

Study Questions

Reading for Week 7

Oct 27 Materialism**DIDEROT, *D'Alembert's Dream*, Parts 1 & 2 (Rameau 89-166)****Part 1: A conversation**

1. When did *D'Alembert's Dream* first appear in print, and under what circumstances? Was this version based on a good copy? What version is this translation based on?
2. What do you think is the "Being" that d'Alembert' is referring to? (92) Why does he think it is contradictory? What does this indicate about the religious beliefs that Diderot is imputing to his friend?
3. What does the analogy with potential energy (dead force) show? (93-94? In what way could consciousness be "latent"? [Note: "consciousness" is a mistranslation: by *sensibilité* Diderot means something more like just *sensitivity*, such as a plant might have to light. See the translators' note of a (weak) defence of their translation. This mistranslation makes the whole discussion here seem ridiculous.]
4. How does 'Diderot' characterize a soul (95)? Who is this person described as "one of the greatest mathematicians of Europe"? (95 ff.) What do you think this idea is of "pre-existent germ cells", and why might it have been proposed? What do you think the point is of the thought experiment where the sun is extinguished? (98)
5. What is memory, according to 'Diderot'? And what is he trying to establish with the analogies of a vibrating string and of a sensitive clavichord? (100-103) [Note that "irritability" is also a translation of *sensibilité*.]
6. What do you think 'Diderot' is referring to as the "the cause that gives rise to innumerable difficulties without removing a single one of them"? (104) What is he saying about Berkeley (105)? What account of reasoning is being suggested on pp. 105-106? What are the jokes about skepticism suggesting?

Part 2: D'Alembert's Dream

1. Who do you think the delirious 'd'Alembert' is arguing with in his disturbed sleep (110)? What is all this about aggregation, continuity, contiguity and bees?
2. What is Diderot suggesting when he has 'Bordeu' say that he can predict "how the rest of it goes" (112)? Does this relate to his account of reasoning? What do you think prompted the speculation about "human polyps" (115)?
3. What is "Needham's drop of water" (117), and to what philosophical use is Diderot putting it? What is going on p. 118 to prompt 'Bordeu' to say "In your presence, what can I say" (118)? [Hint: prurience involved!] What is "the fallacy of the ephemeral" (120)?
4. What is the salacious Diderot suggesting with "the experiment that [Mlle de L'Espinasse has] performed a hundred times" (121)? Could this be why the real Mlle de L'Espinasse wanted the dialogue destroyed?
5. "Man is merely a common phenomenon, while a monster is only a rare phenomenon, but both are equally natural" (124). What bells does that ring for you?
6. "There is only a single great individual." (124)—as in whose philosophy? What did you think of this soliloquy?
7. Mlle. de L'Espinasse gives the image of a spider (125 ff.). To what purpose? how successful is this as a model of the nervous system? What different explanatory functions does the image of sensitive threads serve for Diderot, and how (126-156)?
8. 'Bordeu' is dismissive about free will (159-160). What do you think of his account of d'Alembert's actions in the course of a day. Does it support the position that "a voluntary act is nothing but the most recent of our actions and the necessary effect of one single cause: ourselves" (160). What moral consequences would such a position entail?
9. What account does 'Bordeu' give of poetry (163)? of abstract ideas (164)?