Diderot's Revisionism: Enlightenment and Blindness in the "Lettre sur les aveugles"

Andrew S Curran, Wesleyan University

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DIDEROT’S REVISIONISM:
ENLIGHTENMENT AND BLINDNESS
IN THE LETTRE SUR LES AVEUGLES

By Andrew Curran

When Diderot published the Lettre sur les aveugles in 1749, he quickly advanced to the forefront of heterodoxical thinkers who were replacing metaphysical schemes – both theist and deist – with fully naturalist explanations of the universe. The potential consequences of promulgating such heretical ideas may in part explain Diderot’s choice of genre: the lettre. Aware, as were all philosophes in mid-century France, that works like the more unambiguously materialist L’Homme machine (1748) had been condemned and burned, the newly hired editor of the massive « translation » of Chamber’s Cyclopaedia not only published his text anonymously, he chose to dissemble his thought in a digressive-prone epistle addressed to an unnamed woman. To a degree, the text’s tangents are a strategic maneuver, an attempt to avoid the Bastille (or what would be for Diderot, Vincennes). Yet the polyphony and subjectivity of this literary form also signal a Diderotian constant: a skeptical stance regarding the possibility of asserting universal propositions. Nowhere is this more evident than in the treatment of the text’s primary subject, the blind themselves. In the Lettre, the blind seem to occupy two separate yet contradictory conceptual planes. For the majority of the text, the blind are normalized – explained, rationalized, brought into phase with the reader’s notion of normalcy. Less often, but more memorably, the blind are also identified as conceptually other, as anomalous, even monstrous. An analysis of this multifarious construction of blindness does much more than to underscore the text’s conspicuous incongruities; indeed, this study in contradiction paradoxically clarifies the larger tension existing between the text’s skepticism and its very dogmatic materialism.

Before we arrive at Diderot’s discussion of the blind, however, it is worth recalling that the Lettre sur les aveugles begins with a personal affront. Diderot and the person to whom he addresses his letter had clearly hoped to be present at a demonstration of restored sight – presided by the famous entomologist René-Antoine de Réaumur – where the surgeon Hilmer was to remove the bandages from a recent cataract patient, a
young girl who had been blind since birth. In the first paragraph of the letter, Diderot must inform Madame that, despite his valiant efforts, the operation and the lifting of the patient’s veil have taken place without them; they have been refused access to the affair – to a case-study of what seventeenth and eighteenth-century philosophers referred to as the «Molyneux Problem».

In discussing this missed opportunity with his correspondent, Diderot seems more piqued by the rebuff than disappointed about not actually being present. Indeed, while one might think that Réaumur and Hilmer’s demonstration would have allowed a thinker like Diderot to transcend the limits of the Molyneux Problem as it was originally conceived – it was, after all an entirely hypothetical problem, a thought-experiment – this supposedly monumental scientific demonstration far from impresses the philosophe. In fact, Diderot is quick to criticize the potential shortcomings of such an undertaking, especially one led by the mediocre minds who prevented Diderot and Madame from viewing it in the first place:

... je me doutais bien, Madame, que l’aveugle-née, à qui M. de Réaumur vient de faire abattre la cataracte, ne vous apprendrait pas ce que vous vouliez savoir; mais je n’avais garde de deviner que ce ne serait ni sa faute ni la vôtre.... [Réaumur] n’a voulu laisser tomber le voile que devant quelques yeux sans conséquence. Si vous êtes curieuse de savoir pourquoi cet habile Académicien fait si secrètement des expériences, qui ne peuvent avoir un trop grand nombre de témoins éclairés; je vous répondrai que les observations d’un homme aussi célèbre, ont moins besoin de spectateurs quand elles se font, que d’auditeurs quand elles sont faites.

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1 A thought-experiment used to test hypotheses regarding perception and reflection, the «Molyneux problem» or «Molyneux question» became well known throughout Europe after Locke cited William Molyneux’s query in the second edition of An Essay concerning Human Understanding (1694; II, ix, § 8). If, as the question went, a blind man were to recover his sight, could he visually distinguish between a cube and a sphere – as he had previously done with only the sense of touch? Not surprisingly, Locke – like Molyneux – theorized that the blind person would be unable to recognize visually the same objects that he had easily identified by touch. This analysis of the problem led to two concurrent suppositions: that humankind’s understanding of the outside world was subject to independent perceptual modes and, more generally, that the body of our knowledge could be accounted for by the way in which the mind processes sensation and reflection.

2 Before Hilmer, Cheselden performed a cataract operation in 1728. His findings appeared in the Philosophical Transactions in 1728 (vol. XXXV, n° 402, p. 447-450).

If Réaumur is portrayed as somehow lacking the esprit necessary to move beyond simple myopic observation, his audience is similarly presented as profoundly shortsighted, reduced metonymically to «les yeux sans conséquence» (Lettre, DPV, IV, 17). Much of the denigration of the vainglorious Réaumur can, of course, be attributed to Diderot’s (and his friend Buffon’s) scorn for the famous entomologist’s primary activity: the observation and cataloguing of Creation. Réaumur, whom Diderot will later call a malheureux manouvrier d’expériences who «emploiera toute sa vie à observer des insectes, et ne verra rien de nouveau» is surely not up the rigors of experimental science as Diderot envisions it. After all, as Diderot writes in the Pensées sur l’interprétation de la nature (1753), the génie créateur must, in addition to observing the intricacies of nature, possess a mind capable of transcending simple data: «Il faut que l’observation de la nature soit assidue, que la réflexion soit profonde, et que l’expérience soit exacte.» In short, if empirical observation is only as useful as the interpretative and imaginative powers of the observer are strong, Réaumur’s commentaries on the experiment would have added little to the already voluminous commentary on the Molyneux Problem.

