

ATTIC RATIONALISM AND
ENCYCLOPEDIAIC RATIONALISM:
AN ESSAY ON THE
CONCATENATION OF EPOCHS

The word “encyclopedia” comes to us from the Greek or, more precisely, is the deformed transcription, through Latin, of a *crase* in which we recognize a word composed of two elements, *enkyklios* and *paideia*, found in Quintilian in the ancient editions of *De institutione oratoria* (I, 10, 1). The expression itself, *enkyklios paideia*, appears only later, in the Hellenistic Age, under Roman domination, beginning with Dionysius of Halicarnassus (around the first century B.C.), but the concept goes back to the Eleatics, especially to Hippias of Elis who, if we can believe the account in Plato’s *Dialogues*, taught this total knowledge, later known with the term *enkyklopaideia*.

“Pedia” means what we would today call “education, science

Translated from the French by Jeanne Ferguson

and culture.” The meaning of the qualifying adjective accompanying it is more obscure and was the subject of many discussions among classical philologists.¹ It is thought that two complementary components can be distinguished in it, one expressing the idea of plenitude, of a cycle completed within the linking-up of disciplines, the other the feeling of an ease of access, as though all this knowledge could be put within the reach of everyone. Here exoteric is opposed to the esoteric of the specialists.

These two traits admirably characterize the program traced by Diderot and d’Alembert for the Encyclopedists of the 18th century in France. We read in the *Discours préliminaire*, “As an encyclopedia, the work must expose as fully as possible the order and concatenation of human knowledge”, which corresponds to the first proposition. As for the second, it is found in the desire of the authors to address themselves over the heads of the scholars, to a public enlightened through their efforts and composed of “honest men” of all Europe. This idea of “vulgarizing” hermetic knowledge, of making it accessible, if not to all, at least to those considering themselves initiates, makes the great turmoil of the Encyclopedists comparable to the insidious propaganda of the Greek Sophists, since in both cases these philosophers, these rebels, these strong minds sought quarrels and scandal. We perceive the echoes of all this uproar in Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, as we do in the lampoons of the literary pamphleteers of the 18th century. It is this uproar that is the essence itself of a cultural revolution.

The prophets for the Sophists were Heraclitus and Parmenides; those of the Encyclopedists, Francis Bacon and Descartes. However, a cultural revolution only materializes if a new way of thinking comes to fulfill its promises and is only concluded when this new way of thinking is incorporated into the very substance of the culture-bearers. We can see other resemblances between situation and proposition in the two revolutionary epochs. The reaction to the Sophist movement in Athens engendered the hagiographical *myth* of Socrates from which will derive the *systems* of classical Greek idealism: Plato and Aristotle. The reaction to the movement of the Encyclopedists engendered the hagiographic

¹ F. Kühnert, *Allgemeinbildung und Fachbildung in der Antike*, Berlin, 1961, S. 7-18.

myth of Rousseau, then the systems of German idealism: Kant and Hegel. Plato is to Kant what Aristotle is to Hegel. A synthetic, “intensive” view of the world, an analytical “extensive” view: the one and the other confirming at each epoch the irreversibility of the accomplished revolution. The figure of Socrates in the midst of the Sophists struck the imagination of his contemporaries not because Socrates was opposed to the Sophist culture but because he issued directly from it. For the same reason, the solitary figure of Rousseau contrasts with the clan of the Encyclopedists who frequent the same salons. We cannot understand Plato or Aristotle if we do not put them back into the quarrels of the century of the Sophists that furnished them with the basic data of a critical reflection. No more can we conceive classic German idealism other than by rapport with the rationalism of the century of the Enlightenment.

