

Useful Lies: The Limits of Enlightening the Common Man. Frederick the Great and Franco- German Cultural Transfer

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This article asks if the role of the Enlightenment philosopher was, as understood by contemporaries, to work against elites, or to underpin them. Concentrating particularly on the arch-elitist Frederick the Great and his court philosophers, we will track the notion of the elite and their position as holders of truth and enlighteners. The central tenet of the debate will concern the notion of lying to the masses and the utility of truth. It will be shown that advocacy of absolute truth was rare and often dissimulated by philosophers keen to avoid censure. This dividing line will be used to show the cultural transfer of Francophone debates to the German intellectual sphere.

The connotation of the concept of ‘elite’ is determined by the context in which it is used. In current usage, talk of ‘elitism’ or ‘political elites’ instantly brings forward notions of unearned privilege and inequality. However, an ‘elite athlete’ or an ‘elite soldier’ connotes exceptional talent and merited success. What lies at the crux of this dichotomy is perhaps equality of opportunity. In the Enlightenment era, talk of equal opportunities was rare. Elitism did not carry its modern negative connotation. Yet the notions of the masses and the people certainly did. The people always exist in a binary relationship with ‘leaders’. But what about equality? Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie* defined ‘natural equality’ as:

that which is found among all men solely by the constitution of their nature. This equality is the principle and foundation of liberty . . . Since human nature is the same in all men, it is clear that according to

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natural law everyone must value and treat other people as any other beings who are naturally equal to himself, that is to say, as men like himself.¹

This definition represents the traditional natural law conception of all men sharing an essentially equal constitution and a consequent duty of care. Political elites did not widely share this idealistic view of the masses as peers, and, as we will see, state paternalism was a useful notion behind which tyrannical elites could hide. If natural equality could be acknowledged, social equality certainly could not. The notion of elitism is a useful dividing line then, which can be applied to gauge the extent to which we can consider a philosopher's political outlook to transcend the hierarchical social orders of the absolutism of their age. Of course, the fraught relationship between the so-called elites and the masses was not a new phenomenon. Horace's infamous *odi profanum vulgus et arceo* (I hate the rabble and keep them away) shows the conflict is perennial. Our study is therefore limited to the eighteenth century.

In this essay, we will consider whether certain eighteenth-century philosophers viewed the 'project' of the Enlightenment as an opportunity for all, or whether they considered that the advances of philosophy and science should be restricted to an elite. To do this, we will focus on the French *philosophes* and the court of Frederick II, King of Prussia.

Recent scholarship of the Enlightenment has been dominated by Jonathan Israel's project of defining the 'Radical Enlightenment'.² However, the precise characteristics of what constitutes radicalism can sometimes be more transient than one might wish. One dividing line could be seen in the utility of lies, or the absolute necessity of truth. As one indicative source on the issue, we can usefully consult the *Encyclopédie* article 'Lies', written by Jaucourt, which states that there is a distinction to be made between lying and speaking falsehoods, between 'lying' and 'uttering a falsehood':

Lying is a dishonest and condemnable act, but we can utter a casual falsehood; we can utter one which is permissible, praiseworthy, and even necessary. Consequently, a falsehood that the circumstances render as such, must not be confounded with a lie, which reveals a weak soul or a vicious character. We must not therefore accuse of lying those who use ingenious fictions or fables in order to teach, to protect the innocence of someone, to calm an enraged person ready to hurt us, or to help a sick person accept

¹ Diderot & d'Alembert 1969, I, 1100. Art. 'Égalité naturelle'. Original: "Celle qui est entre tous les hommes par la constitution de leur nature seulement. Cette égalité est le principe & le fondement de la liberté . . . Puisque la nature humaine se trouve la même dans tous les hommes, il est clair que selon le droit naturel, chacun doit estimer & traiter les autres comme autant d'êtres qui lui sont naturellement égaux, c'est-à-dire qui sont hommes aussi bien que lui." All translations are my own.

² Israel 2002; Israel 2006; Israel 2011.

treatment, or to hide state secrets which must not be revealed to the enemy, or any similar cases where legitimate and entirely innocent use can be obtained for ourselves or others.³

Eighteenth-century discourse thus distinguished between lying and a fiction designed to teach, protect innocence or avoid conflict. There existed a defence of falsehoods when they are meant well and will procure legitimate and entirely innocent utility.⁴ The question we will consider here, then, is what constituted utility, and who controlled the politics of knowledge.

This essay is not an answer to the question of how the *philosophes*, a diverse agglomeration of thinkers in any case, envisioned education of the masses, a task which has been done elsewhere.⁵ Neither is it a retelling of the responses to the question posed by the Berlin *Académie's* essay competition, "Is it useful to mislead the people?"⁶ Instead, we will consider the issue of the perceptions of the political and philosophical elite attitudes towards the 'people', with a focus on Frederick the Great, King of Prussia, and his philosophical interactions with the French *philosophes*. The paternalism of government, then, and its use of lies towards the governed are the subject of our analysis. Given the range of relations various *philosophes* held with this so-called Enlightened Despot, it is the constellation around the monarch upon which we will focus our study. In the *Encyclopédie*, the very notion of philosophe is defined as being a part of the world, and not a separate entity. Du Marsais even evokes the utilitarian aspect of the philosopher: "Our philosopher does not feel exiled in this world or believe he is in enemy territory . . . he wants to enjoy himself with others . . . , he is an honest man who aims to please and make himself useful."⁷

Were the *philosophes* democratic? Elitist? Egalitarian? Was their aim to spread the 'Enlightenment's ideals', in the broadest sense of the term? Or were they contemptuous of the uneducated masses? Of course, when we ask questions like these, the notion of taking different thinkers as a homogenous group of programmatic *philosophes* disintegrates. The differing

3 Diderot & d'Alembert 1969, III, 845. Art. 'mensonge'. Original: "Mentir est une action deshonnête & condamnable, mais on peut dire une fausseté indifférente; on en peut dire une qui soit permise, louable & même nécessaire: par conséquent une fausseté que les circonstances rendent telle, ne doit pas être confondue avec le mensonge, qui décele une ame foible, ou un caractere vicieux. Il ne faut donc point accuser de mensonge, ceux qui emploient des fictions ou des fables ingénieuses pour l'instruction, & pour mettre à couvert l'innocence de quelqu'un, comme aussi pour appaiser une personne furieuse, prête à nous blesser: pour faire prendre quelques remedes utiles à un malade; pour cacher les secrets de l'état, dont il importe de dérober la connoissance à l'ennemi, & autres cas semblables, dans lesquels on peut se procurer à soi-même, ou procurer aux autres une utilité légitime & entierement innocente."

4 Such a falsehood would be known as a 'mensonge officieux'.

5 Payne 1976.

6 Krauss 1966. Original: "Est-il utile de tromper le peuple?"

7 Diderot & d'Alembert 1969, II, 1368. Art. 'philosophe'. Original: "Notre philosophe ne se croit pas en exil dans ce monde; il ne croit pas être en pays ennemi . . . il veut trouver du plaisir avec les autres . . . c'est un honnête homme qui veut plaire et se rendre utile."

opinions mean we cannot ask such a leading question, and must concentrate on particular cases, so as not to impugn an entire category of thinkers.

A preliminary word about literacy and reading habits is also necessary. Although literacy figures for the past will always be estimates, it has been stated that in 1700, only 5% of the population of the German territories was literate (80,000–85,000). This situation did change through the course of the eighteenth century, however, and the same study estimates that 350,000–500,000 Germans could read in 1800 – though definitions of ‘literate’ vary widely. Ruppert estimates that by 1800, the literacy rate had risen to 30% of the population.⁸ There has been considerable academic focus on the growth of reading in Germany in the Enlightenment era. Catering initially to a very restricted number of literate people, the book trade grew massively throughout the century, with exponential growth from the 1760s onwards. Despite the initial low literacy rates, there are many other factors which point to an increasing engagement with philosophical works. The spread of reading and books manifested itself in Germany in the rapid expansion of reading societies, known as *Lesegesellschaften*. By the end of the eighteenth century, there were more than 400 such groups in Germany.⁹ These functioned on the principle that their members bought material collectively thereby giving them access to material which would otherwise have been restricted to wealthy private libraries. Thus when considering philosophers’ claims about the reading habits of the masses, we must keep this context in mind.

In the first part of this essay, we will examine the evolution of Frederick the Great’s attitude towards ‘lying’ to the masses, and specifically how this determined his relationship with La Mettrie, the French exile to whom he offered asylum in Prussia. We will then consider Frederick’s particular reaction to d’Holbach’s *Essai sur les Préjugés* (1770) before offering an analysis of how this context shaped the Berlin *Académie*’s 1780 essay competition question, “Est-il utile de tromper le peuple?” Finally, this series of Francophone debates will be considered in terms of its impact on German debates of the role of Enlightenment and the autonomy of the individual in relation to elites. We will analyse two very different German-language philosophers – Immanuel Kant and Heinrich Friedrich Diez – to show that French-language reflections on the questions of elitism and concealing knowledge had echoes beyond linguistic borders.