While the numerous allusions to the imperceptiveness of the experiment’s impresario and his toadies are an effective means of conveying Diderot’s contempt for Réaumur – the famous observer of nature – these metaphors of blocked or obscured vision also hint at the text’s essential function: to counter-cast those who see and those who do not. For the majority of the Lettre, Diderot will forego discussion of the Molyneux problem and those people who have recently regained their sight. Instead, he will give the floor to the blind themselves. Diderot replaces not only Hilmer and Réaumur, but also the poor blind girl, a person who would have been a passive object of scrutiny, a creature whose significance was strictly limited to the interpretation of a pathological problem and to the correction of her anomaly. As such, Diderot liberates the discussion from the confines of an experiment seeking to bring the unseeing into phase with les voyants. Instead, he brings those who see into phase with the blind.

The Lettre’s subtitle, «à l’usage de ceux qui voient», obviously reflects this revolution in perspective. Those who see – and who objectively believe themselves privy to truth – are shown to be subject to

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4 Diderot, Pensées sur l’interprétation de la nature, DPV, IX, 40. The identification of Réaumur as poor observer also hints at Diderot’s disdain for the naturalist observer who gathers useless information at the expense of a true philosophy. See Jacques Roger’s Buffon: un philosophe au Jardin du Roi (Évreux, Fayard, 1989), for a discussion on Réaumur’s methodology as an «observer» as opposed to a «classifier» of nature, p.106.

5 Diderot, Pensées sur l’interprétation de la nature, DPV, IX, 39.
poor sight, whereas the blind demonstrate themselves as having a more penetrating vision. Such a reversal of perspective implicitly overthrows the dominant position of sight within what was then considered a hierarchy of senses, a hierarchy that, as Michel Foucault points out in *Les Mots et les choses*, not only affirmed sight as a superior faculty, but served to negate the importance of the other senses:

L’observation, à partir du XVIIe siècle, est une connaissance sensible assortie de conditions systématiquement négatives. Exclusion, bien sûr, du oui'-dire ; mais exclusion aussi du goût et de la saveur, parce qu’avec leur incertitude, avec leur variabilité, ils ne permettent pas une analyse en éléments distincts qui soit universellement acceptable. Limitation très étroite du toucher à la désignation de quelques oppositions assez évidentes (comme celles du lisse et du rugueux) ; privilège presque exclusif de la vue, qui est le sens de l’évidence et de l’étendue, et par conséquent d’une analyse *partes extra partes* admise par tout le monde.

By rejecting sight – the most reliable basis for establishing humankind’s convictions, for reconciling propositions with reality – the *Lettre* seeks not only to restrict particular fields of belief, but to rethink humankind’s relationship to knowledge. To a certain extent, the implications of the blind perspective reinforce the base tenets of Lockean epistemology, that belief was different from knowledge and that the senses provide an imperfect rendering of the outside world. And yet, Diderot’s unseating of what was the most authoritative of the senses betrays a much more dissenting agenda. Unlike a Descartes or a Berkeley – both of whom proposed a radical skepticism vis-à-vis the senses in order to shore up belief in spiritual causality – Diderot’s disparaging of sight casts doubt on metaphysical concepts as well as on the validity of the numerous metaphors of light attached to the notion of enlightenment. In the *Lettre*, the blind hold a dark mirror in front of us, a mirror in which we perceive the precariousness of our beliefs in physical, esthetic, and metaphysical realms. As the blind share their tactile and olfactory reading of existence with the sighted, the reader becomes aware of a tangible breakdown in the sense-based conventions of understanding which provide humanity with a sense of unity, and ultimately, a rational identity within the cosmos. From Hilmer and Réaumur’s operating room – where the objective was to establish a scientific truth – we move into a more worrisome realm where the attainability of truth is itself called into doubt.

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Diderot's examination of the blind begins with an account of the life of the *Aveugle-né du Puiseaux*. This portion of the text situates itself, epistemologically speaking, among those eighteenth-century works that treated blindness from the perspective of sensationist relativism\(^7\). Diderot's narrative of the *Aveugle*'s life exposes the reader to a number of situations from which even those who are uninitiated in the subtleties of Locke's empiricism or Condillac's sensationist theories infer that his behavior is the result of restricted perception. From the perspective of the theory of knowledge, the blind man's life can be reduced to a series of sensationist cause-and-effect scenarios. In one example, a particular problem resulting from blindness gives rise to a corresponding adaptation or disposition: «La difficulté qu'ont les aveugles à recouvrer les choses égarées, les rend amis de l'ordre» (*Lettre*, DPV, IV, 19). In another, blindness has the effect of increasing the acuity of his other senses, making him a marvel among men: «Il est si sensible aux moindres vicissitudes qui arrivent dans l'atmosphère, qu'il peut distinguer une rue d'un cul-de-sac» (*ibid.*, 24). Indeed, the *Aveugle*'s tactile, auditory, and olfactory comprehension constitutes a world to which the reader does not have access. Although the blind man demonstrates no link or communication between what are distinct perceptual channels, his other senses reveal a marked ability to supplant his vision. His attention to «la beauté de la peau, l'embonpoint, la fermeté des chairs, les avantages de la conformation, la douceur de l'haleine, les charmes de la voix, ceux de la prononciation» creates mental portraits whose lack of visual information is more than compensated for by the refinement of his other senses (*ibid.*, 25). Through touch and the acuity of the «sens qui lui restent», the blind man has forged a remarkably complete understanding of the world; he is genuinely satisfied with his perception. Asked if he would like to regain his sight, the *Aveugle* puts the questioner in his place, and professes what is for him the primacy of the tactile sense.