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It is in Rabelais' *Pantagruel*, Book II, Chapter 20, that we find the entrance of the word *encyclopédie* into the French language, after a truculent chapter in which Panurge shows through strong gestures and grimaces the superiority of his master's doctrine over the “*Thaumastique*.” The English theologian surrenders with these terms: “You saw how his only disciple satisfied me and told me more than I asked... For that, I can assure you that he has opened for me *the true pit and abyss of encyclopedia*.” There is no question here of a *Dictionnaire raisonné* of human knowledge, as in d'Alembert; the idea of order and connecting is absent. For Rabelais, as for all the men of the Renaissance, the extensive totality of knowledge evoked the idea of an overwhelming superabundance, of an inexhaustible wealth allied with the opacity of a deep well or abyss. This characteristic suggests to us the idea of a criterion for differentiating cultures: on the one hand, clarity, the orderly linking up of reasons, on the other shadow and profusion. Incompatible with Plato's view, order and connection were imperative for Aristotle. The Renaissance, being of Platonic inspiration, could not accept this principle. Montaigne's *Essays* are a sort of encyclopedia in disorder. To give them order would be an impossible task.

According to such a criterion, the Encyclopedists found them-

selves, curiously, in the same camp—“soldiers with the same pride and in the same war”—as the authors of the great scholastic syntheses, such as the *Speculum* of Vincent de Beauvais or the *Somme* of St. Thomas Aquinas. Or, to remain more modestly within their period and with what entered the field of vision of their contemporaries, we must compare them with the principal work of St. Alphonse de Liguori—born in 1696, one year before the publication of Pierre Bayle’s *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, and who died in 1787, three years after Diderot—which makes him the contemporary of the Encyclopedist movement. His writings are a sort of summation or encyclopedia of the moral doctrine of the Roman Church after the Council of Trent. It is natural that his function as “*magisterium*” led him to a predilection for “the order and linking up of knowledge,” that he sided with scholasticism or that he took the opposite side. An encyclopedia article differs from an article in a review in that it directly places itself, *ex officio*, outside any discussion, on the level of dogmatic authority. Thus we quickly arrive at a sort of anti-authoritarianism that transforms the debatable into the non-debatable, because of that “*officium docendi*” that incites all teachers to adopt the tone of predication. Does not an epigram of Ecouchard-Lebrun say that the century of Enlightenment “preached everywhere except in church”?

The parallelism between the Attic intellectual revolution of the 5th century and the Encyclopedists of the 18th is striking, in the way of thinking as well as in the emotional aura that bathed that thought. We could cite many revealing resemblances between famous passages, going as far as coincidences that could pass for textual borrowings. Thus Diderot, in *Le Rêve d’Alembert*, a text that is quite close to the article *Naître* in the *Encyclopedie*, takes up the theme of the identity of birth and death in these words: “Living, I act and react as a mass...; dead, I act and react in molecules... To be born, to live and to pass on, is to change forms.”² Here, intellectual provocation, protestation against the power of suggestion, emotional magic proper to the simplest and greatest universals of human existence—to be born and to die—

² Diderot, *Le Rêve de d’Alembert*, ed. by J. Varloot, Paris, 1962.

their rhetorical inversion and, in the same way, their reciprocal neutralization, in the intellectual process as in its verbal expression, irresistibly brings to mind the famous phrase of Euripides, steeped in the Sophist spirit of the times and therefore parodied in Aristophanes' *Frogs*: "Who knows if living is not dying *and if* death is not taken as life by mortals."³ It goes without saying, however, that an argumentation in the spirit of mechanistic materialization would have been out of the question for Euripides; it is Lucretius, instead, among the Ancients, that we are reminded of. However, the intellectual and emotional effect contained in this violent and passionate reaction against the automatism of spontaneous reflexes with regard to the natural realities of life and death—is quite the same, as also is the play of antitheses and antonymies that make up its mode of verbal expression.

Another example is furnished us by the famous saying of Voltaire: "If God did not exist, man would have to invent him."⁴ We distinguish three conducting lines in the evolution of historico-cultural relations on this theme:

1. The verb "to invent" is none other than an exact transcription of the Greek verb *exeurein*, taken in an analogous context by a well-known Sophist who played a political role in Athens under the domination of the "Thirty": Critias, in his satirical drama, *Sisyphus*, attributed by some to Euripides, gives the following version of the origin of religion:⁵

"Formerly, a deplorable anarchy reigned among men; then wise men found a way out by instituting repressive laws (νόμους κολαστάς)" so that "justice reigned as master, *tyrannos*, and impudence, *hybris*, was enslaved." Unfortunately, that was only a half-remedy. Evil-doers stopped behaving openly but continued in the shadows. Thus a second action, quasi-police, was necessary. A certain man who was "wise and powerful in thought (πυκνός τις καὶ σοφὸς γνώμην ἀνὴρ)" thus thought it his duty to "invent (*exeurein*)" "fear of the gods."