Frederick’s own position on elitism and paternalism changed radically during his lifetime. In 1740, the then Prince anonymously penned his French *Anti-Machiavel ou Examen du Prince de Machiavel*, shortly prior to acceding to the throne that year. The work also owes a great debt to Voltaire, who

⁸ Ruppert 1980, 342.

⁹ Müller 2002, 19.

edited the text.¹⁰ Indeed, Frederick's interest in Machiavelli was triggered by Voltaire's glowing reference to the Italian in *Siècle de Louis XIV*, to which the future monarch objected. Machiavelli was thus the subject of correspondence between the two, with Voltaire encouraging the prince to write his refutation, which, because of the mounting pressures on Frederick due to his father's illness, was entrusted to Voltaire in the final stages of production, for light editing and the printing process. Frederick's negative opinion of Machiavelli was undoubtedly informed by Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, which described the maxims of Machiavelli as "très mauvaises".

Frederick thus repeats this condemnation of Machiavellianism and propounds honesty and transparency as the route to virtue. The book is introduced with clear intentions: "I dare to defend humanity against this monster who wants to destroy it, I dare to oppose reason and justice against sophistry and crime . . . I have always seen Machiavelli's *Prince* as one of the most dangerous works."¹¹ Frederick maintained his belief in the importance of absolute monarchy, but on the condition that the monarch be benevolent and thus help the people:

How deplorable is the people's condition when they have everything to fear from the abuse of sovereign power and their needs are prey to the avarice of the prince, their freedom to his caprice, their peace to his ambition, their security to his perfidy, and their life to his cruelties?¹²

Frederick thus accepts that the fate of the masses lies at the whim of monarchs, and by extrapolation, an elite. However, this seems acceptable, because, in his view, the monarch is benevolent, and strives for virtue.

He then establishes his position that honesty must trump Machiavellian plotting:

Artifice and dissimulation, therefore, will live in vain on this prince's lips. In his words and actions, ruse will be useless: men are not judged on their word – we would always be deceived – but we

¹⁰ [Frederick II, King of Prussia] 1996 (London, 1741). The work also appears in the Complete Works of Voltaire, which is the edition we will cite from in the following analysis.

¹¹ Frederick 1996, 115. Original: "J'ose prendre la défense de l'humanité contre ce monstre qui veut la détruire, j'ose opposer la raison et la justice au sophisme et au crime . . . J'ai toujours regardé le Prince de Machiavel comme un des ouvrages les plus dangereux."

¹² Frederick 1996, 116. Original: "combien n'est point déplorable la situation des peuples lorsqu'ils ont tout à craindre de l'abus du pouvoir souverain lorsque leurs besoins sont en proie à l'avarice du prince, leur liberté à ses caprices, leur repos à son ambition, leur sûreté à sa perfidie, et leur vie à ses cruautés?"

compare all their actions, and then their actions to their words. Falsity and dissimulation cannot stand up to such persistent cross-examination.¹³

Frederick thus adopted the position whereby ruse and artifice would always be revealed as such by an examination of a man's deeds. Thus lying apparently serves no purpose. However, Frederick is not, even at this early point of his life, a naïve believer in truth above everything. Indeed it has been suggested that whilst he was writing the text, his position began to evolve as he came to discuss foreign policy. Frederick's invasion of Silesia and the Treaty of Breslau of 1742 were denounced as Machiavellian across Europe.¹⁴ The later chapters of *Anti-Machiavel* are characterised by increasing concessions to Machiavelli, as Bahner and Bergmann describe in their introduction.¹⁵ Indeed, if the people of Prussia were given this text as a political manifesto in a democracy in the 1770s, Frederick would have been hoisted by his own petard.

Frederick's confusion comes to the fore when he begins to accept certain Machiavellian positions, particularly concerning warfare. Keen to expand a just war theory, he defends the opinion that: "There are pre-emptive wars, which Princes are wise to engage in. They are offensive to truth, but no less just."¹⁶ Reasoning that more bloodshed can be averted by a pre-emptive war, 'truth' can be trodden on for utilitarian reasons. This explanation seems to be echoed in the argument for the *mensonge officieux* that Jaucourt would later outline in his *Encyclopédie* article on 'Lies'.

We thus have a rather idealistic and confused notion of the acceptability of elite lying. In any case, what becomes clear when Frederick's 'virtue' is put to the test by other philosophical ideas advanced by French writers is that the very position of the elite is challenged. That the proper functioning of a nation led by a monarch who ruled by divine right depended on the contingency of a kind and caring prince surely invalidated its premise. What was needed, certain *philosophes* argued, was more autonomy for and participation of the people, aided by a greater understanding of the issues, and more freedom of expression and thought. Self-autonomy in thought would naturally raise doubt about the future of those merely born into privilege, as evidenced by Frederick's reactions to the way the *philosophes* subtly undermined the authority of divine right, absolute monarchy.

13 Frederick 1996, 195–6. Original: "L'artifice donc et la dissimulation habiteront en vain sur les lèvres de ce prince, la ruse dans ses discours et dans ses actions lui sera inutile: on ne juge pas les hommes sur leur parole, ce serait le moyen de se tromper toujours; mais on compare leurs actions ensemble, et puis leurs actions et leurs discours: c'est contre cet examen réitéré que la fausseté et la dissimulation ne pourront rien jamais."

14 Pollitzer 1966, 58.

15 Frederick 1996, 33.

16 Frederick 1996, 329. Original: "Il y a des guerres de précaution, que les Princes font sagement d'entreprendre. Elles sont offensives à la vérité, mais elles n'en sont pas moins justes."

Frederick's flirtation with radicalism was always seen as an elite activity, which makes his occasional autocratic edicts on censorship all the more difficult to understand. On the 11 May 1749, the Prussian monarch issued the *Edict, wegen der wieder hergestellten Censur, derer Bücher und Schrifften, wie auch wegen des Debts ärgerlicher Bücher, so ausserhalb Landes verleget werden*.¹⁷ This established a system of censorship for Prussia separate from the apparatus of the Frankfurt-based Imperial Book Commission, ostensibly aimed at stopping the flow of 'scandaleuse Schrifften' apparently infiltrating Prussia.¹⁸

One of the principal victims of this move, and indeed perhaps the principal reason for it, was the French doctor and philosopher Julien Offray de la Mettrie (1709–1751). La Mettrie had fled France after the publication of his *Histoire naturelle de l'âme* (1745), which was immediately confiscated and burnt following an *Arrêt by the Parlement* of July 7, 1746.¹⁹ In turn, he was forced to flee Holland after the publication of his *Homme machine* in 1747. The fact that La Mettrie was forced to flee from Holland speaks volumes, given the generally high levels of toleration for which the country was renowned. After the intervention of Elie Luzac and Maupertuis, a compatriot already settled in Berlin, La Mettrie was afforded refuge in Berlin by Frederick II, who offered him the position of *lecteur* to the King. He was thus able to continue writing and publishing philosophical works. Their relationship, however, was strained and underlined the limits of Frederick's views on Enlightenment.²⁰

It was La Mettrie's *Discours sur le bonheur* (1748) which really outraged Frederick.²¹ This text was uncompromising in its hedonism and its permissive morality. The anti-authoritarianism was anathema to Frederick's commitment to the divine right of kings. To follow the precepts of La Mettrie's thought would liberate the masses from the constraints of authoritative, despotic government and elite power structures.

This links in with our current concern with elites and eighteenth-century philosophy in that La Mettrie was obliged to write a new *Discours Préliminaire* to his collected *Oeuvres*.²² This prefatory text contains many clues as to La Mettrie's genuine thinking on the politics of knowledge.

17 The *Edict* can be viewed at <<http://digitale.bibliothek.uni-halle.de/vd18/content/titleinfo/5836863>>. References to online sources are accurate as of 24 March 2014. Writings published by universities or the Berlin *Académie* were exempt from censorship.

18 It is noteworthy that the *Edict* uses this terminology of 'scandaleuse', derived from the French, which denotes a link between the concept of scandalous writings and French origins.

19 Negroni 1995, 322, n. 292.

20 For more details on this strained relationship and the potential links to La Mettrie's early death, see Pénißon 2006.

21 See La Mettrie 1975 for the critical edition, edited by John Falvey, who suggests that this text led to Frederick's censorship edict.

22 See Thomson 1981 for the critical edition of the *Discours Préliminaire*.

Here, the provocative Frenchman was writing in order to justify his lifetime's work and to gain official permission for the work to be published. The context in which he composed this work, by extension, could be seen to be conditions of persecution in the 'Straussian' sense, and thus allow for a hermeneutical approach for reading between the lines.²³ This model of interpretation considers the true ideas that are to be expressed behind the forms of expression that are acceptable to a reigning authority. If expressed without inhibitions, such ideas would have been subject to censure. That is to say that La Mettrie is here forced to dissimulate his true views, and justify the role of the philosopher in society. He had recently come to realise that Frederick would not tolerate views which put his authority and the position of absolute monarchy at risk. Thus La Mettrie adapted his discourse to align with the dominant perceptions of elites and masses. It is from this context that we can analyse these writings, which seek approval and the stamp of authority.