Si la curiosité ne me dominoit pas, dit-il, j'aimerais bien autant avoir de longs bras : il me semble que mes mains m'instruirraient mieux de ce qui se passe dans la lune que vos yeux ou vos télescopes ; et puis les yeux cessent plutôt de voir, que les mains de toucher. Il vaudrait donc

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\(^7\) Following John C. O'Neal and others, I have chosen to use the increasingly accepted term «sensationism» in lieu of the term «sensationalism» to identify the sense-based theory associated with mid-century thinkers, particularly Condillac. See O'Neal's *The Authority of Experience* (University Park, PA, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), p. 1, n. 1., for a brief analysis of the terms associated with this theory in both French and in English.
bien autant qu’on perfectionnât en moi l’organe que j’ai, que de m’accorder celui qui me manque. (ibid., 23)

Although the Aveugle’s succinct rejoinder certainly underlines the fact that his reading of reality is perhaps different, but in no way inferior to a voyant’s perception, it also indicates what Diderot saw as the intrinsic superiority of the sense of touch to that of sight. While examples of the preeminence of the sense of touch abound in the Lettre, Diderot puts this concept in the most forceful terms in the Lettre sur les sourds et muets (1751) where he reminisces about forays into what he calls anatomie métaphysique. In the fictitious experiment to which he alludes – a speculative sensationist dissection – Diderot divides one man into five, allotting to each person the characteristics of one of the five senses:

Mon idée serait donc de décomposer pour ainsi dire un homme, et de considérer ce qu’il tient de chacun des sens qu’il possède. Je me souviens d’avoir été quelquefois occupé de cette espèce d’anatomie métaphysique, et je trouvais que de tous les sens l’œil était le plus superficiel, l’oreille le plus orgueilleux, l’odorat le plus voluptueux, le goût le plus superstitieux et le plus inconstant, le toucher le plus profond et le plus philosophique. (DPV, IV, 140)

Although Diderot is unclear as to what exactly constitutes the «philosophical» nature of touch, we can presume that, unlike vision, the primary characteristic of the tactile sense – its need to come into contact with the object it perceives – reflects a certain detachment and objectivity in comparison with the other senses. Unlike vision, for example, the sense of touch’s authority is derived from a close relationship with the tangible world.

In the Lettre sur les aveugles, this view of competing and incredibly biased sensory signals has implications that transcend both Lockean and Condillacian perception theories. As well as to indicate that the mind is tabula rasa at birth, Diderot hints that the subjective nature of sensory processing may preclude the possibility of asserting universal propositions. While Locke and optimistic thinkers in general believed that reasoned use of the senses may lead to a «certainty of truth», Diderot’s exploitation of the implicit relativism in a sensationist epistemology

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8 Diderot’s description of Mélanie de Salignac in the Additions à la Lettre sur les aveugles also points to the fact that le toucher, as opposed to sight, is less prone to capricious questions of taste: «Elle était peu sensible aux charmes de la jeunesse et peu choquée des rides de la vieillesse. Elle disait qu’il n’y avait que les qualités du cœur et de l’esprit qui fussent à redouter pour elle... jamais, disait-elle, un bel homme ne me fera tourner la tête» (DPV, IV, 102).
undermines the possibility for such an assertion⁹. This is particularly true for the realm of morality. Diderot, as commentator, poses the problem:

Comme je n’ai jamais doute que l’état de nos organes et de nos sens n’ait beaucoup d’influence sur notre métaphysique et sur notre morale, et que nos idées les plus purement intellectuelles, si je puis parler ainsi, ne tiennent de fort près à la conformation de notre corps, je me mis à questionner notre aveugle sur les vices et sur les vertus. (Lettre, DPV, IV, 26)

Initially, this link between physical and moral worlds produces an uncomplicated discussion of some of the Aveugle’s basic moral predispositions. Diderot cites three examples, all of which follow the pattern of a moral outlook stemming from a blind perspective. The blind man has an «aversion prodigieuse pour le vol [qui] naissait en lui de deux causes; de la facilité qu’on avait de le voler, sans qu’il s’en aperçût: et plus encore peut-être, de celle qu’on avait de l’apercevoir, quand il volait» (ibid., 26). Pudeur, however, is a custom that goes against his common sense since it is something he cannot understand. Most interesting and reminiscent of Montesquieu’s pseudo-anthropological «inductive» explanation for the different forms of government, Diderot posits that in a society of aveugles, women would be common property or adultery would be severely punished¹⁰.

Yet when it comes to the existence of a natural tendency toward virtue – a biological inclination to do good to others – the Aveugle’s deficiency may in some way make him monstrous. Given Diderot’s long-standing interest in the relation between the physical and moral worlds and his lifelong commitment to the natural goodness of man, he could not help but wonder: to what extent is a natural inclination toward bienfaisance dependent on sight? Is a natural morality operative only among people who can see? Could the blind, in relation to those with five senses, be morally anomalous? While Diderot often raised the possibility of moral

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⁹ See Locke’s An Essay concerning Human Understanding. Locke writes: «Certainty of truth is, when Words are so put together in Propositions as to express the agreement or disagreement of the Ideas they stand for, as it really is. Certainty of knowledge is to perceive the agreement or disagreement of ideas, as expressed in any Proposition. This we usually call knowing, or being certain of the Truth of any proposition» (IV.vi.§3: «Of Universal Propositions, their Truth and Certainty», [Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1975], 579-580.) Although Locke denies the possibility of innate ideas, he does maintain the possibility of achieving an objective understanding of reality. It is precisely this belief in the certainty of knowledge, and especially of man’s knowledge of himself, that allows Locke to advance his somewhat rationalist assertion of a divine being’s existence; see IV.x: «Of our Knowledge of the Existence of a God».

