

IN THE NAME OF ATHEISM. A CRITICAL RESPONSE TO PHILIPP BLOM'S BOOK 'A WICKED COMPANY'

Elisabeth Van Dam

In the introduction to his latest book *A Wicked Company: The forgotten Radicalism of the European Enlightenment* (2010), Philipp Blom promises to attract our attention to the contemporary relevance of a forgotten group of intellectual spirits, rehabilitating their historical reputation. This group was formed between 1750 and 1770, around the famous gatherings in the Parisian *salon* of Baron Thiry d'Holbach. According to Blom, the *salon* was host to the founding fathers of the movement of the radical Enlightenment and created the source of skeptical modern thinking, clearing the way to the scientific dispense with a theological approach to man and nature. From the start, Blom picks out his heroes and contrasts them to other figures that somehow tend to be discredited along the story. Diderot, Holbach, Buffon, Grimm, Marmontel, Helvetius and the *Encyclopédistes* were the courageous: they were revolutionary and essential because they were the first atheists, living up to their materialism. Rousseau, Voltaire and even Hume (along with a large group of other British figures like Edward Gibbon, John Wilkes, Laurence Sterne, Adam Smith and David Garrick) were the conservatists, keeping either a pragmatic or sentimental opening towards religion and therefore bound to be weak, repressive,

restrained and emotional. Although the book presents itself as nuanced, reads lovely like a historic novel and is indeed very well documented, Blom nevertheless manages to surreptitiously smuggle his own (political) agenda into his account of a philosophical story he thinks unjustly to have fallen into oblivion. He does so by creating rather simple oppositions and divisions, reducing the merit of the Enlightenment to its radical offspring situated in Holbach's *coterie*. All other efforts of enlightened philosophy, like those of the German, Kantian world, of Rousseau's *Bildungsideen* or of the milder, pragmatic Brits, are cast into the corner of pseudo-theological solutions, keeping God at distance of their cold, rational or totalitarian systems but always within reach when temperatures get too low and danger is at hand. They were too weak for a wicked universe says Blom, that is, they could not live in a godless, meaningless universe discovered through knowledge of the laws of nature and in service of nothing else than our material needs, that is, of the hedonistic and unrestrained satisfaction of our lust in solidarity with the lust of others. Are these oppositions, as Blom presents them, really valuable or even right? There might perhaps be a reason for the fact that he dredges up a figure like Holbach from a past that witnesses of many other, interrelated thinkers he neglects, such as Kant or Lichtenberg, even though they too are discredited today but prove highly relevant to our present. Besides, they were more courageous and less conservative than Blom suggests.

An important chapter in the book that reveals the heart of the problem for both Blom and the radical *philosophes* is the chapter on David Hume, *le bon David* as they used to call him in 18th century Paris. Holbach's house was notorious throughout Europe because of the fame of the *Encyclopédie* as well as the attention Friedrich Grimm gave it in his journal *Correspondance littéraire*. When David Hume came to Paris as secretary of lord Hertford, the British ambassador in Paris, it was self-evident that he would announce his visit to Holbach's *salon*. At that time he was a highly celebrated figure, not because of his philosophical

work but because of his bulky *History of England* (1754-1762), an honest, enlightened six-part account of England's history and its violent past, admired because of its clarity and exemplary practice of the freedom of speech. His *A Treatise on Human Nature* (1739-1740) and the painstaking conclusions of his skeptical philosophy, produced when he was only 26, were not at all known at that time, presumably because few understood their radical implications. It was nevertheless the work he was admired for by Holbach's friends, who were prepared to face these implications. This is the crucial point, because Hume in fact *could not* face them or better, he did not even wish it. His uncompromising philosophical gaze made any certainty about the world and God or even human personality vaporize. Nothing remained except stimuli, perception and psychology. His radical argument arrived at a point of nothingness, at an implacable deleting of all certainty, all belief and all trust in a higher truth. Hume cleared all thought for a confrontation with the void of a meaningless life. Blom compares Hume to Rousseau when he describes how the young philosophizing Scott fell terribly ill after he had written down his views and conclusions. He also stresses Hume's despair when he found out that practically no one reacted on his revolutionary courage as he expected. Hume disgusted his own radical doubt and concluded to give up philosophy because he feared his own thoughts. He could not live without anything more than natural coincidence. From this angle Blom tries to show his reader that Hume is in fact very different and much less brave than the radical circle of Holbach. By contrasting Hume's final, pragmatic choice for a softer attitude, that of agnosticism rather than atheism, with the political dimension of Diderot's and Holbach's anti-religious, "Lucretian" strength, Blom judges Hume to be weak and inconsequent to his radical, philosophical position. But was Hume really inconsequent? His abandoning of his philosophical doubts was perhaps the bravest thing a philosopher could ever do, facing the impossible of life by nevertheless living it with love and with an interest in all of its aspects instead of

abstractly theorizing about its sterile conditions and forgetting to live it. Indeed, Blom overlooks some crucial elements at work in his fascinating account.

