THE FACE OF THE PHILOSOPHER

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Part 1 – An “age of philosophers” ... without philosophers!

The age of Enlightenment is considered as a period of scientific development and did not fail to proclaim itself as the "age of philosophers". However, there is a paradox. In effect, if we examine the history of philosophy, particularly in France, the age of the philosophers appears curiously to have no true philosophers. Between Leibniz and Kant on the extremities, both German, who is there to uphold the tradition of the great founders of the philosophical systems?

In France, there's Rousseau, of course, for political philosophy, but we equally consider him, sometimes before everything else, and not without reason, as a great writer and particularly a hugely influential Romanticist. As for Voltaire, rarely is he considered a philosopher, even though it's he par excellence whom we regard at the time as the patriarch not only of letters but of philosophers. And what to say about Diderot whose philosophical stature is less in the spotlight, and yet he is, without a doubt of all those I've named, the one who has the most solid and developed culture in the history of philosophy.

In short, all those great thinkers we'd traditionally call philosophers, including for example Montesquieu, are most likely seen in the history of philosophy as writers. And often reciprocally, we find that our great Enlightenment writers – thinking particularly of romanticists – are too philosophical. In short, it's a philosophical age without pure philosophers, if I may put it like that, and it maybe also what's most striking and instructive. The Enlightenment is essentially a period of impure philosophy and this is where its richness lies.

Part 2 – Philosophers who reject the “systems”

In truth, philosophers in the age of Enlightenment clearly wanted to distinguish themselves from the meaning that the term assumed since Descartes, that of a thinker apt at formulating systematic generalities, aspiring to discovering the answers to big, metaphysical questions. With Locke's empiricism, whose influence spanned the century, the significance of the philosophical process claimed to be more modest and this had several consequences.

As of 1734 in his *Philosophical Letters,* Voltaire opposed Descartes, author of metaphysical novels, and the empirical and experimental processes of Locke and Newton. In fact, the main target would be what we'd call, to denigrate it, "the spirit of the system". The big abstractions led to nothing and were often a simple game of words. This hunt for abstract and purely verbal chimera is one of the obsessions of the century.

Part 3 – *The Philosopher*, a manifesto

What you must remember is that the ideal portrait of a philosopher had been drawn since the turn of the century, even if this figure didn't take full form until the second half of the century. Striking example, the famous article “Philosopher” in the *Encyclopaedia* only appeared in 1765, although its source was much older. In effect, this text, reworked by editors of the *Encyclopaedia,* relied on an essay from 1716 which we owe to Dumarsais, an important grammarian and who wrote, incidentally, for the *Encyclopaedia* before his death in 1756. He was also a liberal thinker and, at the start of the Regency, he masterfully painted the portrait of what a philosopher should be like. He insisted, like Locke has already done, on the finitude of human understanding and the modesty which, in turn, the philosopher should have on the subjects that he examines.

But he also adds a dimension which to me seems essential for understanding the Enlightenment; it is a moral and social dimension. Let's hear it in his own words, it will be more eloquent:

"The philosophical spirit is therefore a spirit of observation and of accuracy, which links everything to its true principles.

But it is not just the spirit that the philosopher cultivates; he carries his attention and his cares further. Man is not a monster who should live in the depths of the sea or the deep forest. The sole necessities of life make the business of others necessary to him, and in whatever state he may find himself in, his needs and well-being compel him to live in society. As such, reason demands that he understands, studies, and works to acquire sociable qualities. It is shocking that men are not more strongly attached to the more practical things and that they become so strongly hot and bothered on pointless speculations".

Pointless speculations are, of course, a reference to theological debates.

What is important here is the enrolment of the philosopher in sociability. The philosopher is not a thinker locked up in his ivory tower; he is a social man since he duly notes the human being is made for and by society. Only Rousseau will seriously qualify this hypothesis which makes of man a being in constant interaction, someone who thinks not only for the pure pleasure of speculating, but also because thought concerns society.

In short, the philosopher never forgets, in the 18th century, that he must be useful to his fellow citizens. It is this same purpose which favours the emergence of new disciplines of thought, in particular what we call "political economy"; a very representative discipline of this impossibility among Enlightenment philosophers and even the danger, according to them, of establishing a too rigid border between theory and practice. Also, these philosophers felt fully invested in an organised action in favour of thought freed of its most heavy shackles, so much so that philosophers would immediately establish a party. This is at least what the most conservative forces would reproach them for.

And it's true that with the *Encyclopaedia* and the accession of a new, more offensive generation, a more controversial and partisan acceptation of the term “philosopher” will impose itself. Little by little, “philosopher” will become a synonym for “encyclopaedist”, at least support for the encyclopedic clan, although this term will hasten a certain number of rejections, those of anti-philosophers naturally, but also the ostensible distance taken by Rousseau who will break away publicly from Diderot and his friends.

In short, the end of the century will be the accomplishment of a generation of philosophers who exemplify, after the encyclopedic battle, a new order whose symbol could be Condorcet, for example. But this philosopher, nearly institutional, will himself suffer rejection in favour of the unclassifiable figure Rousseau who's outside of the system. As we can see, the philosopher never stopped adapting himself.