In relation to the people, La Mettrie wrote in his *Ouvrage de Pénélope ou Machiavel en médecine*, published under the pseudonym of Aletheius Demetrius, that "all nations are monstrous composites which resemble each other . . . Isn't the people everywhere stupid and imbecilic, a slave to opinions and prejudices, isn't it the world over a kind of Hydra with a hundred and one thousand crazy, empty and light heads?"²⁴ There is no mistaking a certain level of contempt for non-elites here – they are described as stupid and enslaved by prejudice. Yet by terming them slaves, there are, by extrapolation, slave-masters. Is this a critique of the power of elites, or an embrace of a 'natural' situation, presaging later Nietzschean perspectives in philosophy? Even the metaphor of the endless heads of the hydra, as well as connoting threat, also permits us to view La Mettrie's philosophy as a mission. He is perhaps the knight wishing to continue chopping off these heads to enlighten the people. In his most famous work, *L'Homme Machine* (1747), written prior to Frederick's censure, he writes that the task of the philosopher is to proclaim and diffuse the truth they have found: "It is not enough for the wise man to study nature and truth, he must dare to speak the truth in favour of the small number of those who want to and are able to think; because for the others who are willingly slaves to prejudice, it is no more possible for them to attain truth than for frogs to fly."²⁵ This is perhaps an allusion to the philosopher-king. For whilst

²³ Cf. Strauss 1952.

²⁴ La Mettrie 1750, 315. Original: "Toutes les nations sont des composés monstrueux qui se ressemblent . . . le peuple n'est-il pas partout sot, imbécile, esclave de ses opinions et de ses préjugés? n'est-il pas dans toute la terre une espèce d'Hydre, à cent mille et mille têtes folles, vuides et légères?"

²⁵ La Mettrie 1987, 63. Original: "Il ne suffit pas à un sage d'étudier la nature et la vérité; il doit oser la dire en faveur du petit nombre de ceux qui veulent et peuvent penser; car pour les autres, qui sont volontairement esclaves des préjugés, il ne leur est pas plus possible d'atteindre la vérité, qu'aux grenouilles de voler."

La Mettrie's metaphor is perhaps insulting, the verb 'attain' does not mean that the masses should not be *offered* the truth.

Other later remarks by La Mettrie would not perhaps allow us to maintain such an interpretation, if it were not for the fact that our interpretation must take account of the restraints on the author. It is possible to isolate quotations from their context and misread La Mettrie. The following is drawn from the *Discours préliminaire*: "The people do not live with the philosophers. People do not read philosophical books. If, by chance, one should fall into their hands, they will either not understand anything, or will not believe a word."²⁶ Here, La Mettrie claims that the people do not read books and cannot understand them. This offers philosophers immunity – for they can carry on writing, given that philosophy, La Mettrie claims, has no impact on society – and certainly holds no danger for political elites – for the masses are incapable of instruction. It disguises the radical potential of the philosopher to enlighten the masses. For Frederick, it is reassuringly contemptuous of the masses, underlined by a later passage which emphasises the stupidity of the people who will not even believe what they are told by philosophers: "Materialists can prove all they like that man is only a machine, the people will never believe any of it."²⁷

Taken out of context, such partial and tendentious statements as these offend our modern 'democratic' sentiments. However, we must view these statements historically. There are two crucial aspects of the context that we need to take into consideration in order to avoid thinking of La Mettrie as an unreconstructed elitist. Firstly, in the age we are studying, a statement about the lack of readers for philosophical works would be perfectly correct, as outlined above. Thus La Mettrie can claim that the masses did not read, even though this was changing rapidly and books were increasingly entering wider society. In any case, La Mettrie is perhaps not being honest in his appraisal of European literacy. His statements elsewhere about the courage of philosophers provide insight into his view of the role of a philosopher as a beacon of knowledge which would allow society to reduce harm and increase pleasure. Indeed, his interest in being published was to be read, and to effect change.

It is antithetical to see La Mettrie as contemptuous of reading or the masses. La Mettrie's claim that the people do not read is to be seen as a disingenuous plea for freedom from censorship. He does not seriously see philosophy as harmless to existing orders. It was, after all, the printed

²⁶ La Mettrie 1987, 24. Original: "Le peuple ne vit point avec les philosophes. Il ne lit point de Livres philosophiques. Si par hasard il en tombe un entre les mains, ou il n'y comprend rien, ou il n'en croit pas un mot."

²⁷ La Mettrie 1987, 20. Original: "les matérialistes ont beau prouver que l'homme n'est qu'une machine, le peuple n'en croira jamais rien."

word, in the form of the Bible, which kept the masses in order, and thus other forms of printed matter would surely be capable of ending this order.

The provenance of the *Discours préliminaire* only underlines this Straussian reading. La Mettrie had originally planned that his *Discours sur le Bonheur* would be the first text of his completed works, the *Oeuvres philosophiques*, which had been commissioned by Frederick. However, the monarch rejected the *Discours sur le Bonheur*, and so La Mettrie was forced to write a new work to introduce the volume. He used the occasion to write a defence of philosophy. Thus he claims that philosophy cannot change things, and that the *esprits forts* are simply an elite, who live completely separately from the masses, and have no intention of attempting to enlighten the uneducated. They are, in Voltaire's terms, the "athées de cabinet", or closet atheists.²⁸ La Mettrie would have his reader believe that philosophy can affect no change in society. In the *Système d'Epicure* he even states that "Philosophy is only a science of nice words."²⁹

Yet all this can be seen as a strategy by La Mettrie to plea for the constraints of censorship to be relaxed. His real intention is to spread materialism and for the elites to share knowledge with the masses. By claiming that elite philosophy is not for the masses, he stakes a claim for freedom for writers:

Thus all our writings are mere fairy tales for the masses, frivolous reasoning for those unprepared to receive the germination; for those who are ready, our hypotheses are equally without danger. . . . But what, couldn't the common man be seduced after all by some philosophical glimmers, easily glimpsed in the torrent of enlightenment that the philosophy of the day seemingly pours forth.³⁰

La Mettrie's pessimism belies a desire for enlightenment to spread further, as illustrated by this quotation from the *Ouvrage de Pénélope ou Machiavel en médecine*: "It is all too rare to be doubly famous, that is to say among savants and among the people."³¹

La Mettrie uses the *Discours préliminaire*, addressed to Frederick, to conform to the distinction between a philosophical sphere and a public, social sphere:

²⁸ Voltaire 2011, 162.

²⁹ La Mettrie 1987, 368 (§XLII). Original: "la Philosophie n'est de même qu'une Science de belles paroles."

³⁰ La Mettrie 1987, 20. Original: "Ainsi chansons pour la multitude, que tous nos écrits: raisonnements frivoles, pour qui n'est point préparé à en recevoir le germe; pour ceux qui le sont, nos hypothèses sont également sans danger . . . Mais quoi, les hommes vulgaires ne pourraient-ils être enfin séduits par quelques lueurs philosophiques, faciles à entrevoir dans ce torrent de lumières, que la philosophie semble aujourd'hui verser à pleines mains?"

³¹ La Mettrie 1750, 352. Original: "Il est trop rare d'être doublement célèbre, c'est-à-dire parmi les savants et parmi le peuple."

I do not speak in society of all those high philosophical truths, which are not made for the masses. If one dishonours a great remedy by giving it to a patient beyond hope, one prostitutes the august science of things by discussing it with those uninitiated with its mysteries, those who have eyes but do not see and have ears but do not hear.³²

In the *Discours préliminaire*, La Mettrie is thus arguing, disingenuously, that philosophy is a discipline reserved for elite minds, and not applicable to the practice of life. To drive home this point, La Mettrie uses the analogy of mathematics to ask what difference any philosophical findings make:

I think I have proved that remorse is a prejudice born of education and that man is a machine governed imperiously by an absolute fatalism. Perhaps I am mistaken, I want to believe so, but supposing that, as I sincerely believe, it is philosophically true. Why does it matter? All of these questions can be classed as the mathematical point, which only exists in the heads of mathematicians, and other problems of geometry and algebra for which the clear and ideal solution shows the force of the human mind.³³

That achievements in mathematics are said to be demonstrative of the strength of the human mind is an indication of the importance of philosophy too. That there is no application in everyday life for mathematics is a further clue as to La Mettrie's sentiments. If men were to believe that man was a machine and believe the world to be governed by fatalism, there are obvious consequences for the existing organisation of society. To deny this is clearly a smokescreen. This divide between theory and practice, and between philosophers and the masses, is the central tenet of the *Discours préliminaire*. Indeed the distinction is expressed clearly for La Mettrie's protector – Frederick – as the divide between philosophy and politics: “philosophy, desirous only of truth, tranquil contemplator of the beauties of nature, incapable of temerity or usurpation, has never encroached on the rights of politics.”³⁴ It is crucial to note that La Mettrie here makes clear he does not want to

32 La Mettrie 1987, 33. Original: “Je ne parle point dans la société de toutes ces hautes vérités philosophiques, qui ne sont point faites pour la multitude. Si c'est déshonorer un grand remède, que de le donner à un malade absolument sans ressource, c'est prostituer l'auguste science des choses, que de s'en entretenir avec ceux qui n'étant point initiés dans ses mystères, ont des yeux sans voir, et des oreilles sans entendre.”