¹⁰ This is also the context for the pseudo-anthropological assessments of Tahitian society in Diderot’s Supplément au voyage de Bougainville.
monstrosity, he never provided an unambiguous answer to the question, nor gave life to a character, be it Saunderson or Jean-François Rameau, whose conformation could be unequivocally identified as the source of evil behavior. Nonetheless, within the sensationist framework of the Lettre, the possibility of physical monstrosity poses a serious threat to a universal human morality. Here, the unseeing eye, much like the misfiring fibre morale or obtuse molécule paternelle alluded to in the Neveu de Rameau, exposes the weakness of a moral system that depends on a universal esthetic reaction to sensory stimuli.

Indeed, according to Diderot, blindness prevents its victims from understanding the world in the same way that other humans do. In the first place, the blind are reduced to assessing beauty through the rote application of accepted norms. Commenting on this fundamental difference between the blind and those who see, Diderot writes:

La symétrie qui est peut-être une affaire de pure convention entre nous, est certainement telle à beaucoup d’égards, entre un aveugle et ceux qui voient. A force d’étudier par le tact la disposition que nous exigons entre les parties qui composent un tout, pour l’appeler beau, un Aveugle parvient à faire une juste application de ce terme. Mais quand il dit cela est beau, il ne juge pas, il rapporte seulement le jugement de ceux qui voient. (Lettre, DPV, IV, 19)

As Robert Niklaus points out, the Aveugle’s notions of beauty are limited to symmetry and convention because he lacks the abstract component of recognizing true beauty, which is the appreciation of visual harmonies. As such, the blind are wanting of the ability to identify and act on what Diderot called the vrai beau, un sublime réel in the Essai sur le mérite et la vertu. This esthetico-moral problem is by far the worst impairment among the unseeing:

Comme de toutes les démonstrations extérieures qui réveillent en nous la commiseration et les idées de la douleur, les aveugles ne sont affectés que par la plainte : je les soupçonne en général d’inhumanité. Quelle différence y a-t-il pour un aveugle entre un homme qui urine et un homme qui sans se plaindre verse son sang? Nous-mêmes, ne cessons-nous pas de compatir, lorsque la distance ou la petitesse des objets produit le même effet sur nous, que la privation de la vue sur les aveugles? Tant nos vertus dépendent de notre manière de sentir, et du degré auquel les choses extérieures nous affectent! (Lettre, DPV, IV, 27)

Although Diderot later regretted having written this passage (in the Additions à la Lettre sur les aveugles c.1782), his philosophical

11 See Niklaus’s n. 9, in DPV, IV, 77.
assessments of pathology and morality in the *Lettre* comes very close to categorizing the blind as monstrous, as somehow *inhumain*. Lacking the capacity to evaluate the majority of human actions as well as the ability to react to or become motivated by exterior situations, the blind are monsters of indifference. This quasi-monstrosity stems from Diderot’s conviction that the blind are physically isolated from the general set of sensory relationships from which an emotional link to humanity is forged. In a sense, the sightless are both physically and morally blind.

**SAUNDERSON**

While Diderot’s description of the *Aveugle du Puiseaux*’s routine slowly leads the reader into the shadowy “cul de basse-fosse” from which the blind man reads the world, his sketch of the *Aveugle*’s life also stresses how his behavior, esthetic notions, and ethics depend directly on his sightless way of life. Similarly, in Diderot’s account of the Nicolas Saunderson’s exquisite tactile sense, his system of “arithmétique palpable”, as well as the geometrician’s uncommon ability to communicate difficult abstract ideas, Diderot accents the brilliant adaptive powers of a man who lives an unlit existence. In many ways, Diderot’s presentation of this sensationist-based narrative serves the same purpose as the first section of the *Rêve* trilogy (the “Suite de l’entretien”). Much as d’Alembert and Diderot’s playful vision of universal sensibility heralds the frightening nightmare that razes d’Alembert’s notion of self later in *Le Rêve*, the seemingly harmless (sensationist) account of Saunderson’s life prepares many of the themes that reach an equally disquieting paroxysm in his deathbed scene.

The five or so pages that constitute Saunderson’s *profession de foi* temporarily emancipate the *Lettre* from what is otherwise a relatively forthright discussion of blindness. The import of this scene within the text is signaled by the disappearance of the general discursive tone and by the abrupt appearance of sustained dialogue. Following the assessment of the

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12 See Diderot’s account of his meeting with Mlle de Salignac in the *Additions à la Lettre sur les aveugles*, DPV, IV, 99.

13 Diderot’s representation of this double blindness – a concurrent physical and ethical *cécité* – simply combines the early modern era’s use of the term “aveuglement” in both literal and figurative senses. See the *Encyclopédie* article “Aveugle”, where an attempt is made to distinguish between “aveuglement” and “cécité”. “Aveuglement”, recommends the article’s author, d’Alembert, should be used figuratively in moral matters, while “cécité” should be used to describe the physical condition of sightlessness (*Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences des arts et des métiers*, [Hereafter ENC], [Paris, 1751-1772], X, 870).
blow geometrician's accomplishments, Diderot precipitously interrupts
his text: «Lorsqu'il fut sur le point de mourir, on appela auprès de lui un
ministre fort habile, M. Gervaise Holmes: ils eurent ensemble un
entretien sur l'existence de Dieu dont il nous reste quelques fragments»
(Lettre, DPV, IV, 48). Supposedly adapted from a 1747 work entitled The
Life and character of Dr Nicholas Saunderson late Lucasian Professor of
the Mathematicks in the University of Cambridge by Saunderson's
«disciple and friend», M. William Inchliif14, the geometrician's deathbed
scene signals a fundamental shift in the intention and the direction of the
text. This belle mort, a deathbed scene of enthousiasme, courage,
friendship, and finally delirium creates a singular environment for a
reinterpretation of Saunderson's physical anomaly.

