

Diderot, Spinoza, and the Question of Virtue

Louise Crowther

University of Manchester

Abstract

This paper focuses on the French philosopher and writer Denis Diderot (1713-84) and the extent to which, in his portrayal of virtue, he can be said to demonstrate convergences of ideas with Spinoza. The texts that form the primary basis for a consideration of Diderot's post-Spinozist mentality are Le Fils naturel, Le Neveu de Rameau and Mme de la Carlière. As a preliminary to this study, I firstly examine Spinoza's thinking regarding virtue and the necessity of moderation in its exercise, before turning my attention to Diderot's texts. I argue that Diderot's works reveal significant similarities to Spinoza's thinking, which thus highlights Diderot's radicalism and the wide-reaching impact of Spinoza on the Enlightenment.

The over-arching purpose of my thesis is to consider how Lessing and Diderot dealt with the impact of Spinozist thought and to analyze the extent to which they can be said to exemplify a post-Spinozist mentality in their portrayal of three main issues: virtue and vice; freedom; and natural religion. The aim of my thesis is not to demonstrate the direct influence of Spinoza on Lessing since it is notoriously difficult to trace influences in intellectual history. It seeks rather to locate similarities or differences of approach in their treatment of these issues. The originality of my thesis lies in its analysis of Lessing's and Diderot's literary works as the evidence for demonstrating their post-Spinozist mentality, especially as these works have been somewhat neglected in studies of the relationship between these thinkers.

It is increasingly recognized that the Enlightenment was, in many ways, an attempt to come to terms with the challenge posed by Spinoza's philosophy.¹ Spinoza's innovatory writings gave new impetus to a traditional European philosophical reflection on virtue. Significantly, while

¹ See Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); David Bell, *Spinoza in Germany from 1670 to the Age of Goethe* (University of London: Institute of Germanic Studies, 1984); Antonio Negri, *Subversive Spinoza: [Un]contemporary Variations*, ed. by Timothy S. Murphy (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2004); and E. F. Carritt, *Morals and Politics: Theories of their Relation from Hobbes and Spinoza to Marx and Bosanquet* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935) for further discussion of the extent to which the Enlightenment was an attempt to come to terms with Spinoza's radical doctrines.

much research has been conducted into Spinoza's impact on the Enlightenment, a detailed exploration of his impact on the thinking of individual writers is still needed. To redress this imbalance, in this article I examine the way in which Diderot grappled with questions about the nature of virtue in a post-Spinozist world, in which the intellectual climate had undermined traditional moral certainties about virtue and vice.²

The aim of this article is not to demonstrate the direct influence of Spinoza on Diderot, because it is virtually impossible to trace direct influences in intellectual history. Rather, the aim is to locate similarities and differences of approach in their conceptualization of virtue. I will consider the extent to which Diderot can be said to exemplify a post-Spinozist mentality in his portrayal of virtue and vice. The originality of this article lies in my analysis of three of Diderot's literary works from across his career (*Le Fils naturel* (published in 1757); *Le Neveu de Rameau* (composed between 1761-73);² and *Mme de la Carlière* (composed in 1772))³ as the evidence for demonstrating Diderot's post-Spinozist mentality, especially as these works have been neglected in studies of the relationship between these two thinkers. Alongside the nature of virtue and vice, I will also consider Spinoza's and Diderot's investment in the concept of balance when exercising virtue. As a preliminary to this study, I will first examine the received notions of virtue and vice within Diderot's and Spinoza's intellectual context before turning to an examination of the ways in which virtue is conceptualized in their respective works.

With a few exceptions, pre-Enlightenment philosophical traditions tended to regard virtue and vice as absolute categories which could not be reconciled.⁴ The absolute notions of virtue and vice continued to hold sway into the eighteenth century and dictionaries of the time, such as that of Richelet, define 'vice' simply as 'Habitude ou défaut contraire à la vertu' [*Habit or flaw contrary to virtue*].⁵ However, a significant challenge to the absolute nature of virtue and vice appeared in the eighteenth century, when philosophers were adopting new perspectives with

² The first printed edition appeared in 1805, translated by Goethe into German.

³ The first printed edition appeared in 1773.

⁴ Such an opinion was influenced by religious dogma and propagated by such groups as the Stoics who believed that 'good and evil are antithetical'. See Marcia L. Colish, *The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*, 2 vols (Leiden: Brill, 1985), I: *Stoicism in Classical Latin Literature*, 34. Aristotle was one exception to this trend: he challenged the absolute nature of virtue and vice, claiming that virtue was merely an 'intermediacy between two bad states, one involving excess, the other involving deficiency' (*Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. by Sarah Broadie, trans. by Christopher Rowe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 117). Aristotle's claim suggests that he saw virtue, not as an absolute value, but as one that could change depending on the context.

