

SEDUCING AND DEBATING THROUGH THE DIALOGUE OF IDEAS

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Part 1 – What is a dialogue of ideas?

AS: Hello Stéphane Pujol, you're an expert in the dialogue of ideas in the 18th century, a form which imposed itself on the literary and philosophical stage of the time and which you have devoted a piece of work to. But what exactly do you call a "dialogue of ideas"? Is there a difference between this and what we're used to calling "philosophical dialogue"?

SP: Hello Alain Sandrier. First of all, we must take a look back on the long tradition of dialogue in the Antiquity. This dialogue covers two great tendencies, one being more philosophical, obviously we think of Platon or Cicéron, the other being more satirical, this is the model inaugurated by Lucien. These are the two tendencies which predated the modern ages. Dialogue, which was forgotten during the Middle Ages or reduced to scholastic "pro and contra" conversations, was reborn during the Renaissance and throughout the 17th century. It became more of a European phenomenon by way of different usages.

As such, we find pedagogic dialogues including the *Colloquies of Erasmus*, published for the first time in 1522, satirical dialogues in the manner of *Cymbalum mundi* by Bonaventure des Périers in 1538, scientific, popularised dialogues such as the *Dialogue concerning the two Chief World Systems* by Galileo, published in 1632 or the *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds* by Fontenelle in 1686, but also mundane dialogues from *The Courtier* by Castiglione in 1528 to the *Entretiens d'Ariste et d'Eugène* from father Bouhours in 1671, and finally philosophical dialogues, more philosophical according to La Mothe Le Vayer's sceptical model and his *Dialogues faits à l'imitation des Anciens*, published around 1630.

Generally speaking, the dialogue of ideas is the analysis of a subject of discussion between two or several speakers and perfectly illustrates the Enlightenment process as a place of critical questioning and debate.

Part 2 – A dialogue of another kind

AS: This change of title does it also mean a change in output of philosophical discourse? Does it imply a new way of doing philosophy?

SP: In effect, like Fontenelle says at the turn of the century, it's about offering another way of philosophising, less dull than the dissertations and treaties, and also less conceptual. But quite quickly, critics would appear. One reproached dialogues for their too playful allure and their taste for the precious image, judged as having little in compatibility with rational requirements. The difficulty

which rapidly imposed itself on dialogue comes down to the tension between the critical or philosophical project and the problem of the literary dramatization of ideas.

Part 3 – Dialogue as an art of conversation

AS: And this both literary and philosophical dramatization of ideas, is it not linked to the model of conversation?

SP: Absolutely. 18th-century literature and dialogue in particular cultivated the spirit of conversation. It's about saying the truth but saying it in a way which is both animated, natural and cheerful. This is the difficulty of a genre which does not have its own rules, but which refers constantly to this living model that is conversation. Generally speaking, the aesthetics of dialogue in the age of Enlightenment is not without connection to the natural problem that we already found in Platon's work. In the 18th century, conversation was also the place par excellence of exchanging and debating ideas. It pertained to the new places of sociability that were academies, salons and cafés.

Part 4 – The main characteristics of dialogue

AS: According to you, what were the main characteristics of the dialogue of ideas?

SP: The form of dialogue can sometimes be a ploy and integrate discourses of one or several voices. The support of fiction allowed it to play with the traditional framework of the discussion of ideas. The role of an inaugural description, the enrolment of dialogue in a given time and space are the non-negligible elements to understand the originality of these texts. But the essential criteria in my eyes remains the ethos of the speakers, that's to say the way in which they exemplify moral values. It's about making one's own voice heard, maintaining the tension between subjects who don't think in the same way but who must be able to feed and enrich each other's point of view. Since dialogue takes on another way of philosophising, it must summon speakers other than career philosophers.

AS: In what way?

SP : By profoundly renewing the face and status of speakers, by giving a place to marginalised voices, which from now on would take critical allure; that of a noble savage, of course, but also that of a woman or a buffoon or a madman in *Rameau's Nephew* by Diderot for example, or of the dying, with the *Dialogue between a priest and a dying man* by Sade, which appeared in 1782. The case of *D'Alembert's dream* by Diderot is equally very interesting. First, conceived on the model of antique dialogue, its profound originality meant as much to the daring of diderotian materialism as to the choices of speakers such as Diderot himself, D'Alembert, Bordeu and Mademoiselle de Lespinasse; that's to say a philosopher, a geometrician, a doctor, a socialite, all who were contemporaries of dialogue writing.

Part 5 – Variety of dialogue

AS: Any there any themes or registers that owe themselves more than others to the dialogue of ideas?

SP: The dialogue of ideas takes on the majority of big themes the Enlightenment thought moulded: the dialectic of nature and culture, the place of education, the definition of happiness. It perfectly illustrates the debate which opposed philosophers and the church, deists and Christians and, within the Enlightenment itself, what opposed deists and atheist materialists. These themes and registers strictly depended on the ultimate aim desired. The 18th century particularly cultivated three types of dialogue: parodying or satirical dialogue, pedagogic or scientific dialogue and philosophic or heuristic dialogues, of which representatives were often referred to among respective figures like Voltaire, Fontenelle and Diderot.

But any strict compartmentalisation is prohibited, in the same way that we wouldn't know how to classify these writers under a particular group. If there is often a parodying and satirical use of dialogue by Voltaire, it's primarily for denouncing fanaticism, that of priests first, but also a certain philosophical sectarianism. Some of his dialogues are authentically philosophical, the *Dialogues d'Evhémère* for example. As for Diderot, he also wrote a text *The Sceptic's Walk*, billed as rather more classical than *Rameau's Nephew*.

The role of Diderot in this story is, of course, essential, even if the conversed form largely exceeds dialogue. It is an invasive form which relates to a novel like *Jacques the Fatalist* as well as the criticism of art in the *Salons*. If Diderot was able to legitimately appear as both a philosopher of dialogue and the greatest representative of dialogue, it's without doubt because he knew to give this form an unprecedented truth and authenticity. It's also because he did dialogue better than anyone else, a critical exercise which targeted philosophical practice itself.

AS: Well, thank you Stéphane for this very enlightening discussion on dialogue during the age of Enlightenment.