Although the emotion contained in the scene may evoke a deathbed
conversion, the framework of this section of the Lettre resembles more
closely a courtroom where the Protestant minister Holmes pleads the case
of general Providence before a Saunderson cast as a skeptical judge. As is
the case in any courtroom, in Saunderson's exchange with Holmes there
are boundaries to the discussion, precepts to respect, and accepted critical
procedures. If Holmes seeks to convince Saunderson of God's existence,
he must adhere to the sensationist-empiricist epistemology developed
earlier in the text. Innate ideas or categories are objectionable,
unsubstantiated rationalism is unconvincing, and universal principles do
not reflect the concrete essence of things. In his appeal to Saunderson,
Holmes must take one major idea into consideration. The blind
man's thoughts, like everyone's ideas, are the reasoned product of his
sense experience. Given this dictate, Holmes has little leeway in his
strategy: to speak to Saunderson about God, he must limit his arguments
to concepts derived from and limited to the blind man's senses; to
persuade him of God's existence, he must speak to the blind man's
darkened point of view.

That Holmes must limit his appeal to Saunderson's intellectual
capacities and his particular vision of the universe obviously reduces the
efficacy and breadth of the Protestant minister's arguments. In an
extremely cogent reading of the relationship between the blind and seeing
in the Lettre, Jacques Chouillet writes that those who possess the same
senses share a «communauté de sensation», which, when combined
within an acquired «communauté de language», «donne lieu à des

14 This work never existed. In the Encyclopédie article « Aveugle » it is written that
«la prétendue histoire des derniers moments de Saunderson, imprimée en Anglois selon
l'auteur, est absolument supposée. Cette supposition que bien des erudits regardent
comme un crime de lèse-érudition, ne seroit qu'une plaisanterie, si l'objet n'en étoit pas
aussi sérieux » (ENC, I, 872).
commentaires également compris de l’un et de l’autre»\textsuperscript{15}. However, the *communauté de sensation* that exists for hearing, taste, tact, and smell between a blind man and a seeing person does not exist for the visual realm. In this case, according to Chouillet, the vocabulary specific to sight must be replaced by another sense’s lexicon, creating a metaphorization of sensory stimuli within language. Chouillet writes:

Les deux personnages devront opérer un effort de traduction pour que l’expérience visuelle, qui privilégie l’un des interlocuteurs aux dépens de l’autre, devienne un objet de conversation. Et comme la référence au code visuel est interdite à l’aveugle, il va bien falloir que, ou son interlocuteur ou lui-même, fasse glisser les significations d’un code dans l’autre, de façon à recouvrir de façon analogique la catégorie manquante: par exemple du code tactile au code visuel par l’intermédiaire de la parole (code auditif)\textsuperscript{16}.

In the *Lettre*, this translation of experience is used on several occasions. The *Aveugle du Puiseaux* and Saunderson both offer tactile explanations – such as how sight functions or how a mirror works – which effectively conjure visual information for their interlocutors. But if this inventive rendering of experience functions well in casual conversation for objects whose existence is not in question, the blind man’s missing sense, and his resulting *décalage* create an enormous barrier during a metaphysical discussion. In this case, the *communauté de langage*, which normally replaces the lacking sense information, fails. Metaphysical notions that are based essentially on a visual reading of the universe exist solely within language for the blind man; the linguistic concepts pertaining to the divinity have no corresponding essence for Saunderson. It is precisely in this context that Saunderson says to Holmes: « Si vous voulez que je croie en Dieu, il faut que vous me le fassiez toucher » (*Lettre*, DPV, IV, 48). Although this reasoning has been cited as among the most reductive and simplistic of sensationist arguments, Saunderson is simply asking Holmes to unite the universally recognized concept of the deity with a sensory stimulus he can understand\textsuperscript{17}.

\textsuperscript{15} Jacques Chouillet, *Diderot* (Paris, SEDES, 1977), 89.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 89.

\textsuperscript{17} Robert Niklaus writes that this is an « argument frappant, convaincant pour bien des esprits, mais absurde en soi. Il postule le sensualisme et ne peut venir que d’un incrédule. Il ne peut être pris au pied de la lettre. Il faut y voir surtout une première ébauche du matérialisme qu’il développe plus loin » (*Lettre sur les aveugles*, ed. R. Niklaus, [Geneva, Droz, 3\textsuperscript{e} éd., 1970], 98). Jacques Roger concurs: [cet argument] est... enfantin sur le plan métaphysique» (*Les Sciences de la vie dans le pensée française du XVIII\textsuperscript{e} siècle*, [Paris, Albin Michel, 1993], 591).
Despite the absurdity of this request, Saunderson’s desire to reconcile Holmes’s God with his circumscribed sensory understanding of the world delineates the sensationist boundaries of their discussion. Holmes’s rejoinder to such sensation-based skepticism is to praise goal-directedness in nature, by citing the intricacies and beauty of God’s work on earth. Yet these wonders – the order and beauty of creation to which Diderot refers in the *Essai sur le mérite et la vertu* and the *Pensées philosophiques* – are deduced for the most part from visual stimuli, and as such, do not translate for the blind man. The link between the stunning order of the universe and a divine creator is but a vain illusion for him:

Eh, Monsieur, lui disait le Philosophe aveugle, laissez-là tout ce beau spectacle qui n’a jamais été fait pour moi ! J’ai été condamné à passer ma vie dans les ténèbres, et vous me citez des prodiges que je n’entends point, et qui ne prouvent que pour vous et que pour ceux qui voient comme vous. (Lettre, DPV, IV, 48. My emphasis)

By reducing nature’s wonders to *prodiges*, Saunderson’s skepticism rejoins and pushes Pierre Bayle’s attack on superstition to its logical conclusion. It was with Bayle that terminology traditionally associated with metaphysical concepts such as *prodige* and *comète* was stripped of its supernatural connotations – explained away as paganism, ignorance, and invariably the result of, as the *Encyclopédie* article «Prodige» puts it: «la superstition des hommes effrayés à la vue des objets inconnus». In the *Lettre*, Saunderson implies that Holmes’s deism is just another example of superstition with its own set of *prodiges*. What was for Holmes an empirical reality – the undisputable wonders of creation – is reduced to a predisposition of humanity to see extraordinary, supernatural marvels wherever it looks.