Fear is the important concept in this problem. In this story – a history where we should not neglect the specific context determining specific reactions – fear has three different dimensions. Unfortunately Blom mixes them up. The *first* is the fear he ignores: the fear that has driven the radicals, as he describes and praises them, into the godless world of materialism. It is the fear for the empty space or blind spot in any system of (scientific) knowledge, that is, the void that anyone who is religious or has beliefs (be it in God or anything else that cannot be known, defined or understood) willingly embraces. It is a dimension of fear we actually should not fear but admit. Atheists are in fact most frightened of all, since they are scared of fear. They replace it by their belief in a religion of science. Nevertheless, they do not believe they too actually believe. A vast belief in the advance and certainty of science erases the blind, absurd, unfathomable, surprising, incalculable, indefinable, unsayable or obscure from human experience. It are these things Blom or any radicals in search for clarity and light cannot face, defending a world dictated by predictable laws. The poetry of an unpredictable God has no place in their positivist view.

There is another dimension of fear Blom touches upon, one that has more right to be erased or replaced than the previous. This is the fear the church woke in its disciples, fear used as an instrument to attain power and oppression. Considered from Holbach's historical context, defined by hierarchic domination and the patronizing of knowledge, it becomes clear why the church and all religious associations to instruments of power and fear like the 'wrath of God' or the 'deadly sins' had to be attacked in those days. It also makes clear why figures like Diderot defended such a radically political, atheist position towards the existence of a God, especially in the difficult climate of France. It nevertheless does not explain why keeping an opening towards

something beyond the facts of science and the material laws of nature should be considered as weak or sentimental, as Blom suggests. *Because it should not.* The tendency to ask for more than can be understood or predicted is very human and all attempts to create space for what cannot be subsumed under a natural law, in short, to create meaning in life, usually witness of the beauty of human creativity and of the power of imagination. Blom actually admits this in his account of Diderot's letters and literary works, writings expressing inventiveness, drama and playfulness but also fear, regret and sadness for the loss of magic in life, for the problem morality poses and for the dead end Diderot's radical, philosophical thoughts were leading to.

This relates to a *third* aspect of fear: fear for the loss of meaning in a purely materialistic world, in an empty whirl of atoms and molecules. God or other 'sentimental' practices are meant to compensate for this loss. But Blom seems to be revolted by all attempts that allow for religious' feelings', in fact, for feelings and emotions *tout court*. This becomes most clear in his view on Rousseau. For Blom nothing Rousseau ever did was right, good or valuable. He blames Rousseau's philosophy to be way too much biography, soaked in emotions and sentimental reactions against his enemy-friends. He makes the reader believe that all Rousseau ever wrote or created was the effect of his frustrations, of fear, jealousy, masochistic desires, misanthropy, pessimism, paranoia, megalomania and good PR. For Blom Rousseau equals secularized self-hatred, a soft form of Christian dogmatism that cannot free itself of the yoke of guilt. Rousseau's originality and relevant contribution to the 'colored shadows' the Enlightenment had cast over Europe are therefore invalidated or even made ridiculous. The stressing of Rousseau's unstable emotional nature creates a one-sided perspective on a figure who played an interesting part in the development of our cultural history. It is a reductionist perspective merely used to generate false oppositions and simple categories from where Blom convincingly writes his own program.

It is not surprising that materialist figures like Holbach and Helvetius are getting more and more into the picture of academic debates nowadays. Although Blom claims Holbach to be undeservedly neglected, he jumps on a hot topic for efficiency-minded practices nowadays. In my opinion, its impetus is partly related to how the dynamics between our instrumental, economic and scientifically oriented society and the developments of the academic culture, or better, academic business, creates interests and expectations. Universities format their research in line with financing systems that are built on highly profiled criteria of output and production, of speed, efficiency, ciphers and results instead of the indefinable values of education, development, human processes, creativity and pleasure. Although Blom's epilogue fulminates against the rise of capitalism, liberalism and imperialism, resulting from the 19th century's appropriation and abuse of the 'soft form' of the Enlightenment, he does not seem to admit how his praise of Holbach's materialism merely conforms to the rule of contemporary liberal economic mechanisms built on a zealous belief in scientism at universities and in society. There is no much room left today for anything outside the economic criteria and scientifically calculable or definable standards dictating academic programs or the market, in short, there is no space for emotion, blind spots, surprise or even the poetry of an empty place like God. Everything has to be stuffed up with facts and figures, nothing is more interesting and fashionable than atoms, bits or the quantity of publications. Blom blames 'soft philosophies' like the one of Kant and German idealists or Rousseau and Voltaire of having created the opportunity to further oppression of our material body, in line with the tyranny of the church, that is, in line with a practice of guilt and hate towards our animal instincts and unreasonable impulses. Blom argues that this is due to their dehumanizing rationalism that makes human desires – Diderot's hedonist love for *volupté* – secondary to an all-overruling system preceded by capitalist symbols of power like Reason