33 La Mettrie 1987, 21. Original: “J'ai cru prouver que les remords font des préjugés de l'éducation, & que l'homme est une machine qu'un fatalisme absolu gouverne impérieusement: j'ai pu me tromper, je veux le croire: mais supposé, comme je pense sincèrement, que cela soit philosophiquement vrai, qu'importe? Toutes ces questions peuvent être mises dans la classe du point mathématique, qui n'existe que dans la tête des géomètres, & de tant de problèmes de géométrie & d'algebre, dont la solution claire & idéale montre toute la force de l'esprit humain.”

34 La Mettrie 1987, 16. Original: “la philosophie, amoureuse de la seule vérité, tranquille contemplatrice des beautés de la nature, incapable de témérité & d'usurpation, n'a jamais empiété sur les droits de la politique.”

usurp the monarch's absolute power and that philosophers are "far from wishing, as is commonly imagined, to destroy everything."³⁵

Thus La Mettrie's seemingly dismissive attitude to the possibility of educating the masses must be understood, given its context, to be nothing of the sort. This explicit reference to the 'danger' of philosophical writings is a disingenuous claim about the impotence of philosophy: "Let us not, therefore, fear that the mind of the people will never model itself on that of the philosophers, too far out of its reach."³⁶ His strategy becomes crystal clear with his invocation to the censor, namely, Frederick: "Let us be free on our writings."³⁷

La Mettrie's death in November 1751, in Berlin, prevented the further disintegration of his relationship with Frederick. Five years later, Frederick's main philosophical interlocutor, Voltaire, wrote on the subject of lying to the people in *Jusqu'à quel point doit on tromper le peuple* (1756). It was here that Voltaire gave his reflections on the question "to what degree the people, that is to say nine out of ten humans, must be treated like monkeys".³⁸ This short text recounts a string of historical superstitions which have been overcome and is in truth too cryptic to be of much use in determining Voltaire's true feelings regarding the question he had set himself.

Fortunately, it is a question Voltaire discussed elsewhere throughout his career. Chapter XX of Voltaire's *Traité sur la Tolérance* (1763), a work with a very specific intention following the Calas affair, examines whether "it is useful to maintain the people in superstition".³⁹ Even here, writing within the context of a Protestant having been wrongly sentenced to death for the murder of his own son – a miscarriage of justice motivated by Catholic prejudice – Voltaire defends the need for prejudice: "man always needs a brake."⁴⁰ Moreover, he repeats his consistent anti-atheist argument: "A reasoned, violent and powerful atheist would be a scourge every bit as gruesome as a bloodthirsty superstitious man."⁴¹ This rather meaningless comparison – given that regardless of convictions, the qualifiers 'violent', 'powerful' and 'bloodthirsty' determine these cases – shows

35 La Mettrie 1987, 17. Original: "loin de vouloir, comme on l'imagine communément, tout bouleverser."

36 La Mettrie 1987, 23. Original: "Ne craignons donc pas que l'Esprit du peuple se moule jamais sur celui des Philosophes, trop au dessus de sa portée."

37 La Mettrie 1987, 45. Original: "Soions donc libres dans nos écrits."

38 Voltaire 2010, 37. Original: "jusqu'à quel degré le peuple, c'est-à-dire neuf parts du genre humain sur dix, doit être traité comme des singes."

39 Voltaire 2000, 242. Original: "S'il est utile d'entretenir le peuple dans la superstition."

40 Voltaire 2000, 242. Original: "l'homme a toujours eu besoin d'un frein."

41 Voltaire 2000, 242. Original: "Un Athée qui serait raisonneur, violent et puissant, serait un fléau aussi funeste qu'un superstitieux sanguinaire."

Voltaire's inherent contempt for the masses and his defence of elites (in direct contradiction of Pierre Bayle's paradox): "everywhere where a society is established, a religion is necessary."⁴²

Without bringing the religious foundation of society into question, Voltaire seeks to distinguish religion from superstition. Religion, for Voltaire, is natural religion whereby a supreme artisan creator acts as a providential arbiter of reward and punishment in the afterlife in order to regulate human behaviour, which is unseen by the institutions of society. This is, therefore, no defence of Christianity or existing revealed religion. Indeed, Voltaire argues in this chapter of the *Traité sur la tolérance* that "Every day, reason penetrates in merchants' shops in France, as in the abodes of the lords."⁴³

Voltaire stringently attacks those religious leaders ("Masters who have been paid and honoured for so long to daze the human race"⁴⁴) whom he considers to be exploiting their disciples and teaching outright superstition by labelling them "*Bêtes farouches*". So Voltaire navigates a middle path concerning the relative positions of the elites and the masses. Nowhere does Voltaire defend a modern democratic anti-elitist model of society, in keeping with the majority of his contemporaries. Even in private correspondence, he defended the monarchy: writing to Damilaville in 1762 about the posthumous publication of Boulanger's *Recherches sur l'origine du despotisme oriental* (1761), he claimed that "brothers must always respect morality and the throne".⁴⁵

As with most *philosophes*, there are numerous expressions of Voltaire's view of the wider masses as incapable of thought: "the populace, who are not made for thinking."⁴⁶ What distinguishes Voltaire's views, however, is that he considers the masses merely unprepared for the truth. In the 1734 *Lettres philosophiques* (section XIII), he maintains that the *philosophes* "do not write for the people", which explains why "one must never fear that a philosophical sentiment could harm the religion of a country".⁴⁷ This, as we saw when analysing La Mettrie's *Discours Préliminaire*, is dissimulation, and not to be taken at face value. Sixteen years prior to La Mettrie's text, Voltaire, having suffered at the hands of an absolute monarch, including a spell in the Bastille, knew full well that he had to plea for clemency from the censors, and play down the danger of philosophy in

⁴² Voltaire 2000, 242. Original: "partout où il y a une Société établie, une Religion est nécessaire."

⁴³ Voltaire 2000, 244. "Chaque jour la raison pénètre en France dans les boutiques des Marchands, comme dans les hôtels des seigneurs."

⁴⁴ Voltaire 2000, 244. Original: "Maitres si longtemps payés et honorés pour abrutir l'espèce humaine."

⁴⁵ Voltaire, "Letter to Etienne Noël Damilaville: Saturday, 19 January 1762." In *Electronic Enlightenment*, edited by Robert McNamee et al. University of Oxford. <http://www.e-enlightenment.com/item/voltfrVF1080255a_1key001cor/> References to online sources are accurate as of 30 March 2014. Original: "Les frères doivent toujours respecter la morale et le trône."

⁴⁶ Voltaire 2008, 421. Art. 'Bled ou blé'. Original: "la populace, qui n'est point faite pour penser."

⁴⁷ Voltaire 1964, 175. Original: "n'écrivent point pour le peuple." And "il ne faut jamais craindre qu'aucun sentiment philosophique puisse nuire à la Religion d'un País".

what was an unsuccessful attempt to circumvent censorship of his text. So Voltaire's statements about the innocence of philosophy is a strategy. Yet in contradistinction to La Mettrie, Voltaire's whole philosophy relies on an afterlife of reward and punishment.

In *Dieu. Réponse au Système de la nature* (1770), Voltaire differentiates between the "athée de cabinet" (a virtuous scholarly atheist, literally a 'closet atheist') and the "athée de la cour" (literally the 'court atheist', depicted by Voltaire as a hedonistic, seemingly crazed madman bent on destruction and bloodshed). He admits that virtuous atheists exist, using the example of Spinoza: "Spinoza never acted wrongly."⁴⁸ He concludes, however, that these virtuous atheists have a pernicious effect on practical atheists, above all rulers: "The closet atheist is nearly always a peaceful philosopher, the fanatic is always turbulent, but the court atheist, an atheist prince, could be the scourge of the human race."⁴⁹

In his *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764), Voltaire's most consistent claim is that atheism cannot prevent crime.⁵⁰ He confounds atheism with lawlessness and thus holds a fundamentally elitist position. Voltaire concludes "that atheism is a very pernicious monster in those who govern, and also in those in retreat, although their lives are innocent, because from the closet they can reach those in power . . . it is nearly always fatal to virtue".⁵¹

His conviction that humans have an innate tendency to unvirtuous behaviour informs his desire for a system of control. Religion is a necessary control mechanism, which also necessitates an elite to run society and in some way to lie, by insisting on the contingent truth of religion. Whilst Voltaire's worldview does not preclude autonomy, it does not encourage all members of society to emancipate themselves from instruction.

In several places, another *philosophe*, Helvétius, expressed the belief in the necessity of truth and the futility of superstition. Aligning himself with Diderot and d'Holbach, he complained of the Enlightenment's lack of progress, in a chapter heading in *De l'Homme*: "Progress of truth – of the slowness by which truth spreads."⁵² In a footnote to section VII of the same text, he writes that "In morality . . . the only really harmful thing is not looking [for truth]. Whoever preaches

48 Voltaire 2011, 162. Original: "Spinosa n'a pas commis une seule mauvaise action."

49 Voltaire 2011, 162. Original: "L'athée de cabinet est presque toujours un philosophe tranquille, le fanatique est toujours turbulent mais l'athée de cour, le prince athée pourrait être le fléau du genre humain. Le malheur des athées de cabinet est de faire des athées de cour."