In an earlier part of the *Lettre*, Diderot had already offered an aphorism on this subject to caution his reader: «un moyen presque sûr de se tromper en métaphysique, c’est de ne pas simplifier assez les objets dont on s’occupe» (DPV, IV, 32). This *mode d’emploi* for incompetent and fallacious metaphysical speculation – a biting criticism of man’s predisposition to find a higher significance in nature – is an implicit recommendation to invoke the philosophical principle known as

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18 In his *Pensées diverses sur la comète*, (1683), Pierre Bayle strikes out at the supposed metaphysical origin of unexplained phenomena including thunder without clouds, comets, etc.. For Bayle such occurrences have a physical explanation that is as-yet unexplained. See, for example, *Pensée* CXCIV which is entitled: «Qu’il n’y a point d’exemple, qui prouve que Dieu ait formé miraculeusement des prodiges pour la prétendue conversion de quelqu’un à l’Idolâtrie.»

19 *ENC*, XII, 422.
Ockham’s razor. If, according to this notion, a philosophical idea can exist without a given component, then this same component is superfluous, and the simpler explanation is preferable. This axiom later takes the form of a parable in Saunderson’s vision of Indian metaphysics:

Demandez à un Indien, pourquoi le monde reste suspendu dans les airs, il vous répondra qu’il est porté sur le dos d’un éléphant; et l’éléphant sur quoi l’appuiera-t-il? sur une tortue; et la tortue qui la soutiendra?... Cet Indien vous fait pitié: et l’on pourrait vous dire comme à lui: M. Holmes mon ami, confessez d’abord votre ignorance, et faites-moi grâce de l’éléphant et de la tortue. (ibid., 49)

Ignorance, far from justifying the existence of a divinity, should be a reason to content oneself with a less embellished, or material, explanation of the universe. Any metaphysical reading of natural phenomena is flawed, according to the geometrician, in that it affixes a needless concept to what is surely a simpler process. Nature itself is not prodigious in a metaphysical sense; it is man’s own reading of nature that supplies the wonder and the divine intent20.

To combat the geometrician’s rejection of deist belief in a general Providence, Holmes appeals to what we could call an extended Providence that includes Saunderson himself. Working within the blind man’s own sphere of knowledge (his tactile understanding of the world), Holmes incites Saunderson to “feel” God’s handiwork: “portez les mains sur vous-même, et vous rencontrerez la divinité dans le mécanisme admirable de vos organes” (Lettre, DPV, IV, 48). Although Saunderson concedes that the intricate functioning of the body escapes his comprehension, he again cites man’s readiness to attribute supernatural origins to all that he does not readily understand: si «[le mécanisme animal] vous étonne, c’est peut-être parce que vous êtes dans l’habitude de traiter de prodige, tout ce qui vous paraît au-dessus de vos forces» (ibid., 49). Yet Saunderson here goes far beyond a criticism of man’s tendency to produce supernatural explanations for unexplained phenomena. Within the dialogue, Holmes’s choice of Saunderson’s body as the a posteriori proof of God’s existence is inauspicious to say the least. By asking Saunderson to envision his corporeality as part of a world controlled by a benevolent and omnipotent God, Holmes invites Saunderson to turn his attention from a general cosmology to a biological

20 Compare with Diderot’s use of the term in Le Rêve de d’Alembert, where prodige reflects both the absence of spiritual causality as well as the wonder of his materialist view of the world: «Le prodige, c’est la vie, c’est la sensibilité, et ce prodige n’en est plus un...» (DPV, XVII, 131).
world. Suddenly (and it is from Holmes’s mouth, not Saunderson’s) God is responsible for the entirety of Creation\textsuperscript{21}.

This introduction of organic phenomena into his teleological argument has grave consequences for Holmes’s campaign against Saunderson’s atheism. Holmes inadvertently allows the century’s strongest argument for a divine order – the great mathematically-driven cosmologies of Newton and Leibniz – to become contaminated by the decidedly unmathematical eccentricities of organic life. This \textit{mise en parallèle} of the abstract perfection of geometry and the unpredictable reality of organic phenomena allows Saunderson to contrast his anomaly with the postulated flawlessness of a Newtonian-type universe:

... l’ordre n’est pas si parfait,... qu’il ne paraisse encore de temps en temps des productions monstrueuses. Puis se tournant en face du ministre, il ajouta, « voyez-moi bien, M. Holmes, je n’ai point d’yeux. Qu’avions-nous fait à Dieu, vous et moi, l’un pour avoir cet organe; l’autre pour en être privé?». (Lettre, DPV, IV, 51)

Saunderson’s exclamation against this order is generally seen as one of moral outrage: after all, what did he do to deserve his anomaly? Jean Mayer has summarized Saunderson’s predicament quite elegantly, calling him a « monstre passif, à la fois victime d’un destin et donnée d’expérience »\textsuperscript{22}. Similarly, Emita Hill writes that « Saunderson’s blindness not only conceals from him ‘le spectacle de la nature,’ it is an indication of the elements of disorder and capriciousness that Diderot apprehended in the universe »\textsuperscript{23}. The blind geometrician’s dilemma is indeed insufferable: for him, Newton’s mathematical world of perfection is untouchable and abstruse while the world open to him – the tactile and concrete world – remains unequivocally faulted\textsuperscript{24}. His outburst echoes

