

FOREWORD

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More than in the case of any other period or current of the history of western thought, every discussion about the Enlightenment confronts us with our own present. The philosophical question on what the Enlightenment has been, is or should be, refers not only to a particular moment of our history, but also to some central issues of our political and philosophical present, such as, for instance, the crisis of democracy, its values and institutions, and the epistemological problem of conceptualising or objectifying life. Furthermore, every historiographic (re)construction, interpretation and (re)discovery of the philosophies of the Enlightenment implies explicitly or implicitly a particular vision of our time, since the way the Enlightenment is presented in each case determines the manner of how our present (its challenges, its problems, its achievements) arises before our eyes. The Enlightenment appears, then, as a complex issue, for in discussing its conceptual legacy one can sometimes no longer discern the thin line between historical and philosophical approaches nor whether one is talking about then or today. These problems and difficulties are certainly related to the fact that in historically and philosophically (re)writing the Enlightenment one is dealing with, using Foucault's words, "the history of the present", namely with a past that immediately and essentially constitutes the basis of our present.

But the complexity of the Enlightenment lies not only in its mixed, hybrid, nature as an object of research. Its complexity also reflects in its diversity of manifestations. The task of systematising this plurality or, put in other terms, of bringing or finding some order or logic in the diversity of philosophers and philosophical visions the Enlightenment encompasses, has always represented a challenge for philosophers as well as for historians. The scholarship on the Enlightenment in the last decades has surely contributed to consolidating the thesis of the existence of a plurality of Enlightenment philosophies, but has shown at the same time that the categories we used to historically and conceptually organise the philosophies of the Enlightenment have become ineffective for disclosing this event in the history of western thought in its own particular nature. So the question is whether it is possible to organise the Enlightenment and, if so, by means of which categories. In this sense, the studies of Margaret Jacob and Jonathan Israel on the radical Enlightenment, basically, their distinction between a radical and a moderate Enlightenment, represent a very important contribution to conceptualising the new vision of the Enlightenment developed in the last decades. However, their research must only be considered as the first steps towards a real solution. Both scholars agree that the task they began is not yet accomplished.

One could surely suggest that the task to be achieved consists in continuing Israel's and Jacob's systematisation of the diversity of philosophies of the Enlightenment by means of advancing in a distinction between radical and moderate philosophers based on the categories already defined by both scholars. However, the more one immerses oneself in the vast field of philosophical manifestations of the Enlightenment, the stronger the impression becomes that both concepts, 'radical' and 'moderate', need to be critically revisited. This means that a reconstruction of the Enlightenment that continues the main lines of the works of Jacob and Israel cannot be reduced to merely further applying their conceptual apparatus, but must rather consist in

questioning the central concepts in their interpretations. The present volume deals with this very problem and more precisely with the question of what the radicalness of the radical Enlightenment is, has been and/or should be.

The first contribution to this volume has been made by one of the above-mentioned celebrated scholars, namely, Prof. Dist. Margaret Jacob from the University of California, Los Angeles. She is the author of seminal works on the radical Enlightenment, a topic she began to study about more than twenty years before J. Israel published *The Radical Enlightenment* (2001). In her *The radical Enlightenment* (1981) she articulated for the first time the thesis of the existence of a radical wing within the Enlightenment, which for her, unlike Israel's thesis, does not necessarily have an atheist coinage. One of the most interesting and controversial aspects of her thesis has been, without a doubt, the central role she gave to Freemasonry in the historic development of the Enlightenment in the Continent. In the paper she prepared for the present volume Jacob put the question of "where are we now" after more than thirty years of intensive inquiry on the radical Enlightenment. She summarizes the most important points of her thesis and offers a dispassionate and profound criticism against Israel's *radical Enlightenment*. The aim of her criticism is not to direct our attention to someone's errors or contradictions, but first and foremost to show to what extent an overly rigid definition of the categories of radical and moderate Enlightenment ends in distorting the past. Jacob questions not only Israel's dismissal of the relevance of the social context in general and freemasonry in particular when rewriting the Enlightenment, but also his selective readings that make it very difficult, if not impossible, to gain access to the complexity of the philosophical thought of central figures such as Rousseau, Lessing and d'Holbach as well as to the origins of Enlightenment vital materialism.

The discussion about materialism and vital materialism is precisely the topic of Charles T. Wolfe's (Ghent University) intervention in this

volume. He challenges the usual consideration of materialism as a “necropolis” and of matter as nothing but ‘dead matter’ and/or ‘mechanical, lifeless matter’. This common opinion on materialism has always as correlate the postulate that matter has no freedom or that every materialism neglects the possibility of freedom. In his paper he examines some ‘moments’ of radical Enlightenment materialism such as La Mettrie and Diderot (including his *Encyclopédie* entry “Spinosiste”) and the anonymous clandestine text *L’Âme Matérielle* in order to emphasize the distinctive focus these materialist discourses had on the specific existence of organic beings. In doing so, Wolfe attempts at showing the distinctive character of this ‘embodied’, non-mechanistic character of Enlightenment ‘vital materialism’ that needs not deny the task of developing an ethics in order to affirm matter as a principle. His reflexions on Enlightenment vital materialism undoubtedly challenge our image of this current in the Enlightenment and offers very interesting arguments for deconstructing the usual identification of materialist ethics with hedonism.