50 Voltaire 1994a, 388. Art 'Athée, athéisme'. "L'athéisme ne s'oppose pas aux crimes."

51 Voltaire 1994a, 391. Art 'Athée, athéisme'. Original: "Que l'athéisme est un monstre très pernicieux dans ceux qui gouvernent, qu'il l'est aussi dans les gens de cabinet, quoique leur vie soit innocente, parce que de leur cabinet ils peuvent percer jusqu'à ceux qui sont en place . . . il est presque toujours fatal à la vertu."

52 "Progrès de la vérité – De la lenteur avec laquelle la vérité se propage."

in favour of ignorance is a rogue who wants to dupe fools.”⁵³ In correspondence with Martin Lefebvre de La Roche, Helvétius writes: “You ask me if it is good to educate the people. And why could education do harm? If a few men have an interest to deceive, nobody has an interest to be deceived. The greatest number must therefore be allowed the greatest freedom to examine the pros and cons.”⁵⁴ This freedom implicitly involves the work of philosophers targeting the greatest number as an audience.

Writing to Frederick the Great, Diderot’s collaborator on the *Encyclopédie* d’Alembert claimed that: “The people is an imbecilic animal who allows itself to be led into darkness.”⁵⁵ One can infer that the addressee of this letter has perhaps altered the terminology with which d’Alembert expresses himself. These rather harsh terms denote a criticism of the extant situation, rather than a call to exploit the people even more. Also, d’Alembert’s desire for Enlightenment ideas to spread far and wide is attested by his desire to produce a cheap version of d’Holbach’s *Bon Sens* (1772), which he suggested in a letter to Voltaire in August 1775: “I think like you about this *Bon Sens* which seems to me a much more terrible book than the *Système de la Nature*. If the book was abridged any more (which could easily be done without loss) and it was published cheaply, it could be bought and read by cooks.”⁵⁶ Thus Enlightenment, as represented in printed books, was in d’Alembert’s view, a democratic ideal for the philosopher to share with the people. It was of course d’Alembert who helped Frederick to formulate the Berlin *Académie* essay question in 1780. Before we consider that, however, we will turn to the reactions to d’Holbach’s *Essai sur les préjugés*.

D’Holbach’s campaign against religion and superstition changed strategy after his initial phase of publishing amended translations of works by English deists and freethinkers and the printed versions of texts by French *libertins*, such as Fréret, whose atheistic works had previously only

53 Helvétius 1776, 369. Original: “En Morale . . . la seule chose réellement nuisible est la non-recherche [du vrai]. Qui prêche l’ignorance est un fripon qui veut faire des dupes.”

54 Claude Adrien Helvétius, “Letter to Martin Lefebvre de La Roche: Tuesday, 4 August 1769.” In *Electronic Enlightenment*, <http://www.e-enlightenment.com/item/helvclUT0050104_1key001cor/>. Original: “Vous me demandez s’il est bon d’instruire le peuple. Et pourquoi l’instruction pourroit-elle nuire? Si quelques hommes ont intérêt à tromper, nul n’a intérêt à être trompé. Il faut donc laisser à tout le monde la plus grande liberté d’examiner le pour et le contre.”

55 d’Alembert, Jean Le Rond. “Letter to Frederick II: 30 November 1770.” In *Electronic Enlightenment* Original: “Le peuple est un animal imbécile qui se laisse conduire dans les ténèbres.”

56 d’Alembert, Jean Le Rond. “Letter to Voltaire: 15 August 1775.” In *Electronic Enlightenment* <http://www.e-enlightenment.com/item/voltfrVF1260139_1key001cor/>. Original: “Je pense comme vous sur ce *Bon Sens* qui me paroît un bien plus terrible livre que le *système de la nature*. Si on abrégéoit encore ce livre (ce qu’on pourroit aisément sans y faire tort) & qu’on le mît au point de ne coûter que dix sols, et de pouvoir être acheté et lu par les cuisinières.” Friedrich Melchior, Baron von Grimm also saw *Le Bon Sens* as a book which the non-elites would be capable of reading, but unlike d’Alembert, was fearful of its potential: “C’est l’athéisme mis à la portée des femmes de chambre et des perruquiers.”

existed in manuscript form.⁵⁷ D’Holbach instead turned to write his own original texts (though heavily influenced by his previous reading) and, through his contacts in Holland, published a series of programmatic, prescriptive texts. The *Essai sur les préjugés* caused a great stir in France, although it was not banned, according to Negroni.⁵⁸ Unfortunately, the ‘French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe’ database contains no sales statistics for the *Essai sur les préjugés* from the *Société Typographique de Neuchâtel*.⁵⁹ We cannot, therefore, judge the diffusion of the book in Prussia or elsewhere. However, by examining the reaction of Frederick the Great, we can ascertain that it had a substantial impact.

Reading the text, it becomes obvious why Frederick was moved to publish a refutation. D’Holbach’s text, published under the pseudonym of Mr. D.M., alluding to Du Marsais, clearly continues the discourse on the utility of the truth for the masses, announced in the first pages: “truth is necessary to man, and error can only ever be dangerous to him.”⁶⁰ Later on in the text, the sovereign would find himself as a direct interlocutor: “truth is equally necessary, to both the sovereign in order to shore up his power, and to the subjects to be happy, submissive, and peaceful. . . . A good king, far from fearing truth, will always take it himself as a guide, and will want it to enlighten his people.”⁶¹ Frederick’s sensitivities were triggered by sentences like the following: “a despot who commands irritated subjects does not become a victim of truth, but of imprudence and impetuous ignorance.”⁶² He did not take well to the prescriptive elements of the text, such as: “equitable princes will recognize that they do not have the right to deprive them [their subjects] of truth.”⁶³

That the book caused a stir across Europe is illustrated by the book-length refutation by Frederick, *Examen de l’Essai sur les préjugés*, published in 1770. Mark Curran has commented that Frederick’s *Examen*, “at seventy octavo printed pages, was relatively lengthy but ill-conceived. It was an unruly piece, occasionally intelligent but poorly structured, which amounted to little

⁵⁷ See Hammersley 2010, 123–132.

⁵⁸ Negroni 1995. Dawson 2006 also contains no mention of this work.

⁵⁹ For the *French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe*, see <<http://fbtee.uws.edu.au/stn/interface/>>. This project has made available the database of the archives of the *Société Typographique de Neuchâtel*, a key source for work on the eighteenth-century French book trade, as originally made famous by Robert Darnton.

⁶⁰ D’Holbach 1770, 2. Original: “la vérité est nécessaire à l’homme, & l’erreur ne peut jamais lui être que dangereuse.”

⁶¹ D’Holbach 1770, 142. Original: “la vérité est également nécessaire, et au souverain pour assurer son pouvoir, et aux sujets pour être heureux, soumis et tranquilles. . . . Un bon roi, loin de craindre la vérité, la prendra toujours lui-même pour guide, et voudra qu’elle éclaire son peuple.”

⁶² D’Holbach 1770, 142. Original: “un Despote qui commande à des sujets irrités ne devient point la victime de la vérité, mais de l’imprudence & de l’ignorance impétueuse.”

⁶³ D’Holbach 1770, 143. Original: “les Princes équitables reconnoîtront qu’ils n’ont pas le droit de les priver de la vérité.”

more than a collection of the prince's immediate thoughts".⁶⁴ The refutation shows its author to be reactionary and dismissive of the capacity of the non-elite sections of society. Superstition is said to be a foundation of order. The evolution of Frederick's thought is complete. Here, he sees that truth should be reserved for a minority of men: "If truth was made for man, it would present itself naturally to his eyes, he would receive it without effort."⁶⁵ He dismisses d'Holbach's ideas as the "vanity of the philosophical spirit".⁶⁶ Study of Frederick's correspondence shows that these ideas can be traced back further than the publication of the *Essai sur les préjugés*: he wrote to the duchess of Gotha, declaring that:

There is no idea more extravagant than wishing to destroy superstition. Prejudice is reason for the people – does this imbecilic people deserve to be enlightened? Don't we see that superstition is one of the ingredients that nature has placed in man's composition? How can you fight nature, how can you destroy such a universal instinct?⁶⁷

Moral and social order, contended Frederick, rely upon superstition, which is an essential component of the human mind and has shaped all civilisations. This explains why religions have continued for centuries: "This shows that the majority of human opinions are founded on prejudice, fables, errors and imposture . . . man is made for error . . . truth is not made for man."⁶⁸ These prejudices and superstitions of the lower orders are needed to funnel the natural fears of men. Frederick's argument relies on the paternalism of the *mensonge officieux*: "What would one gain from disabusing a man of illusions which make him happy?"⁶⁹

Frederick argues that were all superstitions to be effectively wiped out, it would not be long before a new set of superstitions would replace them: "I dare almost to guarantee that in a state where all prejudice would be destroyed, it would not be thirty years before new ones would arise, and, well, the errors would quickly spread and entirely overrun it."⁷⁰ Here, one is faced with a

⁶⁴ Curran 2012, 101.

