable because all he can see on the horizon, i.e., where this country should be, is the sea and the sky touching

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<sup>28</sup> Diderot, *Conversation with a Christian Lady*, 254.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Colas Duflo, *Diderot philosophe* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2003), 391.

<sup>31</sup> Diderot, *Conversation with a Christian Lady*, 265-67.

each other – how is he, then, to believe the ancient tales about the existence of a country, which is so obviously contradicted by the testimony of his senses? Then one day while walking on the beach he sees a plank in the water, lies down on it and, reflecting on the absurdity of his grandmother's tale about the far-off country, falls asleep. Whereupon the wind rises and carries the plank with the sleeping Mexican out to open sea; when he wakes up he looks around and to his surprise he sees an open, coastless sea all around him. As the sea now touches the sky even where there should be the shore on which he was walking not so long ago, the Mexican realizes that he may well have been wrong to deny the existence of the country beyond the sea. Just as there surely is Mexico somewhere behind the horizon, so also the country his grandmother told him about may well exist somewhere beyond the sea. If the wind continues, it may even carry him to its coast! In retrospect, he rationalizes his previous rash denial of the country's existence as follows: "I have reasoned stupidly, it's true, but I was honest with myself, and no one can ask any more of me than that. If being clever isn't a virtue, then not being clever can't be a crime." When some time afterwards he reaches an unknown shore and learns from "a venerable old man," who met him on the shore, that this is precisely the very country whose existence he had denied, and the old man its ruler in whose existence he had not believed either, he repentantly falls to his knees at the old man's feet and the latter forgives the Mexican for his unbelief. The old man pardons the Mexican because in the bottom of his heart he can see that the latter denied his existence and that of his empire in good faith. (However, since several other Mexican's thoughts and deeds in the past cannot be said to have been as innocent as the denial of the country beyond the sea and its ruler, the old man pulls his ear and enumerates all the errors he committed in his life; as each one is spelled out, the Mexican repents and asks the old man for forgiveness – to a just and wise judge, this kind of punishment should suffice, he is not going to pull the Mexican's ear on account of his errors "for all eternity.") Just as the "venerable old man" did not punish the Mexican for denying him and his country, so also God, if he exists, will not punish the philosopher for being so stupid in his life-time as to deny God's existence and the life after death: just as in the next world no one will be rewarded for being clever in this world, so no one will be damned for being a fool either; or, as the philosopher remarks, "do you think, though, that whoever created the people as fools is going to punish them for being so?"<sup>32</sup>

Incidentally, this idea, often repeated in Diderot, can be found in an

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

even more explicit form in Bayle, according to whom God cannot punish atheism since it was he himself who allowed certain individuals to deny his existence. Some readers of *Dictionnaire historique et critique* found it appalling that while the author treats favorably the morals of certain atheists from the past, he does not fail to stress that some villains were religious. In the *Éclaircissement sur les athées*, first in the series of four clarifications he wrote for the second edition, Bayle responds by claiming that the state of affairs where "the worst villains are not atheists, and [...] most atheists, whose names have come down to us have been virtuous according to ordinary standards" is actually a sign of an extraordinary and little known kind of grace at work, namely the so-called *grâce réprimante*, restraining grace, which "like a strong dike holds back the flood of sins, as much as is requisite to prevent a general inundation that would destroy all monarchic, aristocratic, democratic, and other states."

Is it not that, if there are some persons whom God does not abandon so much as to allow them to fall into the philosophy of Epicurus or the atheists, they are chiefly those ferocious souls whose cruelty, audacity, avarice, fury, and ambition would be capable of soon destroying all of a large country? Is it not that if he abandons certain people to the point that he allows them to deny either his existence or his providence, these are chiefly people whose dispositions of temperament, education, liveliness of ideas of virtue, love of glory, or dread of dishonor serve as strong enough brake to keep them within the bounds of their duty?<sup>33</sup>

For Bayle, then, the existence of the virtuous atheists and the sinful theists results directly from God's providence: while the former are, as a rule, persons who were good enough for God to allow them to deny his existence without having to fear for the fate of humanity, the latter are, as a rule, persons who were too vicious for him to allow them any such thing and has therefore to restrain them with the system of post-mortem punishments and rewards. Like the title character of Diderot's dialogue, Bayle's virtuous atheists too could wager reasonably enough that God, if he exists, would not punish them for denying his existence, since after all it was he himself who – precisely on account of their virtue – allowed them to do so.

