CRITICAL THINKING

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Part 1 – Criticism of institutions

In the *Encyclopaedia*, the will to change the common way of thinking was not limited to political and religious criticism. We will see that it affected many other areas, whether they were state institutions, sciences, knowledge and even how to transmit knowledge. In fact, alongside articles that unabashedly reported atrocities of the time such as slavery, wars or torture, the knight of Jaucourt also wrote denunciation of these same barbarities, starting with slavery. His article on the black slave trade probably is the first overtly abolitionist text published in France.

Here is what it says: "The purchase of black people, to reduce them to slavery, is a commerce which violates all human nature rights, and which comes from the arbitrary and inhuman usages of colonies. People might say that these colonies would soon be ruined if the slavery of black people was abolished. Let European colonies be destroyed rather than be the cause of so much unhappiness!"

As for war and its horrors, Jaucourt denounced it with the same vigour, just as he denounced the execution of army deserters at a time when peasants and ordinary people were forcibly conscripted. He also denounced torture, which was then called the "question". We can read in his article “Question”: "The laws of nature cry out against this practice, for anyone without exception. The unfortunate man you torture is much more thinking about getting rid of what he feels than confessing what he knows."

Part 2 – Fights for a new ethic

Changing the common way of thinking, of course, implied new moral values based on two essential virtues: benevolence towards others and search for happiness. Diderot was concerned about the moral education of children. "Woe to the children, he wrote, who will never have seen their parents shed tears on the story of a generous action, woe to the children who will never have seen the tears their parents shed on the misery of others." It's about awakening children's sensitivity to justice.

Thus, it is not surprising that we find in this dictionary of sciences and crafts a eulogy of love and amorous pleasure. In the article “Pleasure”, Diderot attacked the hypocritical devotees who denounced pleasure, which they condemned and called "sin": "Keep quiet, unhappy man, and remember that it is pleasure that has drawn you from nothingness!"

Part 3 – Scientific fights against banned thought

Let's move on to something very different, the acknowledgment of scientific discoveries. It often took a fight against banned thoughts, frequently of a religious origin. In the article “the Antipodes”, D'Alembert ironically recalled that a pope declared heretic a priest who had suggested that there were men on the Antipodes.

Elsewhere, D'Alembert enumerated persecutions suffered by scholars. "The great Galilee, he wrote, was once put to the Inquisition and his opinion of the Earth movement condemned as heretical." We have already mentioned inoculation, but we must add that important theologians condemned it at the time as a heretical practice that should be forbidden because, they said, it was "Usurping God's rights to give an illness to those who do not have it, or to undertake to remove it from the one who Providence naturally destined for it."

It is understandable that Doctor Tronchin's article took place in the campaign for inoculation, which raised a real mobilisation of public opinion. The *Encyclopaedia*, far from being limited to an accumulation of knowledge, was also a work through which knowledge and their transmission were questioned.

Part 4 – Criticism of knowledge and its transmission

Questioning knowledge began with the choice of knowledge contained in the *Encyclopaedia* and the decision to exclude everything that did not serve a useful transmission of science, or the ability to distinguishing what came from skills and what belonged to titles of nobility. D'Alembert explained it thus: "One will not find in this work the genealogy of great families but the genealogy of sciences, more precious for who knows how to think, nor the conquerors who have desolated the Earth but the immortal geniuses who have enlightened it, because, he continued, the *Encyclopaedia* owes everything to expertise and nothing to titles and it tells the history of the human spirit and not of the vanity of men."

The knowledge recorded in the *Encyclopaedia* sometimes came from more or less reliable accounts of distant travellers; thus, Diderot's ironically criticised these stories, their vague descriptions that easily led to doubting their validity. Take, for example, the article "Aguapa": "Aguapa, noun, botanical natural history, a tree that grows in the West Indies, of which is said that its shade means death to those who sleep naked under it and which make the others swell in a prodigious way. If this country's inhabitants do not know it better than the description we have of it, they are in great danger." Looking for words like Aguapa and many others in the *Encyclopaedia*, readers won't have learned what this distant tree is but a higher form of criticism. Questioning their questioning and sometimes even laughing at it.

Another example is that of the "Acacalis" article, of which Diderot writes that it is "A shrub with a butterfly flower and a fruit covered by a pod. But its description is so vague, we need to wait until the progress of Natural History teaches us about it." We need to wait. This statement keeps coming back in the dictionary, as a call for vigilance to the reader and to the future progress of knowledge.

We can see that critical thinking, so active in the *Encyclopaedia*, had nothing dogmatic about it. To Encyclopaedists, the search for knowledge was inseparable from awareness of knowledge's precariousness, or more precisely of is perpetual lapse and eternal renewal.