⁶⁵ Frederick 1770, 5–6. Original: "Si la vérité étoit faite pour l'homme, elle se présenteroit naturellement à ses yeux, il la recevrait sans efforts."

⁶⁶ Frederick II 1770, 7. Original: "vanité de l'esprit philosophique."

⁶⁷ Frederick 1851. Letter to the Duchess of Gotha (1763), 215. Original: "Il n'y a point d'idée plus extravagante que celle de vouloir détruire la superstition. Les préjugés sont la raison du peuple, et ce peuple imbecile mérite-t-il d'être éclairé? Ne voyons nous pas que la superstition est un des ingrédients que la nature a mis dans la composition de l'homme? Comment lutter contre la nature, comment détruire généralement un instinct si universel."

⁶⁸ Frederick II 1770, 11. Original: "Voilà donc la plupart des opinions humaines fondées sur des préjugés, des fables, des erreurs & des impostures . . . l'homme est faite pour l'erreur . . . la vérité n'est pas faite pour l'homme."

⁶⁹ Frederick II 1770, 14. Original: "Que gagneroit-on à détromper un homme que les illusions rendent heureux?"

⁷⁰ Frederick 1770, 19. Original: "J'ose presque assurer que dans un état où tous les préjugés seroient détruits, il ne se passeroit pas trente années qu'on en verroit renaître de nouveaux, & qu'enfin les erreurs s'étendroient avec rapidité, & l'inonderoient entièrement."

dilemma in the interpretation. This could be cultural pessimism fit to grace any era, or it could be argued that Frederick is engaged in a specific justification of his own elitist position.

The Prussian monarch recognised that the *Essai* could not have been by Du Marsais, stating that “this book can only have been written by some resuscitated head of the League, who, still breathing the spirit of factions and troubles, wants to rouse the people into rebellion against the legitimate authority of the Sovereign”.⁷¹ Frederick’s critique limits itself to the French context of the book, and leads him to make an apology for both Louis XIV and Louis XV. France’s debt is attributed to the former’s war of succession, “the most just of all those that the monarch had undertaken”⁷² whilst the latter is excused as “innocent”.⁷³ It is not surprising that the monarch defends the established order, preferring “softer means” rather than “overthrowing the established order”.⁷⁴

D’Holbach’s long-time collaborator, Diderot, came to the defence of his friend’s view of enlightenment established in the *Essai sur les préjugés*. In 1771, Diderot composed a text which remained undiscovered until Franco Venturi’s 1937 edition, at which point it was conferred the title of *Lettre sur l’Examen de l’Essai sur les préjugés ou Pages contre un tyran*.⁷⁵ This work was a stringent attack on Frederick the Great. Diderot did of course snub Frederick’s invitation to visit the Prussian Court and attacked Voltaire and Helvétius for not doing likewise. Diderot also attacked Frederick in his *Principes de politique des souverains* (1774). In *Pages contre un tyran*, Diderot takes d’Holbach’s defence against Frederick’s attack in the *Examen de l’Essai*:

The author of the *Essai* represents the world as it is: full of liars, scoundrels, and all kind of oppressor. There are despotic and nasty kings in this world; did he say that there weren’t? There are violent, wasteful, greedy ministers in this world; did he say that there weren’t? There are corrupt magistrates; did he say that there weren’t? There are deceitful, foolish, fanatical priests; did he say that there weren’t? There are men in this world blinded by all kinds of passions, harsh and negligent

⁷¹ Frederick 1770, 52. Original: “ce livre ne peut avoir été écrit que par quelque chef de parti de la Ligue ressuscité, qui respirant encore l’esprit de faction & de trouble, veut exciter le peuple à la rébellion contre l’autorité légitime du Souverain.”

⁷² Frederick 1770, 59. Original: “la plus juste de toutes celles que le monarque avoit entreprises.”

⁷³ Frederick 1770, 56.

⁷⁴ Frederick 1770, 23. Original: “boulversant tout l’ordre établi.”

⁷⁵ Diderot 1963, 127–148.

fathers, ungrateful children, deceitful spouses; did he say that there weren't? He did not, therefore, depict an idealized world.⁷⁶

These barbs, aimed at the monarch though never received, emphasised the negative aspects of society – despotism, corruption, violence – and thus undermined Frederick's criticism that the *Essai sur les préjugés* was too idealistic and ignored the true nature of the world. Diderot is then explicit that truth is always preferential to superstition, as the author of the *Essai*, d'Holbach, had written. Diderot writes:

But he did maintain, and still maintains, that man loves truth. All men love truth, because truth is a virtue; man is constantly seeking truth; it is the aim of all his studies, of all tasks, of all work. He hates error because he knows well that in whatever area, he cannot be mistaken without harming himself. True happiness is founded on truth.⁷⁷

Pointing out flaws in Frederick's refutation was a simple task for Diderot. Yet he went further to support the original text's supposition that truth was always necessary and always a basis of virtue. Diderot also criticized Helvétius for his fawning over Frederick, to whom Helvétius dedicated his posthumously published *De l'Homme* (1772). Diderot's own attitude towards enlightened despotism is dealt with in the *Mémoires pour Catherine II and the Observations sur le Nakaz*, where anti-elite sentiment is particularly strong in sections I, VI, IX and XX.⁷⁸

Frederick's position must not be misunderstood. He did not wish the people to be kept in a state of superstition to be exploited. He does admit to this danger in the *Examen*. He even wishes that the public read more, mentioning to Voltaire that some works are more accessible than others: "Boulangier's work is superior to the other, and more accessible to the people, for whom long deductions tire the mind, loosened and relaxed by the frivolities which constantly

76 Diderot 1963, 135. Original: "L'auteur de l'*Essai* s'est représenté le monde tel qu'il est, plein de menteurs, de fripons, d'opresseurs en tout genre. Des rois despotes et méchants, il y en a dans ce monde, a-t-il dit qu'il n'y en eût point? Des ministres violents, dissipateurs, avides, il y en a dans ce monde, a-t-il dit qu'il n'y en eût point? Des magistrats corrompus, il y en a dans ce monde, a-t-il dit qu'il n'y en eût point? Des prêtres fourbes, insensés, fanatiques, il y en a dans ce monde, a-t-il dit qu'il n'y en eût point? Des hommes aveuglés par toutes sortes de passions, des pères durs et négligents, des enfants ingrats, des époux perfides, il y en a dans ce monde, a-t-il dit qu'il n'y en eût point? Il n'a donc pas fait un monde idéal."

77 Diderot 1963, 135–136. Original: "Mais il a prétendu et prétend encore que l'homme aime la vérité. En tout genre l'homme aime la vérité, parce que la vérité est une vertu; l'homme cherche sans cesse la vérité; c'est le but de toutes ses études, de tous ses soins, de tous ses travaux; il déteste l'erreur, parce qu'il sait bien qu'en quoi que ce soit, il ne saurait se tromper sans se nuire à lui-même; son vrai bonheur est fondé sur la vérité."

78 See Israel 2011, 270–274.

excite it.”⁷⁹ Conversely, Frederick feels that enlightened absolutism is the key to peace, and that philosophy is the preserve of the elite.

This social and political elite clique of philosophy is epitomised by the *Correspondance littéraire*, the hand-written philosophical organ of the elite – its circulation was limited to European Courts, usually numbering around sixteen subscribers.⁸⁰ Its editor Melchior Grimm reinforced this view among his royal and aristocratic readers, insisting that the truth is “for a small number of chosen ones . . . The people never participates”.⁸¹

Diderot fell out with Grimm over his relationships with various monarchs. Whereas Diderot remained constant and unchanged in the company of Catherine the Great, making no concessions to the monarch, he felt Grimm had mutated.⁸² Writing to Grimm in 1781 regarding one of Diderot’s prefatory notes addressed to monarchs, Diderot told him: “If you have the puerile vanity to think that you are targeted and are offended by the page addressed to kings . . . I pity you . . . My friend, I no longer recognize you. You have become, without realizing it maybe, one of the most veiled, but most dangerous anti-philosophers. You live among us, but you hate us.”⁸³

This intellectual history so far has considered Frederick as the sole German participant in a Francophone debate. This final section will show that the influence of this whole debate about the elitism of knowledge politics, culminating in the French-speaking Berlin *Académie*’s debate, was felt in the wider field of German *Aufklärung*.

Arising from correspondence between d’Alembert and Frederick in the late 1770s, the Berlin *Académie*’s essay competition question for 1781 was “Is it useful to mislead the people?” The history of this competition and the answers received have been edited and published by Krauss.⁸⁴ It is taken into consideration here as a continuation of Frederick’s involvement with this issue.

Two prizes were issued, one for each side of the argument. The winning answer for the ‘yes’ side came from Frédéric de Castillon. In his answer to the question, he followed the distinction between philosopher and people, deciding that: “Error is made for the masses, and the masses

⁷⁹ Frederick II, king of Prussia, “Letter to Voltaire: Friday, 5 January 1767.” In *Electronic Enlightenment* <http://www.e-enlightenment.com/item/voltfrVF1150267b_1key001cor/>. Original: “L’ouvrage de Boulanger est supérieur à l’autre, et plus à la portée des gens du monde, pour qui de longues déductions fatiguent l’esprit, relâché et détendu par les frivolités qui l’énervent continuellement.”