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{21} Aram Vartanian has shown that this extension of Providence to include the biological realm was discouraged by some, especially Maupertuis in his \textit{Essai de cosmologie} (1750). Vartanian writes: « The \textit{Essai de cosmologie} (as its title suggests) tried to reestablish a Newtonian system of creation, founded on the most universal and mathematical of grounds: Maupertuis’ principle of minimum action. Maupertuis, who was interested equally in saving the traditional teleology and in promoting the future of biological science, saw clearly the need to keep separate God’s purpose from the patterns of organic phenomena » (« From Deist to Atheist: Diderot’s Philosophical Orientation », \textit{Diderot Studies} I [1949], 57).


\textsuperscript{23} « The Role of ‘le monstre’ in Diderot’s Thought », \textit{Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century} 197 (1972), 178.

\textsuperscript{24} Compare with the blind \textit{croyant} of the \textit{Promenade du sceptique}, who is cast, unlike Saunderson, as naively oblivious to the disorder in the world. It should be noted that in this dialogue, the Marronnier cites philosophical blindness as proof that the blind man
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quite poignantly the profound irreconcilability of notions of cosmic meaning with the cruelty of an imperfect physical being.

While Saunderson’s seething remarks generally serve to underscore the inconsistencies of the deist worldview, his physiological delirium at this point in the text, coupled with his status as « monster », also signal a critical epistemological change in his worldview. As he lies dying, Saunderson evolves from an empiric – one who relies on practical and sensory experience – into a practitioner of speculative philosophy. Transcending not only his darkened point of view, but also the world of verifiable facts, Saunderson inserts himself into a nightmarish and godless chronicle of the universe. As living proof of another order, a disorder (?), in the present, Saunderson claims himself to be an indication of the chaos of the past. His version of the genesis, derivative of Lucretius’s *De natura rerum*, is rife with anomalies:

Imaginez donc, si vous voulez, que l’ordre qui vous frappe a toujours subsisté; mais laissez-moi croire qu’il n’en est rien; et que, si nous remontions à la naissance des choses et des temps, et que nous sentissions la matière se mouvoir et le chaos se débrouiller, nous rencontrerions une multitude d’être informes, pour quelques êtres bien organisés. (Lettre, DPV, IV, 50)

From the geometrician’s unique perspective, biological anarchy becomes the backdrop against which a smattering of ordered beings – and with them misleading taxonomies and classifications of normalcy – come into being. As Annie Ibrahim writes: «L’aveugle nous montre qu’il y a une fausse métaphysique, celle qui pose l’ordre de la Nature.» Indeed, Diderot’s use of Lucretius goes farther than simply to posit a creation with no creator; his evocation of unstable forms and a dynamic universe undermines categories of meaning whose very structure is designed to reflect an epistemology compatible with finalist thought. In short, the geometrician replaces divine intention – the *sine qua non* of finalist thought – with a view of blind mechanical contingencies:

... si le premier homme eût eu le larynx fermé, eût manqué d’aliments convenables, eût pêché par les parties de la génération, n’eût point rencontré sa compagne, ou se fût répandu dans une autre espèce, M. Holmes, que devenait le genre humain ? il eût été enveloppé dans la dépuration générale de l’univers.... (Lettre, DPV, IV, 50-51)

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is forsaken by his supposedly benevolent Prince (God): «On voit bien à ce trait [your lack of reason], dit en riant le marronnier, que ton père t’a déshérité» (DPV, II, 127).

The demonstrable order that exists now – the predictability and harmony within species – is but a mirage behind which hide millennia of monsters, lost species and mutations, all of which are subjected to what we could anachronistically call a disinterested natural selection.

In the Lettre, the concept of monstrosity permits a pervasive diffusion of the idea of biological chance across historical time. As spokesman for a dynamic vision of the universe where «le mouvement continue et continuera de combiner des amas de matière, jusqu’à ce qu’ils aient obtenu quelque arrangement dans lequel ils puissent persévérer», Saunderson is able to debunk the immutability of the past by citing the imperfection of the present (ibid., 51). One of the consequences of this injection of contingency over time is the corruption of humankind’s relationship with the cosmos. With the destruction of the continuity and the fixity of species comes an unfolding universe that denies humankind any significance, and rebukes any attempt at rational understanding.

Qu’est-ce que ce monde, M. Holmes? un composé sujet à des révolutions qui toutes indiquent une tendance continue à la destruction; une succession rapide d’êtres qui s’entre-suivent, se poussent et disparaissent; une symétrie passagère; un ordre momentané. Je vous reprochais tout à l’heure d’estimer la perfection des choses par votre capacité; et je pourrais vous accuser ici d’en mesurer la durée sur celle de vos jours. Vous jugez de l’existence successive du monde, comme la mouche éphémère, de la vôtre. (ibid., 52)

Saunderson paints a bleak vision of the cosmos which denies humankind’s consciousness of itself any meaning above and beyond its materiality and its limited duration over time. To a large degree, Saunderson’s worldview hints at Diderot’s later (and more didactic) presentation of the human species as an ephemeral strain within a continuum of possible forms.

