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« Il est possible que l'imagination nous fasse un bonheur plus grand que la jouissance. »

On the role of imagination in the philosophy of Denis Diderot

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Abstract

This paper consists of two parts and a short introduction. The first part addresses the question what is imagination according to Diderot. In the second, meta-philosophical part, I want to show that and how Diderot frequently makes use of imagination in his philosophy. The claim I want to make is that Diderot's philosophy is characterised very well as the practise of imaginative thinking. Imagination ranks as a method in Diderot's writings.

On Diderot

In German-speaking Austria and Germany, Denis Diderot is a marginal figure. Not all of his works have been translated, some translations are outdated and there is no critical German edition. He is regarded as a writer among philosophers and among literary scholars, he is regarded as a philosopher (which is a problem for thinkers of the enlightenment in general). An apt approach is to understand him as both, philosopher and writer, and reading his texts as multi-layered intellectual works. He wrote about a variety of different philosophical topics, among them: morality, language philosophy, sensation and perception, natural philosophy, religion, metaphysics, aesthetics – and, his writings cover several different genres: letters, dialogues, essays, etc. Diderot distrusted and rejected philosophical systems, his opinions were tentative and explorative (cf. Barzun, 1986, p. 18). Hence, his philosophical reception was rather limited, but

nevertheless manifold. Opinions about him range from severe criticism to excessive praise. While for instance in 1880 Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly called Diderot a “charlatan” who is not capable of developing a consistent philosophy (cf. Barbey d'Aurevilly, 1968, p. 207), German novelist and historian Philipp Blom recently praised Diderot as the glorious mind who represents what enlightenment should stand for (cf. Blom, 2010). Maybe the best approach to Diderot's philosophy is to follow his *Encyclopédie* article on *Éclectisme* for reading him as an eclectic thinker: As someone who is much more interested in discussing different problems in a reasonable manner, rather than following a particular school of thought. Following this characterisation, I will not stay within one single text but refer to several writings of Diderot – nevertheless, I will stay closer to primary sources than referring to given interpretations.

1 Imagination in Diderot's philosophy

What is imagination according to Diderot? This question, “Qu'est-ce donc que l'imagination, me direz-vous?” (DPV X: 359), is asked in the *Discours sur la poésie dramatique* from 1758. Diderot gives an answer as direct and as literal as the question is: „L'imagination est la faculté de se rappeler des images“ (DPV X: 359). This explanation, given in the 18th century, appears to be valid and widespread still today. The entry on Imagination in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article from 2011 reads that imagination is considered as a faculty, which allows “to form a particular sort of mental representation of [something]” (Gendler, 2016). The 18th century, pre-Kantian notion of “images” used by Diderot is replaced by the contemporary notion of “mental representation”. Nevertheless, in the same way as Nelson Goodman (1976) points out that is not obviously clear what representation actually means, the expression “se rappeler des images” needs clarification and contextualisation.

So, imagining something means to recall certain images. Recall from where? Diderot's statement given, memory is a good candidate for being the origin from where images are recalled from. And indeed, there are passages that confirm this idea, like the statement given in *Le rêve de d'Alembert*: “L'imagination, c'est la mémoire des formes et des couleurs.” (DPV XVII: 189). But nevertheless, for him there is a difference between remembering something and imagining something. A wo/man without imagination is only able to remember, i.e. to repeat sounds or words s/he has heard before. S/he would act mere mechanically and, in the *Discours sur la poésie dramatique*, Diderot refers to this person as being stupid and being an automaton (cf. DPV X: 359–360).

What is the difference then between imagining and remembering? For Diderot, the use of imagination can be provoked with a series of questions that forces to give less and less abstract and less and less general answers; this movement, from abstraction to concreteness, leads to what he calls sensitive representation, “représentation sensible” (cf. DPV X: 360). So, what he refers to as recalled picture can be characterised as a sensitive representation.

An example illustrates this notion: Diderot describes how the question “[Q]u’est-ce que la justice?” (DPV X: 360) is answered. Explaining justice with uttering, for instance, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s statement from *Du contrat social*: “Il faut donc des conventions et des loix pour unir les droits aux devoirs et ramener la justice à son objet” (Rousseau, 1964, p. 378) would not be sufficient for understanding what justice is (cf. DPV X: 360). Giving Rousseau’s characterising statement would be the mechanical act of repeating memorised sounds. In order to understand justice, somebody has to work out an image about justice. In the text, this image is given as the description of a particular situation, in which two hungry people fight over the fruits of a tree with an unjust outcome. This depiction of a situation is given as an example for an “image”; he also labels it as “tableau” (DPV X: 360), that allows understanding what the concept of justice means.¹ Significantly, he states that there is not one single image that provides an explanation for justice to everybody but different tableaux for different people (cf. DPV X: 360).

Why does this procedure make use of imagination whilst the other does not? It could be the case that instead of uttering Rousseau’s sentence, the given scenario is repeated by heart. However, this thought can lead to a sceptical knock out argument: How can we ever know that somebody understands what s/he says and does not simply say something by heart? I do not think there is a positive answer to this question; but there is a positive answer for the particular distinction in Diderot. Even if the whole description were memorised, it would have a different genesis than something recited by heart. The person who describes the image must have had some experiences that allow her/him to construct the image. Without ever having experienced justice, s/he would not be able to do so. With referring to experience, Diderot expects that the demand for concreteness instead of abstraction is fulfilled and claims that giving, or recalling, the image leads back to what he calls the way that the object initially entered the soul: “[...] le même chemin qu’elle y est venue [de son âme]” (DPV X: 360).