⁸⁰ Cf. Kölving & Carriat 1984. There were usually 15 or 16 subscribers, all from royalty or the nobility, and very much concentrated in the German states. For the full list of subscribers, see vol. I, xviii–xix.

⁸¹ Grimm 1878, 328. Original: “pour un petit nombre d’élus . . . Le peuple n’y participe jamais.”

⁸² Wilson 1972, 701.

⁸³ Diderot 1970, 213–14, letter to Grimm 25 March 1781. Original: “Si vous avez la puérile vanité de prendre pour vous et de vous offenser de la page qui s’adresse aux Rois . . . Vous me faites grande pitié . . . Mon ami je [ne vous] reconnais plus. Vous êtes devenu sans vous en douter peut être, un des plus cachés, mais un des plus dangereux antiphilosophes, vous vivez avec nous, mais vous nous haïssez.”

⁸⁴ Krauss 1966. Original: “Est-il utile de tromper le peuple?”

are the people of all classes. Let us separate the small number who are called philosophers, such a beautiful name, formerly so respectable, and so degraded nowadays, dragged through the mud.”⁸⁵ He concluded that: “It can, therefore, be useful to the people to be misled, as much in politics as in religion.”⁸⁶ This view was opposed by Bernard Nicolas Lorinet, who used a theological argument: “I hold as impious he who claims that the people must be misled in order to be happy. This implies God had not provided the means for happiness.”⁸⁷

Yet this French-language debate was not limited in its impact to Francophone circles. Indeed, the question of the relationship between elite philosophy and lying to the masses goes to the heart of the German debate of what exactly the Enlightenment was. To show this, we only need to refer briefly to the most well-known of definitions of the Enlightenment: Immanuel Kant’s answer to the *Mittwochsgesellschaft’s* question “Was ist Aufklärung?”⁸⁸ Kant’s famous opening sentence to this essay demonstrates a familiarity with these debates: “Enlightenment is mankind’s exit from its self-incurred immaturity. *Immaturity* is the inability to make use of one’s own understanding without the guidance of another. *Self-incurred* is this inability if its cause lies not in the lack of understanding but rather in the lack of the resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another.”⁸⁹

This self-determination, an essentially anti-elitist position, could not, however, simply arise within the elitist systems of eighteenth-century religious and political control. Yet Kant argues that a strong political state (an enlightened absolutism) is necessary to facilitate the spread of enlightenment. Indeed, his essay explicitly names Frederick the Great as the prime model of the creator of the ideal preconditions of enlightenment. Though Kant claimed the enlightened age had not yet arrived, he did consider himself to be living in an age of enlightenment, which is synonymous with the age of Frederick the Great:

When we ask, are we now living in an enlightened age? the answer is: No, but we live in an age of enlightenment. As things now stand it is still far from true that men are already capable of using

⁸⁵ Krauss 1966, 25. Original: “L’erreur est faite pour la multitude, et celle-ci constitue le peuple de toutes les classes. Séparons-en le petit nombre qui, se décorant du nom de philosophe, nom si beau, si respectable jadis, et de nos jours avili et traîné dans la fange.”

⁸⁶ Krauss 1966, 38. Original: “Il peut donc être utile au peuple d’être trompé, tant en politique qu’en religion.”

⁸⁷ Krauss 1966, 51. Original: “Je tiens pour impie celui qui prétend qu’il faut tromper le peuple pour le rendre heureux; comme si Dieu n’avait donné les moyens du bonheur.”

⁸⁸ On other answers to this question, see Schmidt 1996. Cf. Knudsen 1996 on the particularities of the German debates on *Volksaufklärung* in the 1780s.

⁸⁹ Kant 1974, 9. Original: “Aufklärung ist der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit. *Unmündigkeit* ist das Unvermögen, sich seines Verstandes ohne Leitung eines anderen zu bedienen. *Selbstverschuldet* ist diese Unmündigkeit, wenn die Ursache derselben nicht am Mangel des Verstandes, sondern der EntschlieÙung und des Mutes liegt, sich seiner ohne Leitung eines anderen zu bedienen.”

their own reason in religious matters confidently and correctly without external guidance. Yet we have clear indications that the field is now being opened for them to work freely toward this, and the obstacles to general enlightenment or to the exit out of their self-incurred immaturity become even fewer. In this respect, this age is the age of enlightenment or the century of Frederick.⁹⁰

Prussia is seen as exemplary. How can this be? After all, Frederick issued decrees on censorship in 1749 and 1772, whereby all texts had to be submitted to a panel for consideration before publication. And as we have seen, Frederick came to adopt a position where he endorsed lying to the masses to protect his own authority. Kant's naming of Frederick, still in power (he died in 1786), is pure artifice, and yet another example of Kant's strategy, or a concession to the absolutist monarch, which historians need to read in context.

Yet the idea of a strong monarch capable of creating the conditions necessary for enlightenment was very much present in French writings on the subject. D'Holbach's lesser-known *Ethocratie ou, Le gouvernement fondé sur la morale* (1776) also seems to advocate the use of absolute power, but in order to bring about change in public ideas: "Wisdom and equity armed with great power are capable of quickly changing the face of the state. Absolute power is very useful when it intends to crush abuses, abolish injustice, correct vice and reform mores."⁹¹ Louis-Sébastien Mercier's best-seller *L'an 2440* (1771), a science-fiction dream, envisaged a revolution in society linked to the work of a philosopher-king: "The revolution was carried out effortlessly by the heroism of a great man. A philosopher king?"⁹²

Conditions in Prussia would worsen with the accession of Frederick William II to the throne. The Wöllner Edict on Religion of 1788 would only strengthen censorship and cause more problems for Kant, as evidenced by the publication of Kant's *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*.⁹³

90 Kant 1974, 15. Original: "Wenn denn nun gefragt wird: leben wir jetzt in einem aufgeklärten Zeitalter? so ist die Antwort: Nein, aber wohl in einem Zeitalter der Aufklärung. Daß die Menschen, wie die Sachen jetzt stehen, im ganzen genommen, schon imstande wären oder darin auch nur gesetzt werden könnten, in Religionsdingen sich ihres eigenen Verstandes ohne Leitung eines andern sicher und gut zu bedienen, daran fehlt noch sehr viel. Allein, daß jetzt ihnen doch das Feld geöffnet wird, sich dahin frei zu bearbeiten und die Hindernisse der allgemeinen Aufklärung oder des Ausganges aus ihrer selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit allmählich weniger werden, davon haben wir doch deutliche Anzeigen. In diesem Betracht ist dieses Zeitalter das Zeitalter der Aufklärung oder das Jahrhundert *Friedrichs*."

91 D'Holbach 1776, 6. Original: "La sagesse et l'équité armées d'un grand pouvoir, sont capables de changer en peu de temps la face d'un Etat. Le pouvoir absolu est très utile quand il se propose d'anéantir les abus, d'abolir les injustices, de corriger le vice, de réformer les mœurs."

92 Mercier 1771, 303. Original: "La révolution s'est opérée sans efforts et par l'héroïsme d'un grand homme. Un roi philosophe."

93 *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*. Cf. Allen Wood's account of the publication details in Kant 2001 [1793], 41.

A second, much more marginal and almost forgotten German thinker provides further evidence that the radical ideas of this French-language discourse on deceiving the masses were not lost on the German intelligentsia. Heinrich Friedrich Diez (1751–1817), was an outspoken defender of d’Holbach’s *Système de la Nature* (1770). He wrote on many heretical topics in the period before he left Germany in 1784 to become the Prussian Ambassador in Constantinople, which curtailed his own writings on materialist ideas.⁹⁴ He was also a prolific collector of manuscripts of la *littérature clandestine* and the influence of these French texts is evident in his own writings.⁹⁵

In his 1772 essay *Advantages of Secret Societies for the World*,⁹⁶ Diez takes up the theme of the autonomy of individuals regardless of their social class and background: “Thus the educated knave can already be their own guide.”⁹⁷ To get from the state of ‘knave’ to autonomous citizen, Diez explains in his 1781 text *Apologie der Duldung und Preßfreiheit* that it is the responsibility of educated citizens to spread their learning – this is seen as a duty:

If the acquired skill of speech has raised us above animals, then the acquired skills of reading and writing raises us above the rabble, in that these activities are exceptionally adept at enlightening our understanding and clarifying our perceptions. It is therefore a great duty on the educated mind to share with others these insights and knowledge, and thereby increase the number of clever and happy people in the state, in that he seeks to reduce the great crowd of rabble.⁹⁸

Diez is adamant that books can change people’s ideas, but this does depend on the ambition of the masses – they must be “ambitious enough to court the applause of the dispersed, clever thinkers – and all this through the only way befitting investigators of truth: writings.”⁹⁹ Yet this sharing of knowledge and the ambition of the people need norms which can facilitate the process of enlightenment.

For this radical thinker, superstition will destroy society’s laws. A secular state cannot tolerate superstitions in the public sphere, let alone promote them:

⁹⁴ Diez’s early works have recently been republished, edited by Manfred Voigts.