⁵ Pierre Richelet, *Dictionnaire portatif de la langue française* (Lyon: Bruyset-Ponthus, 1756), p. 658. Unless otherwise stated translations into English are by the author.

regard to conduct. G. W. Leibniz, for example, distinguished between different types of evil, saying: ‘Evil may be taken metaphysically, physically and morally. *Metaphysical evil* consists in mere imperfection, *physical evil* in suffering, and *moral evil* in sin.’⁶ Leibniz’s division of evil into different sub-categories implies that he did not see evil as a single absolute category, as had traditionally been the view, but rather as a multi-faceted category, with a much more complicated relationship to virtue. Furthermore, Leibniz argued that ‘God wills order and good; but it happens sometimes that what is disorder in the part is order in the whole’.⁷ Whilst he does not claim that all evil necessarily produces a higher good, Leibniz does indicate that partial imperfection may be necessary to bring about ‘the best’.⁸ The Enlightenment *philosophes* also challenged the notion of the absolute nature of virtue and vice. Hence, Julien Offray de La Mettrie wrote that they believed that ‘[i]l n’y a rien d’absolument juste, rien d’absolument injuste. [...] nuls vices, [...] nuls crimes absolus’ [*there is nothing absolutely just, nothing absolutely unjust. [...] no vices [...] no absolute crimes*].⁹

Having considered the intellectual context surrounding Diderot, it is now appropriate to turn our attention to Spinoza’s own doctrine of the nature of virtue and vice, before examining Diderot’s works in the light of the Dutch philosopher’s thinking. Benedict de Spinoza (1632-1677) wrote extensively about the nature of virtue and vice. In Spinoza’s writings the highest and most absolute form of virtue is ‘blessedness’, a state of union with God that he defines as the highest form of cognition. Consequently, Spinoza equates absolute virtue to happiness since it leads to divine love.¹⁰ However, Spinoza accepts that it is impossible for man to achieve this absolute understanding (and a complete union with God) and, hence, it is impossible for him to achieve absolute virtue. Stuart Hampshire explains it thus: ‘[a] wise man is still only a man, and therefore only relatively wise and (by definition) not perfect or all-powerful; he cannot be wholly free, rational and self-contained’.¹¹ Only God is completely rational, the sole cause of his actions and completely virtuous. By contrast, man constantly has to fight against the effects of external causes and has only a relative virtue and a relative dominion over the emotions, often failing to

⁶ G. W. Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil* (Amsterdam: 1710; repr. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), trans. by E. M. Huggard, p. 136.

⁷ Leibniz, p. 201.

⁸ Leibniz, p. 279.

⁹ Ann Thomson, *Materialism and Society in the Mid-Eighteenth Century: La Mettrie’s ‘Discours Préliminaire’* (Geneva; Paris: Librairie Droz, 1981), p. 223.

¹⁰ See Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, Book V, P42, Dem. repr. in, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, trans. and ed. by Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) pp. 401-617.

¹¹ Stuart Hampshire, *Spinoza and Spinozism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), p. 127.

restrain them.¹² Indeed, in his *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670) Spinoza reveals that the individual's virtue is relative to his ability to know God:

[O]ur highest good and perfection [...] depend solely on the knowledge of God. [...] [K]nowledge and love of God is the highest good. [...] The worldling cannot understand these things [...] because he has too meager a knowledge of God.¹³

Therefore, whilst Spinoza indicates that virtue is itself absolute, he recognizes that it is impossible for man to achieve an absolute attainment of it since it depends on his relative capacity for understanding and improving his intellect.

Whether he is postulating virtue as a relative or absolute concept, the notion of balance is a key factor in Spinoza's exposition of virtue. He sees balance as a vital quality for the successful pursuit of virtue. For example, Spinoza argues that an imbalanced approach to virtue can lead to misery. In his *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (1677) Spinoza maintains that many people have suffered 'most miserably' in the pursuit of honour.¹⁴ Significantly, what makes honour dangerous is not honour per se but rather the fact that it is pursued to the exclusion of a 'love toward the eternal and infinite thing'.¹⁵ It is, therefore, an excessive concentration on honour that produces vice; hence, moderation and balance are vital qualities for the successful pursuit of virtue.