According to another maxim dear to Voltaire, "it is proper that

³ Aristophanes, *Ranae*, 1477-78, and Euripides, frag. 639, Nauck; cf. also frag. 830. This quotation comes from a lost tragedy, perhaps from *Polyide* or *Phrixos*.

⁴ Voltaire, *Epîtres CIV, A l'auteur du livre des Trois Imposteurs*, v. 22. To which Diderot answered, *in petto*, "That is what we have done."

⁵ Critias, B 25, Diels.

the people be guided and not that they be instructed".⁶ The argument of Critias is no less ambiguous: if he rejects the tradition of the priests, myths and rites, as expressions of the truth, he admires it as an "invention." In a traditional perspective, to claim that God is only an invention may seem blasphemous. In a different perspective, that of Freemasonry, for example, so powerful in Voltaire's time, such a proposition only translates the apotheosis of law-giving reason and the crowning of the social edifice, according to a symbolism centered on the image of construction. We recognize in it the rationalist myth of the "law-giver," *nomothetès*, or the "inventor", *heuretès*, supreme arbiter in religious affairs, molding to his reasoning the life of peoples, both so characteristic of classical Antique thought. Let us remember what Plutarch said about semi-mythical personages like Lycurgus or Numa Pompilius. The Hellenized Jews themselves adapted the image of their Moses to ideas of this kind. A philosophical reinterpretation of an ancient mythological figure, this Savior, this Civilizing-Hero (Claude Lévi-Strauss has much to say on this subject), this Culture-Hero, has all the traits of a deceiver, that is, a "*picaro*": adventurer, liar, artist and charlatan, which takes nothing away from his greatness, rather adding to it. The philosophical myth of the law-giver does not fail to add to the picaresque atmosphere. Plutarch, a pious and virtuous man, assures us that Numa Pompilius deliberately "set up" his mystic interviews with the nymph Egeria in order to better strike the popular imagination, and he praises him for such prudence.⁷ However, the awakening is sometimes brutal: witness the monologue of Sisyphus in Critias or the sally of Voltaire.

How admirable invention is! Critias is not satisfied with unmasking the maneuvers of the wise man who "invented" religion; he admires him for his wisdom and considers him his brother. As tradition, as institution, religion is an obstacle to cultural revolution, but as invention, it closely resembles it. We find in Mozart, in *The Magic Flute*, which is the musical manifestation of the century of Enlightenment, the same spirit of calculated mystery that testifies just as well to the benevolent wisdom of Sarastro as

⁶ Voltaire, letter to M. Damilaville, March 19, 1766.

⁷ *Vie de Numa*, IV.

to the perfidy of the Queen of the Night: what the latter loses attests to the virtue of the former.

2. The concept of a law-giving God is enriched in the 18th century in France with a supplementary nuance that is not found in Greece in the 5th century B.C. I mean a sort of inversion or parodic refraction of Catholicism, of the Catholic order that fashions the lives of the faithful through the intervention of the popes, according to dogmatic and canonical rules. In this regard, let us recall the article on Lent, in the *Encyclopédie* itself, which, not without emphasis, mentions the version according to which “it was the Pope Telesphorus who instituted it around the middle of the second century.” Catholicism, emptied of its inspiration by the Holy Spirit, put to the service of the Utopia of the century of Enlightenment? Why not! If Lent can be “instituted,” can we not “institute” the Supreme Being? This is what Robespierre tried to do, and we know with what success.

3. Freed of this slightly puerile superficial varnish that the form of his *boutade* had, Voltaire’s irreligiousness reveals a significant relationship with the religion of Kant: this God of whom we have need (“We need a God who speaks to humankind”)⁸—*and who must be invented*—is not so far from the Kantian God reduced to being no more than a postulate of practical reason. The difference is that the German idealist philosopher confides to individual conscience what, for Voltaire, is purely the affair of social regulation. Besides, as we know, neither could Kant, speaking of categorical imperative, do without the concept of legislation. “Behave in such a way that the maxim of your will can be erected as universal law.”⁹ However, this concept, for him, is disparaged almost to the level of a simple metaphor of practical reason, whose idea is radically interiorized and made private—a characteristic of Protestantism opposed to the anti-papist “papism” of the Sage of Ferney. Let us add that on this point Voltaire is much closer, not only to Critias, but to the spirit of classical Greek philosophy whose character is essentially public. *Laws*, said Plato. *The Spirit of the Law*, responds Montesquieu. This echo has a symbolic value—and that of a sign of the time.

