

Study Questions

Reading for Week 5

Oct 6 *Epistemology and metaphysics***DIDEROT, *Letter on the Blind* ([Jourdain](#) (68-117 only))**

[Jourdain's intro.]

1. Under what circumstances did Diderot come to write his *Letter on the Blind*? Who is Madam de Puisieux, and what was Diderot's relationship to her? Why was Diderot imprisoned (with his wife) in the Chateau at Vincennes?
2. Was Nicholas Saunderson a real person? How did Diderot come to know what he said on his deathbed?
3. Who was Monsieur de Réamur, what was the point of the operation he was performing, why was Diderot interested in it, and why was he not impressed with the conduct of the experiment?

[Diderot's text]

1. Was there really a man in Puisaux who was born blind? Why does Diderot go to visit him? What philosophically interesting observations does he make about him—e.g. of the blind man's ideas of beauty, and of a mirror (70-75)?
2. Does the blind man regret not being able to see? Would a blind person have difficulties learning a language, given the empiricists' theories about how ideas are formed (78-80)? What influence would this have on his morals and on his metaphysics (80-83)?
3. Why do you think Diderot considers it so important to account for how a blind man could have a knowledge of figures and Mathematics (83-90)? [Notice the transition to a discussion of Saunderson]
4. What are you able to make of Saunderson's devices for doing geometry? Was he a successful teacher at Cambridge University?

5. What does Diderot have to say on idealism and Berkeley (104)? Why does he say (104-105) that Condillac (in his *Essay on the Origins of Human Knowledge* of 1746), adopted Berkeley's principles and had not sufficiently avoided his conclusions?
6. Who was Gervase Holmes? In what way is Saunderson's fictional speech an attack on the argument from design (108-114)? Do you find it persuasive? What ideas of Epicurus are appealed to? What use is made of the idea of genetic mutations ("monster births")? How is the great age (seeming eternity) of the universe relevant?