⁹⁵ Diez’s 856 manuscripts, held in the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin, have been catalogued by Ursula Winter 1986–1994.

⁹⁶ *Vortheile geheimer Gesellschaften für die Welt* (Halle: Carl Hermann Hemmerde, 1772).

⁹⁷ Diez 2010, 21. Original: “So kann schon der gebildete Knabe sich selbst führen.”

⁹⁸ Diez 2010, 175. Original: “Hat uns die erworbene Fertigkeit zu sprechen über die Thiere erhoben: so erhebt uns die erworbene Fertigkeit zu lesen und zu schreiben über den Pöbel, indem sie vorzüglich geschickt ist, unsern Verstand zu erleuchten und unsre Empfindungen zu reinigen. Es ist daher dem gebildeten Geist eine große Pflicht, seine Känntnisse und Einsichten andern mitzuthemen und dadurch die Anzahl der Klügern und Glücklichen im Staat zu vermehren, indem er den großen Haufen des Pöbels zu verringern sucht.”

⁹⁹ Diez 2010, 175. Original: “ehrgeizig genug, um den edlem Beyfall der zerstreuten, klügern Denker zu buhlen – alles durch den einzigen Weg, der sich für den Erforscher der Wahrheit geziemt, durch Schriften.”

Superstition, if it would only remain at the level of opinions, would be just as harmless as unbelief. But because it oversteps this boundary, . . . it undermines national laws, in that it destroys civil peace and appoints itself as the tyrant of the people, who have committed no other crime than to profess other religious maxims.¹⁰⁰

This leads Diez to his position of arguing against all forms of censorship: “The abolition of all censorship would firstly be a great benefit for freedom of thought.”¹⁰¹

Unlike Kant, Diez is forthcoming in his support for a secular morality, devoid of beliefs in providence: “I nonetheless respect the virtue of honest Christians, even if I think that their virtue is – oh why should I conceal it! – in no way superior to mine.”¹⁰² This anticlerical position is inherently anti-elitist in that it allocates marginal, non-conformist ideologies the same level of toleration as Christian morality. It is also inextricably linked to the view that each citizen is autonomous in their reasoning.

In a second, slightly amended *Apologie der Duldung und der Preßfreiheit*, which was published in the *Berichte der allgemeinen Buchhandlung der Gelehrten* in 1781 at Diez’s expense, Germany’s intellectual situation is compared unfavourably with England’s. Like many eighteenth-century observers, Diez sees England as a centre of freedom, allowing progress: “Through liberty, England has soared to be a giant of mind and character, which is foreign to all other peoples. . . . Germany has always been a slave of its faith. Its philosophy has thus remained as old as its faith.”¹⁰³ This criticism of Germany (before such a political entity existed) is an implicit criticism of the elitist nature of its intellectual milieu.

In a tactic similar to La Mettrie’s in the *Discours Préliminaire*, Diez attempts to maintain that freethinkers’ books cannot cause any harm and thus should not be subject to censorship: “The use and harm of books is never as considerable as one imagines. A book is always a corrective to the impression of the other.”¹⁰⁴ Just as La Mettrie had done, Diez justifies his advocacy of freethinking

100 Diez 2010, 186. Original: “Der Aberglaube, wenn er blos bey Meinungen stehn bliebe, würde eben so unschädlich seyn als der Unglaube. Aber da er diese Grenze überschreitet . . . er untergräbt die Gesezze der Länder, indem er die bürgerliche Ruhe vernichtet und sich zum Tirannen über Menschen aufwirft, die weiter nichts verbrochen haben, als daß sie sich zu andern Glaubensmaximen bekennen.”

101 Diez 2010, 188. Original: “Die Aufhebung aller Censur würde schon ein großer Gewinn für die Geistesfreiheit seyn.”

102 Diez 2010, 191. Original: “Ich ehre gleichwohl die Tugend redlicher Christen, ob ich gleich fühle, daß ihre Tugend, was soll ichs verschweigen! um keinen Grad höher ist, als die meinige.”

103 Diez 2010, 200. Original: “Durch die Freyheit hat sich England zu einer Grösse des Geistes und Charakters aufgeschwungen, die allen andern Völkern fremd ist . . . Teutschland ist immer ein Sklave seines Glaubens gewesen. Seine Philosophie ist daher so alt geblieben wie sein Glaube.”

104 Diez 2010, 200. Original: “Der Nutzen und Schaden der Bücher ist niemals so beträchtlich, als man sich vorstellt. Ein Buch ist immer das Correctiv vom Eindruck des andern.”

by referring to the small number of readers and the fact that the lower social classes do not read, despite having stated elsewhere that it is the duty of philosophers to spread enlightenment: “The number of free-thinking writings is, though, as small as the number of their readers. The apprehension of the growing apostasy is therefore always exaggerated. No freethinker has ever written for oafish citizens and farmers.”¹⁰⁵ We can here ascertain the prominent influence of the writings of La Mettrie and d’Holbach on Diez’s pre-1784 writings.

To come to our conclusions, let us observe that, by the end of the eighteenth century, the optimism of the secular, radical Enlightenment was draining from some of its most fervent proponents. Naigeon, in his *Mémoires sur la vie et les ouvrages de D. Diderot*, admits that Diderot’s philosophy is not for everybody because it is erudite and complex. Referring to the *Rêve de d’Alembert*, he writes:

The philosophy taught in the two dialogues is only suitable for a very small number of privileged beings; it demands too much study, meditation and knowledge for the fundamental principles and their full consequences to be admitted, and I do not mean only by the common man whose bad education makes him everywhere stupidly gullible and superstitious, but even by those placed in happier circumstances, who, with the means to inform themselves, have, regarding these matters, generally neither a faith any less blind than that of the people nor a more reasoned and motivated disbelief.¹⁰⁶

Diderot himself was no optimist and despaired at the slow progress being made as he wrote to Sophie Volland in 1759: “the progress of enlightenment is limited, it hardly reaches the suburbs; the people there are too stupid, too miserable, and too busy. It stops there.”¹⁰⁷

Taking the notion of the intellectual’s position in relation to the masses, we have revealed complex relationships between philosophers and a view of human beings as capable of self-determination and as benefitting from the ‘truth’ regardless of the immediate ramifications for happiness. There were those who defended the absolute value of spreading truth, but they often

¹⁰⁵ Diez 2010, 200. Original: “Die Zahl der Freydenkerschriften ist aber eben so gering, als die Zahl ihrer Leser. Die Besorgniß der wachsenden Apostasie ist deshalb immer übertrieben. Für einfältige Bürger und Bauern hat noch kein Freydenker geschrieben.”

¹⁰⁶ Naigeon 1821 (1798), 307–08. Original: “la philosophie enseignée dans les deux Dialogues, ne convient qu’à un très-petit nombre d’êtres privilégiés; elle exige trop d’études, de méditations, de connaissances, pour que les principes qui lui servent de base puissent jamais être admis dans toutes leurs conséquences, je ne dis pas seulement par le vulgaire que sa mauvaise éducation rend partout stupidement crédule et superstitieux, mais même par ceux qui, placés dans des circonstances plus heureuses, et avec plus de moyens de s’instruire, n’ont en général sur ces matières ni une foi moins aveugle que celle du peuple, ni une incrédulité plus motivée et plus réfléchie.”

¹⁰⁷ Diderot 1956, 299. Letter to Sophie Volland, 30 October 1759. Original: “les progrès de la lumière sont limités; elle ne gagne guère les faubourgs. Le peuple y est trop bête, trop misérable et trop occupé: elle s’arrêta là.”

had to disguise their position, or write anonymously. This led to instances where these very same writers would defend themselves by disingenuously claiming that philosophical writings are not linked to changes in public opinion, when writing otherwise elsewhere. This analysis has shown us that the context of texts is crucial to understanding a thinker's true position. La Mettrie can thus be rehabilitated from his current reputation as dismissive of the 'masses'. The *philosophes* were thus carefully negotiating their own position as the intellectual elites, without necessarily despising or disdaining the people. When a writer like d'Holbach, himself part of the feudal social elite – a member of the nobility – strongly criticized the absolute power of the monarchy, it demonstrated a divisive issue in the struggle for access to 'truth'.

Frederick's reactionary responses to the 'threat' represented by secular 'democracy' – as evidenced by his quasi-censorship of La Mettrie, and his correspondence and his refutation of the *Essai sur les préjugés* – show that the elite's contempt for the masses was able to voice itself in a reasoned and articulate way. Moreover, this explains why it was so rare to find explicit advocacy of enlightening the masses. This also helps to demonstrate the essential tension between the two forms of power: intellectual and political, which structured the period.

We have also shown that these elite-level, French-language debates between the constellation of French *philosophes* and the Prussian monarch engendered a shift in German discourse and influenced German ideas on the utility of enlightening or deceiving the people. In conclusion, we can revise Payne's 1976 assessment of the *philosophes* as disinclined to instruct the people by taking into account the conditions which prevented clear expression of such intentions. This inclination can be recovered in the thought of the *philosophes*, keen to negotiate their own position in the social hierarchies of the day. It is wrong to impugn a whole generation of thinkers, at a time when contemporary power structures hindered the expression of egalitarian political views.

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