This sort of wager where the philosopher expects a just punishment for his denial of God cannot be a true alternative to the calculating theist at-

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<sup>33</sup> Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, trans. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), 407.

titude. It is one thing to persist in the materialist and atheist belief and at the same time expect the punishment for it, if this belief turns out to be mistaken, to be just, or, as in the case of the young Mexican, even pardoned. It is quite another to persist in one's materialist and atheist belief in spite of the possibility that the punishment awaiting one if the belief turns out to be mistaken might be totally disproportionate (i.e., eternal perdition). Unlike the former, the latter *ont tout à perdre et rien à gagner à nier un Dieu rémunérateur et vengeur*,<sup>34</sup> have everything to lose and nothing to gain by denying a rewarding and avenging God, as Diderot elsewhere describes the attitude of the genuine virtuous atheists. It is only such attitude – and not the one of marshal's wife's interlocutor who denies God, yet at the same time already weighs what punishment God will inflict on him if he happens to be wrong – that is the proper materialist alternative to the calculating theist attitude. While the title character of Diderot's dialogue does not seem to be entirely sincere and uncalculating in his denial of God and the life after death – would he persist in his atheist belief equally unshakably and unreservedly even if he could not reasonably expect God, if he exists, to be a just judge? – by contrast, when Du Marsais's sage declares that "he neither hopes for nor fears anything after death" (193), or that "after this life he expects neither punishment nor reward" (196), he really means it and is not concerned over the question whether the punishment awaiting him if he proves to be wrong is going to be excessive. Du Marsais's sage knows that the one who calculates the gravity of the punishment he would have to suffer if he proves to be wrong cannot be entirely sure that he is really right.

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In the *Eclaircissement sur les pyrrhoniens*, third of the above-mentioned four clarifications written for the second edition of his *Dictionnaire* – this work seems to be an inexhaustible source of inspiration for the majority of the authors of the clandestine philosophical texts – Bayle says that "a true believer," that is, "a Christian, who knows the spirit of his religion well," is well aware that philosophy will never be able to perfectly harmonize "the Gospel mysteries" with "the Aristotelian axioms." Since "natural things are not proportional to supernatural ones," demanding from a philosopher to put in harmony philosophy and the Gospel would simply mean demanding from him "what the nature of things will not permit." And then he continues as follows:

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<sup>34</sup>Diderot, *Observations sur Hemsterhuis*, in *Œuvres*, 5 vols., ed. Laurent Versini (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1994-97), 1: 759.

One must necessarily choose between philosophy and the Gospel. If you do not want to believe anything but what is evident and in conformity with the common notions, choose philosophy and leave Christianity. If you are willing to believe the incomprehensible mysteries of religion, choose Christianity and leave philosophy. For to have together self-evidence and incomprehensibility is something that cannot be. The combination of these two items is hardly more impossible than the combination of the properties of a square and a circle. A choice must necessarily be made. If the advantages of a round table do not satisfy you, have a square one made; and do not pretend that the same table could furnish you with the advantages of both a round table and a square one.<sup>35</sup>

Clearly, it is not only "a true believer" that "must necessarily choose" between the two mutually exclusive options, but also a true *philosopher*, that is, a sage who knows the spirit of *philosophy*. Faced with this alternative, Du Marsais's sage – like numerous other thinkers in the French philosophical underground of the period – chose philosophy and left Christianity. And it is perhaps for this reason that Du Marsais's *Le Philosophe*, in the edition where it appears alongside Diderot's *Entretien d'un Philosophe avec la Maréchale de \*\*\**, is entitled *Le vrai Philosophe*,<sup>36</sup> *The True Philosopher*.

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<sup>35</sup> Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, 429.

<sup>36</sup> See note 22 above.