or Will. In my view, this is not a correct conclusion. First of all, Blom simplifies the complexity of the philosophies of Kant and others. He definitely misinterpreted Kant's structural vision of the place of God in his moral philosophy and his dynamic idea of the organ of Reason, which is not an instrument of power but a moving force in correspondence with the movements of man. He creates too many inconsistencies between the parties he wishes to be opponents. The different figures of the Enlightenment had indeed very different views but they were no enemies towards each other, on the contrary, the worst villains of this story seem to be the censors of the church and state, whose disapproving presence looms menacingly over the proceedings of all figures. Secondly, Blom forgets that Holbach's materialism in fact creates much more space for a dehumanization of our world and being than Kant or Rousseau ever did since it explicitly erases the natural, human tendency to feel guilty, to create meaning, to allow Gods and magic or avoid the direct satisfaction of desire and lust by restricting and restraining the drives of our body. Blom claims Diderot and co in their hedonist motto to 'live now' to be the direct forbears of Freud's destruction of illusions on human drives. He obviously did not learn from Vienna's hysterics, since it was Freud who discovered and described how all humans create mechanisms and symptoms that help dealing with the immediacy of their lust, that is, with the danger of their submission to unrestricted pleasure. Human beings cannot live like unregulated machines, be it lust-machines, production-machines or fact-machines. In fact, people do not seek for unfettered lust but merely try to avoid pain. Indeed, they even prove to have lust in pain. People need guilt and punishment. History shows that the unnatural tendency of human natures to always find a way outside of themselves, to create places, points and positions beyond themselves, opening a space to move in relation to themselves as a judge, a third, a God or restrictor, is absolutely natural and even sane. I don't think Diderot or Holbach even would deny this, although Blom suggests they

desire human beings that live inhuman, that is, as pure lust-seekers. Some of the few citations and fragments from letters and works of the *philosophes* Blom quotes, cast a more nuanced light on their beliefs. I wish Blom had done this much more because it certainly would uncover his too simple story of the good versus the bad. While the book is well researched, it is lightly footnoted and Blom is often content to tell us what his subjects thought, rather than let them speak in their own words. A serious dialogue with the past should not be as monotone as this. Nevertheless, while Holbach and Diderot are the clear heroes of this book, they are not portrayed without their flaws.

Blom's book is not entirely without merit. With great enthusiasm and literary panache he opens and defends a part of the past that could be inspiring for our intellectual future. Not particularly the atheist-beliefs Blom thinks valuable for us, but much rather the interdisciplinary and artful spirit of the *salon* with its open culture to education and elevation by debate, is in my opinion a powerful instrument we could use today. Blom describes and praises how Holbach's house welcomed a broad range of very differently educated figures from all over Europe with many different talents and interests, debating all together in a vivid, equal, nonchalant and aesthetic atmosphere. Sharing thoughts with each other without being motivated by profit or professional reasons but out of passion for the beauty and constructive effects of it, seems a forgotten activity today. We could learn from the *hybris* of a *salon* like Holbach's, and try breaking free from academic conventions or hierarchic structures and oppositions between different scientific branches, departments, specializations and disciplines that lock us up in single-minded worlds. The cross-pollination between art, literature, science, philosophy and life is most fertile for those trying to practice the *art of life*. Blom shows us what a fascinating age the 18th century was and what courageous people preceded us while battling for the freedom we have today, practicing their hybrid life in surrender and in exchange with other brave spirits.

Blom has successfully made his case for a reappraisal of the radicals of Paris. Nevertheless, his hinted prejudice betrays his political position and favor for the contemporary success of evolutionary materialism, scientism and skeptical thinking. It is a pity that his spirited story of the French stars of the Enlightenment is cast in the shadow of an implicit program that in fact conforms to capitalist structures instead of breaking with them. 'Live now', the motto he pushes into Diderot, could easily be seen today as 'buy now': satisfy your needs immediately on the market. However, as history learns, all books that conform to contemporary tendencies in society and at universities, catching the light of 'likes' and success, are usually running behind. What is to come is still slumbering but already preparing in the shadows.

Universiteit Gent
Email: Elisabeth.VanDam@UGent.be