Throughout his career, Denis Diderot (1713-1784), in a similar manner to Spinoza, revealed a tension in his thinking between seeing moral concepts as absolute – as 'fixed moral principles' – and as relative, that is, 'judged essentially according to a purely internal, subjective and individual principle'.¹⁶ This bifurcation of his thinking suggests that Diderot swayed between seeing virtue as purely relative and entirely absolute. Diderot swayed between converging and disagreeing with Spinoza's understanding that virtue is a moral absolute: he argues both that virtue is equated to happiness and is thus a moral absolute and later 'questions the identity of

¹² Equally, in his *Short Treatise* Spinoza indicates that virtue has, in reality, a relative dominion over the emotions: 'Though we see that a thing is good or bad, we nevertheless find no power in ourselves to do the good, or omit the bad, while at other times we do [find this power in ourselves]' (*Collected Works of Spinoza*, pp. 46-156 (p. 138)).

¹³ Benedict de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. by R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Dover Publications, 1951), pp. 59-60.

¹⁴ *Collected Works of Spinoza*, pp. 3-45 (p. 9).

¹⁵ *Collected Works of Spinoza*, p. 9.

¹⁶ Anne R. Larsen, 'Ethical Mutability in Four of Diderot's Tales', *Studies on Voltaire*, 116 (1973), 221-34 (pp. 221-22).

virtue with happiness'.¹⁷ Diderot's struggle over the separability of happiness and virtue is played out in two of his plays, *Le Fils naturel* and *Le Neveu de Rameau*, in which he came to two very different conclusions. In *Le Fils naturel*, Diderot recognizes virtue and vice to be moral absolutes; hence, the truly unhappy characters are the ones who forsake virtue. Even though the pursuit of virtue may initially require a certain amount of painful sacrifice, Diderot demonstrates that virtue and happiness are ultimately reconciled through that very medium of sacrifice. For example, Dorval is tormented by virtue, so that he even calls it a '[d]ouce et cruelle idée!', and says that virtue is synonymous with sacrifice, not happiness: 'ô vertu! Qu'es-tu, si tu n'exiges aucun sacrifice?' [*O Virtue, what are you if you do not demand any sacrifice?*].¹⁸ Significantly though, these sacrifices are subsequently described as that which links virtue to happiness. Indeed, it is after Dorval accepts that he must sacrifice himself for virtue that he feels happy and envisages being able to experience 'le repos' [*calm*];¹⁹ this reveals the reconciliation of virtue and happiness and thus that virtue and vice are absolute moral categories.

By contrast, Diderot comes to a completely different conclusion as to the relationship between virtue and happiness in *Le Neveu de Rameau*. Whereas in *Le Fils naturel*, Diderot ultimately converges with Spinoza's portrayal of virtue and happiness and highlights its absolute moral nature, in this play he highlights the relativity and separability of virtue and happiness and shows a dissimilarity from the Spinozist perspective. He suggests, for example, that happiness is not necessarily solely attained through virtue, since le Neveu gains his happiness from living by his own morally unconventional principles:

[p]uisque je puis faire mon bonheur par des vices qui me sont naturels [...] il serait bien singulier que j'allasse me tourmenter [...] pour [...] me faire autre que je ne suis.²⁰

[*since I can achieve happiness through vices which are natural to me [. . .] it would be very strange for me to torture myself [. . .] so as to make myself quite different from what I am*]

¹⁷ Anthony Strugnell, *Diderot's Politics: A Study of the Evolution of Diderot's Political Thought After the Encyclopédie* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1973), p.52.

¹⁸ Denis Diderot, *Le Fils naturel*, repr. in Diderot, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by H. Dieckmann and J. Varloot 25 vols (Paris: Hermann, 1975-), x, pp. 13-81 (p. 54).

¹⁹ *Le Fils naturel*, p. 55.

²⁰ Denis Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, repr. in *Oeuvres complètes*, xii, pp. 69-196 (pp. 118-19).

This notion that virtue is relative to, and determined by, the individual is further exemplified when Lui says to Moi that ‘il pourrait arriver que vous appellassiez vice ce que j’appelle vertu, et vertu ce que j’appelle vice’²¹ [*it could turn out that what you call vice I call virtue, and that you call virtue what I call vice*]. Diderot, therefore, recognizes that virtue and vice have the potential to be more fluid in meaning and cannot be said to be absolute guides for the individual to follow. Hence, moral conduct may vary from one individual to another, but there are limits which most refuse to cross without feeling remorse or guilt.²²