The third paper in the present volume is “From the *more geometrico* to the *more algebraico*: D’Alembert and the Enlightenment’s transformation of systematic order” by Boris Demarest (Ghent University). In his paper Demarest historically and systematically reconstructs the emergence of a new conception of system in the Enlightenment, according to which a system of knowledge about the universe must be one-dimensional and continuous. This new (enlightened) way of conceiving system affirms that a conceptual reproduction of reality that does not neutralise the discontinuous and labyrinthine character of the universe remains still conditioned by historic and socio-cultural limitations and has not yet reached a scientific level. Accordingly, discontinuity and complexity are not predicates of reality as it *really* is. Demarest’s reconstruction departs from an analysis of D’Alembert criticisms against the *more geometrico* in science and then discusses the methodological transformations in the

18th Century in order to obtain a complete view of the methodological shift from geometry to algebra in the Enlightenment. The last two sections are dedicated to examining some of the consequences of this methodological turn as well as formulating some conclusions not only regarding the Enlightenment but also (implicitly) our present. The aim of such an exploration in the emergence of this new way of conceiving a system aims at showing that the Enlightenment refusal of the many layers of complex organisation should not be celebrated as the triumph of reason and true knowledge against superstition, but rather as the victory of a new belief (the belief that there is *the one true structure* in the universe, that this structure can be object of knowledge and that this knowledge can be gained by means of merely increasing objective data about reality) against an old one. In this sense, Demarest's criticism against the apparent advantages of a one-dimensional and continuous system and of the method lying behind this conception, establishes very interesting links between 'then' and 'today' in the horizon of the discussion about the possibilities and limitations of a scientific disclosure of what there is.

The fourth paper, "Friedrich Hölderlin and the clandestine society of the Bavarian Illuminati. A Plaidoyer" by Laura A. Macor (Università degli Studi di Padova), provides evidence about a hitherto neglected aspect in the philosophical and literary work of Friedrich Hölderlin, namely: his relationship with the secret order of the Bavarian Illuminati. From Hölderlin's correspondence and works Macor reconstructs the biographic and conceptual connections between this secret society and the German poet. Her thesis is that the fact that Hölderlin was personally acquainted with many Illuminati and read a number of important writings connected to the society is not merely accidental. The description of the activities of the Bavarian Illuminati in the different cities where Hölderlin lived and Hölderlin's explicit and implicit references to the Order offers a new interpretative horizon for further research not only on Hölderlin, but also on the development of

German political thought (principally Jacobinism and Republicanism) at the end of the 18th Century.

Elisabeth Van Dam's (Ghent University) "In the name of atheism", the fifth paper in this volume, consists in a critical analysis of Philipp Blom's *A Wicked Company: The forgotten Radicalism of the European Enlightenment* (2010). Van Dam takes issue with Blom's concept of 'radicalism' and attempts at convincingly showing that Blom's radical Enlightenment is built on a simplification of the opposition between *radical* and *moderate or conservative philosophers*. This simplification is based on the identification of *the* radical Enlightenment with one of its manifestations, namely, the circle of radical philosophers related to Holbach's *coterie*. As an outcome of Blom's reductionism the Enlightenment becomes, according to Van Dam, a 'history of heroes and villains' that cannot integrate in its discourse the existence of a whole range of grey nuances in the Enlightenment. In order to defend her thesis, Van Dam examines how Hume and Rousseau are depicted in Blom's book and shows the problems of Blom's interpretation when contrasted with some aspects of the philosophies of both Enlightened thinkers that Blom does not mention in his book. Van Dam's critical approach to Blom's work does not aim at remarking problems of historiographic nature, but at highlighting on the paradoxical effects of Blom's historic reconstruction. Van Dam claims that the main problem consists in that Blom's recovery of this 'forgotten Radicalism' ends in adopting a conservative tone, namely, that Blom's apology for Enlightenment radical thinking and its materialism no longer represents a radical position in the light of our present, but it serves, on the contrary, as an apology for today's dominant discourse – what she calls the rule of contemporary liberal economic mechanisms built on a zealous belief in scientism at universities and in society.

Besides contributions from the fields of the social and intellectual history and of the history of philosophy, this volume includes, as its last paper, a very interesting account on the development of culture in the

Enlightenment by Florian Heyerick, musician and musicology scholar and docent at the School of Arts KASK-Koninklijk Conservatorium (Ghent). Heyerick describes the changes in the milieu of music and the role of Freemasonry in the birth and growth of civil concert associations in 18th Century Paris. In doing so he illustrates one of the most important contributions of Freemasonry to the Enlightenment, namely, the idea and realisation of a democratisation of culture by means of giving to the citizens the chance of enjoying and participating in entertainments, uses and customs reserved until then only for the élites.

I do not want to end this foreword without expressing my sincere gratitude to the authors for the quality of their contributions and their openness in discussing the comments and observations of the reviewers. I would also like to thank the members of the *Centre for Critical Philosophy* who have helped in the preparation of the present volume.

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