⁸ *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*.

⁹ *Critique de la Raison pratique*, Conclusion.

We thus see how far the symmetry can go between the cultural revolution of the 5th and 4th centuries B.C. and that of the century of Enlightenment. But how can such a “sympathy” be interpreted?

The Greeks perfected an early type of occidental rationalism which was first manifested in the Sophist movement and found its completed form in Aristotle. It remained faithful to itself, at least in its principles, until the coming of the industrial age. This rationalism clearly differs from all earlier forms of thought through the exercise of methodical observation, turned towards thought itself (gnosis, logic) and toward the verbal expression of thought (rhetoric, poetics, linguistics); this is why it may be qualified as logico-rhetorical. The logic it elaborates rests on a syllogistic demarche, in other words, on deduction, which represents a movement from high to low in a hierarchical space in which the general is considered primordial with respect to the specific: primordial, from the gnoseological point of view, that is, more certain, and primordial from the ontological point of view, that is, more real. Rhetoric, inseparable correlative of Aristotelian logic, is a linking technique of *generalities* in which the specific appears as a derivation of the general. Aristotle’s *Organon* itself encloses the *Analytics*, which concern the syllogism; the *Categories*, which concern terms; and the *Topics*, which deal with commonplaces. This is why we may qualify this rationalism as deductive. As models of this kind of knowledge, we may cite Euclid’s geometry, in which theorems derive from postulates and axioms, and Roman jurisprudence, in which the “cases” are deduced from the law. Casuistics takes up this paradigm on the moral level.

Such a process supposes an ensemble of fixed and indisputable points that can neither be demonstrated nor questioned by critical reason. The solidity of the concatenation of the syllogisms depends on the stability of these points of attachment. It is not by chance that for this type of thought it seems obvious that the transmission of the movement of an object to another supposes the existence of an immobile *first cause*. This deduction is known to us because of the role it plays in the “Five Ways to the Proof of God,” in St. Thomas Aquinas, but it goes back to Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*.¹⁰

¹⁰ XII, 8, 1073 ab.

The very structure of deductive rationalism, its dependence with regard to the immutability of atoms, makes it rest, in the final analysis, on extra-rational facts—those of experience, first of all, but also those of authority, tradition and philosophical myth. When Aristotle speaks to us of the attraction of moving things for the first cause or when Poseidonius evokes cosmic sympathy, it is not a matter of myths, properly speaking. This attraction, this love do not arise from either religion or a mystic vision, nor do they represent a compromise between science and mysticism. It is simply a matter of a *jeu*, a particular form of thought having its own rules, observing them, drawing their consequences, all weighed and considered. As for the social institutions that preside over the development of intellectual life, they also demand the immutability of those rules which alone permit vying with the most distant predecessors and successors. Without this common measurement, no comparison, no emulation, no *zeal* (*zelo-sis*) is possible—and no progress.

We thus understand that the “Greek miracle,” marked by such agitation, was succeeded by a period of two thousand years that we qualify with the sinister terms of *obscurantism* and *stagnation*. That rationalism that the Greeks had instituted and that was dying of languor at the dawn of the industrial era aspired through its intrinsic principle to an immutable equilibrium between observation and tradition, between criticism and authority, between “physics” and “metaphysics.” Not only did it impose limits; it also accepted bending to exterior restraints, like that of theological orthodoxy. The break-through of modern rationalism, of the *Novum Organum*, as Bacon proudly said, shook the barriers and marked, from its own point of view, the end of stagnation. But from the point of view of the faithful disciples of Aristotelian rationalism, it defied all rules, it “deceived”, it caused scandal.