The importance of balance when exercising and dealing with virtue is particularly well illustrated in Diderot’s *Mme de la Carlière*, which offers a similar outlook to that of Spinoza in showing certain traditionally virtuous characteristics to be dangerous when taken to excess. In this text, the female protagonist’s whole existence seems to revolve around securing her new husband’s absolute fidelity to her. Having been unhappily married before, she decides that she must get a public declaration from Desroches that he will be unswervingly faithful. Failure to do so on his part will lead to his denunciation and the irrevocable end to their marriage. Unfortunately, Desroches does eventually have an affair. Significantly, though, he is not condemned by the narrator for having broken his word, which suggests that the narrator supports and understands Desroches’ actions.²³ Indeed, the narrator excuses Desroches on the basis that Mme de la Carlière ‘voulut absolument [...] nourrir’,²⁴ [*she was determined to breast-feed*] rather than employing a wet-nurse, to the point at which a man of Desroches’ nature was pushed to his limits: ‘Ce fut un long et périlleux intervalle pour un jeune homme d’un tempérament ardent et peu fait à cette espèce de régime’²⁵ [*this was a long and dangerous interval for a hotblooded young man who was not made for such a regime*]. Moreover, the narrator condemns Mme de la Carlière as ‘la vertueuse [...] inflexible et hautaine bégueule’ [*the virtuous [...] inflexible and haughty prude*]. The reference to Mme de la Carlière being haughty suggests that her pursuit of

²¹ *Le Neveu de Rameau*, p. 139.

²² Diderot’s desire to demonstrate the difficulty of making moral judgements, either from a doctrinal or a sentimental point of view, is further illustrated in two of the *Contes*: *Ceci n’est pas un conte* (1772) and the *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville* (1773).

²³ D. J. Adams, ‘A Diderot Triptych Re-examined’, *Modern Language Review*, 76 (1981), 47-59 (p. 52).

²⁴ Denis Diderot, *Mme de la Carlière*, repr. in *Oeuvres complètes*, XII, pp. 549-75 (p. 559).

²⁵ *Mme de la Carlière*, p. 559.

virtue, in the form of fidelity, has become a matter of supercilious pride.²⁶ This implies that her virtue is deficient since it is uncompromizing in its inhuman refusal to forgive, despite Desroches' obviously sincere repentance for his infidelity.²⁷ Furthermore, the consequences of her attitude result in the complete destruction, not only of Desroches – who is vilified by the public (although there is the possibility that his reputation might recover) – but also of herself and their child, both of whom die.²⁸ These outcomes strongly indicate that virtue, when taken to excess on the basis of a rigid principle, can cause vicious results and therefore should only be pursued with moderation.

From the texts considered it is clear that Diderot's work does not provide a unified depiction of virtue. Ultimately, he appears to provide two answers to the question of whether virtue and vice are absolute or relative categories: the first, illustrated in *Le Fils naturel*, suggests that virtue and vice are absolute categories, while the second, illustrated in *Le Neveu de Rameau*, suggests that they are relative. In terms of the question of whether balance is important when exercising virtue, *Mme de la Carlière* clearly represents Diderot's opinion that moderation and reasonableness should be prioritized in the exercise of virtue. This desire for balance perhaps suggests one reason why Diderot was, throughout his career, torn between a strictly absolute and a more moderate, relative view of virtue. It is, moreover, evident that with regard both to the nature of virtue, and the need for balance when exercising it, Diderot shows affinities to Spinoza's doctrines. Both philosophers embrace the ideal notion that virtue is absolute, whilst acknowledging that in practice it is often relative; they also show the need for balance when pursuing virtue.

The significance of such convergences of opinion between the two philosophers is that they provide an insight into the relationship between Spinoza and Diderot. Whereas Spinoza's conception of the role of virtue remains largely abstract, this paper shows how Diderot concretizes his view of the role of virtue through fiction. His fictional texts depict potential real-life scenarios and play out the tensions between and consequences of relative and absolute views of virtue and vice. In dramatizing these theories he implicitly takes into account human

²⁶ *Mme de la Carlière* reinforces the views expressed in the *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville* (repr. in *Oeuvres Complètes*, XII, pp. 577-644 (p. 605)) on the issue of fidelity. The Tahitian, Orou, argues that enforced fidelity is contrary to nature and completely unreasonable; given that man's very nature is changeable, he takes the view that he should not be forced to make unchangeable marital vows.

²⁷ *Mme de la Carlière*, p. 569.

²⁸ *Mme de la Carlière*, p. 569, p. 571.

tendencies and emotions and the strains of life to a greater degree than Spinoza, and plays out how this may affect the individual's view of virtue. Furthermore, a study of Diderot's affinities with Spinoza serves to show his growing independence from the philosophical concepts and values which constituted the traditionally accepted pool of thinking in the eighteenth century, and his increasing association with the radical side of the Enlightenment which rebelled against this norm.