THE MONSTROSITY OF THE BLIND

That physical anomaly plays a preponderant role within the Lettre has been noted by almost every critic who has written on the text. But only Marie-Hélène Chabut has gone so far as to affirm that the fundamental disorder associated with monstrosity echoes a purposefully chaotic text structure, an esthétique de l’écart. According to Chabut, Diderot follows a discursive strategy that, contrary to a monological discourse, seeks to «attirer notre attention sur la différence, les écarts, plutôt que sur l’unité
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d’une pensée dogmatique»26. Pointing to the pact uniting Diderot’s digression-prone narrator with his destinataire: («Et toujours des écarts, me direz-vous. Oui, madame, c’est la condition de notre traité »)27, Chabut argues that the polysemous status of the word écart as both deviation (as in écart de la nature) and digression reflects the Lettre’s genius of ambiguity. This comparison of monstrosity’s chaotic essence to the admittedly elusive and enigmatic nature of the Lettre raises an important question: how does the question of monstrosity relate to the rest of this text? Is Saunderson’s monster-inspired refutation of God more than simply an emotional protest against the wonders of creation upon which deist belief is based? Is the conceptual and philosophical obscurity of the monster an emblem of the text itself? While the link between the poetics of textual digression, Saunderson’s delirium, and the appearance of monstrosity in the Lettre cannot be denied, the analogy between the chaos of the monster and the overall ambivalence or disorder of the text merits discussion. First and foremost, Saunderson’s monstrosity, despite its conceptual ambiguity, is very much unlike the Lucretian monsters found in the text itself. Unlike the formless and aimless creatures in De rerum natura, the textual creation of the blind geometrician is more teratogenetic in nature since Diderot produces this monster with a particular intent in mind. Saunderson’s monstrosity, his blindness, is carefully crafted in order to deliver a stinging message to Diderot’s public: the conceptual ‘orders’ on which we base our notions of humankind are both « imperfect » and « temporary »28. Indeed, by identifying our faculties as limited, faulty, and prone to error, Diderot, through Saunderson, identifies all of humanity as Réaumur-like, that is to say, myopic and malheureux manouvriers d’expériences.

Nonetheless, Diderot’s textual staging of such a « skeptical » blind man might lead one to believe that the Lettre’s primary goal is to cast doubt on the possibility of asserting universal truths. After all, in the Lettre various systems of reasoned order (transcendental, physical, moral, and esthetic) collapse as they are filtered through Saunderson’s conception of the universe. In the closing paragraph of his letter, Diderot himself seemingly underlines the impossibility of arriving at truth as well, by invoking Montaigne: « Madame, quand on a mis les connaissances humaines dans la balance de Montagne [sic], on n’est pas éloigné de prendre sa devise. Car que savons-nous? » (Lettre, DPV, IV, 72). The ambiguity of such a

27 Diderot, Lettre DPV, IV, 66. My emphasis.
skeptical end to the *Lettre* raises numerous questions about the text in general, especially regarding Saunderson’s dogmatic rejection of God. At least epistemologically, the possibility of spiritual causality is, to a certain degree, reinstated when Diderot cites humanity’s profound ignorance. And yet, this «que sais-je?» is palpably disingenuous. This becomes clear when we recall that the sensationist epistemology developed during the discussions of the blind is designed not to profess ignorance, but to affirm the bankruptcy of metaphysical views of the universe. While the *Lettre* draws freely from Locke’s empiricism and Condillac’s sensationism to deny the validity of *a priori* metaphysics, the text carries with it the explicit and categorical rejection of the existence of any being outside the bounds of the physical world, an assertion that cannot be made given the boundaries of our knowledge. As such, it can be argued that the sensationist framework in the *Lettre* moves past its implicit skeptical boundaries and into the realm of ideological materialism. Further proof for such an assertion may be found in Diderot’s dialectical treatment of blindness—a treatment that simultaneously rationalizes and renders monstrous such a deficiency. As we have seen, Diderot’s text initially serves to normalize the *Aveugle du Puiseaux* and Saunderson; by portraying the blind as irregular, but not categorically abnormal, Diderot strips the unseeing of any metaphysical or transcendental significance; they have become «simple variant[s] in the orderly interplay of familiar norms»29. And yet, while Saunderson’s relativistic assessment of his own life mocks those people who would find him exceptional, he himself identifies his congenital anomaly as conceptually other, as an irreducible physical monstrosity. Indeed, Saunderson qualifies himself as *imparfait* in the same way that an armless or legless fetus is seen as astonishingly defective. Contradicting the very foundation of his own materialist worldview—a world-view where, as Diderot writes in the *Encyclopédie*, nothing can be «imparfait... pas même les monstres»30—Saunderson reinstates the *a-nomos* element of physical monstrosity, its *a-normative*, and transgressive essence as an irregularity on a transcendental level.

The significance of this contradictory treatment of blindness cannot be overstated. Given the materialist parameters of the *Lettre*, it is only in Saunderson’s dying mind that the material reality of a physical anomaly can clash with—and invalidate—God’s supposed benevolence. Diderot’s genius is creating a textual world where Saunderson can react viscerally to a notion—blindness—that has been fully normalized elsewhere in the

30 ENC, VIII, 584.
text. Indeed, within the impassioned diatribe of the dying blind man, the notion of physical monstrosity seems to recapture its traditional ability to surprise, to provoke amazement, to étonner. And yet, Diderot's precise intention in evoking monstrosity may more closely approximate étonner's latin root, extonare, which is to stun, to leave the observer in a stupor. This is, after all, the real aim of the Lettre: to shock the reader into confronting the shortcomings of finalist principles relying on a sensationist-empiricist epistemology. While monstrosity in the Lettre is obviously not a manifestation of divine wrath, not an omen or portent, Diderot's blind monster retains a second vestigial element from its traditional lexicon. In the Lettre, the monster is sign, mark, or clue: an early signal of the most dispiriting and bleak implications of so-called Enlightenment method.

Wesleyan University