Classical rationalism had the advantage of offering an image of the world that was sufficiently logical and coherent (differently from archaic myths and beliefs) and at the same time sufficiently stable and perceptible (differently from contemporary scientific concepts) to grasp and seduce the imagination. The divulgation of that image belongs to poetry. Virgil after Lucretius, Dante after Virgil: “*L’amor che muove il sole e l’altre stelle*”¹¹ is not at all a

¹¹ *Paradiso*, XXXIII, 145.

lyrical conceit but the condensed formula resuming one of the theses of Aristotelian cosmology.¹² This has nothing to do, obviously, with the awkward attempts of the 19th and 20th centuries to create a “scientific poetry.” The last echo of the great tradition of Virgil, Lucretius, Dante, Milton and Blake is the *Hermès* of André Chénier, a belated heir of the Encyclopedist mentality.

What places the Encyclopedists themselves as actors and promoters of the second cultural revolution is that they are precisely at the hinge between two qualitatively different states of rationalism and that they can therefore conciliate the contradictory traits of the old and the new state of mind, put new wine in the old bottles. The same characteristics acquire in them an ambivalent nature because at the same time they are inscribed in an old context and in a new one. The increased attention of the *Encyclopédie* to the “mechanical arts” certainly announces the beginnings of industrialization, but when we read that Diderot was not content to call on M. Prévost, inspector of the glass factories; M. Longchamp, master brewer; M. Buisson, manufacturer of expensive cloth; MM. Bonnet and Laurent, silk merchants of Lyons, and so on, but set himself to the study of the trades of weaving, silk and cotton, we cannot help evoking the figure of the Sophist Hippias of Elis, parading one day before the crowd of spectators at the Olympic Games in a sumptuous attire, entirely made by his own hands to the smallest detail.¹³ The ancient philosophers did not have the cult of “mechanical arts,” but rhetoric loved to soothe itself with the dream of universal knowledge and knowing how to do things. Like Hippias, inventor of the *enkyklios paideia*, Diderot, father of the *Encyclopédie*, wanted to be the universal man able to understand and undertake everything. When industrial civilization showed its true image, certain people would claim the mastery of a concrete technical qualification, but no one would dare any longer to aspire to being able to do everything for himself, however ingenious and enthusiastic he might be.

The old and the new cultural revolutions are closely tied to the politics that served as their background. The first in date inaugurated a series of monarchical enterprises: Hellenism, Roman

¹² *Métaphysique*, XII, 7, 1072 b.

¹³ Apuleius, *Les Florides*, 9.

Imperialism, the Roman Catholic Church, the monarchy of Divine Right—the second marks the beginning of the end of this absolutism. Greek rationalism, although issuing from democracy, tended to the idea of the “man-king,” *aner basilikos*. Plato was not alone in searching for the way of salvation in the coming of a philosophical Utopia under the protection of some Syracusan tyrant. Xenophon, the conformist reasoner, adjusted his moral ideas to the realities of the pre-Hellenistic monarchy. The cynics, born protesters, fixed the ideal figure of a solitary wise man ranged against the absolute authority of a monarch; in a famous anecdote, Diogenes defies Alexander as equal to equal. Both are rare birds, sovereign individuals living on the margin of laws and usages. The Stoic sage is the “true” king, the rival and double of the political king. The figure of Marcus Aurelius allies the two figures into one. The correlation between the figures of the philosopher and the monarch appears fleetingly for the last time in the ideology of the “enlightened despot,” which marks the end of the cycle.

Encyclopedic rationalism keeps one of the traits of ancient rationalism: the insufficiency of its sense of history. But here we must quickly feel a reservation. If the mentality of the Encyclopedists ends for us by seeming typically “ahistoric,” it is by dint of being obsessed by history; we cannot speak of the absence of historic dimension in Aristotelian rationalism, since this absence is total and ingenuous. Voltaire attacks Pascal and Joseph de Maistre attacks Voltaire¹⁴ on the point of knowing if Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius could have conceived the idea of a duty toward God. After Pascal, after Bossuet, neither Christian apologetics nor anti-Christian polemics were able to keep from questioning entire epochs apropos of the love of God or of any other aspect of their spiritual climate. An inconceivable and unformulatable question for the thinkers of the more remote past.

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¹⁴ *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, 9th interview.