¹ Although Diderot’s scenario tells more about injustice than about justice. It could as well depict suppression, violent blackmailing, or slavery.

The passages about imagination in the *Discours sur la poésie dramatique* closes with thoughts about the relation between poetry, truth, and philosophy. Although I do not think that the distinction between poet and philosopher is defined very sharply for Diderot, he does differentiate. The way of remembering images according to a natural order is the philosopher's activity; the way of remembering images according to a natural order given a particular hypothesis is the poet's activity (cf. DPV X: 360–361).

This considerations given, the role of imagination and its relation to memory seems to be clearer: Memory provides the pieces that are reassembled when using imagination. There are passages that confirm this interpretation, like another statement about imagination, given in *Éléments de physiologie* in which Diderot writes: “Point d’imagination sans mémoire, mais mémoire sans imagination” (DPV XVII: 478). In this book, the *Éléments de physiologie*, another aspect of imagination can be identified.

Without context, Diderot writes: “L’imagination dispose des sens [...]” (DPV XVII: 477). It is not entirely clear what he means with this statement. Is dispose meant in the sense of arrange and does imagination order the senses or is meant in the sense that imagination evokes and initialises the senses to perceive? In both ways, the statement is not linked with memory. With referring to a longer passage about the formation of concepts, again taken from the *Éléments*, I want to favour the first meaning:

Le champ de l’œil embrasse une partie de l’arbre, / si l’œil ne réitère pas l’expérience, il ne connaîtra pas l’arbre, / si la portion embrassée dans la seconde expérience par le champ de l’œil ne se lie pas par la portion embrassée dans la première, en sorte qu’une partie de ce qu’on a vu se joigne à une partie de ce qu’on voit, on aura beau multiplier les expériences, on aura parcouru tout l’arbre; mais les expériences ne se liant point les unes aux autres on n’aura point la notion précise d’un arbre.

Pour avoir cette notion exacte et des parties, et de l’ensemble, / il faut que l’imagination peigne le tout dans l’entendement, et que j’en éprouve la sensation, comme si l’arbre était présent ; (DPV XVII: 457)

So, when we perceive the individual parts of a tree – leaves, branches, bark, trunk etc. – it is imagination that encompasses single impressions by one concept, or “notion precise”, as Diderot writes. In the context of Early Modern Philosophy, this view was new but it had, of course, its predecessors. The task of linking sense expressions was fulfilled by the *sens commun* according to scholastic philosophy; this inner correlation to the outer senses combines perceptions and links between

mind and sense experience (cf. Maydell & Wiehl, 1974). This concept can be found in several scholastic writings as well as in Descartes' *Principia* from and the early and unpublished *Regulae ad directionem ingenii*. In contrast to the scholastic tradition, Diderot does not use the notion of *senus communis* or *sens commun* (cf. Funt, 1968, p. 49)², nevertheless its task are discussed and assigned to imagination. A further analysis of Diderot's views on perception would be necessary to argue for this claim. (For now, it may serve as a hypothesis. In the *Encyclopédie* article on Imagination, *Imagination*, *Imagine*, from the section on Logique, Beaux-Arts, Métaphysique et Littérature, which was written by Voltaire, a similar, not the same but a similar, role is assigned to imagination: it combines experiences that come from sense perceptions with memories to ideas (cf. Voltaire, 2016; Lafon, 2011, p. 103).

However, along with the many thinkers of Early Modern Period who break with scholastic traditions and who give new, or other, meanings to established concepts, Diderot gives imagination a new meaning. For medieval Aristotelian scholastics, like Albert le Grand, Thomas d'Aquin, or Jean Duns Scot, *imaginatio* (lat.) gave the intellect access to *phantasma*, i.e. perceived objects free from materiality (cf. Trede, 1974, p. 346). With Diderot imagination does makes more than just giving mental presence to absent images.

I want to come back to the term of *disposer* in the statement "[l']imagination dispose des sens" (DPV XVII: 477). If it is interpreted in the sense that l'imagination orders sense experience, then the following question is raised: according to what order does the arrangement happen? Here again, I want to give the outline of a thought can be developed further and before I give an explanation that is taken from Diderot's writings, I briefly want to refer to another author: Percy Bysshe Shelley. In 1821, Shelley published an essay with the title *A Defence of Poetry*, in which he argues that poetry and arts give order to society. The act of creating art, which is the act of using imagination, is the act of creating order. He writes that poets are those "who imagine and express [...] order [...]; they are the institutors of laws and the founders of civil society" (Shelley, 1915, p. 79). Given Diderot's understanding of imagination that "peigne le tout dans l'entendement" (DPV XVII: 457) and considering Shelly's account, Diderot can be characterised as thinker of romanticism: it is not law, nature, or reason that provides a society's order but artistic imagination.

² Funt refers to the *Lettre sur les aveugles*. There are statements in the *Éléments de physiologie* about blind people who do have imagination according to Diderot (cf. DPV XVII: 475).

What does Diderot say about order? In his Salon writings, which are a broad collection of thoughts about art and aesthetics as well as elaborate pieces of art critique, there is a passage about order. This passage is found in the essay *La Promenade Vernet* (DPV XVI: 174–239) on the painter Joseph Vernet from the *Salons de 1767*. In a dialogue, Diderot writes (and, in my opinion, he expresses his own views):

Pourquoi l'univers vous paraît-il si bien ordonné; c'est que tout y est enchaîné à sa place, et qu'il n'y a pas un seul être qui n'ait dans sa position, sa production, son effet, une raison suffisante ignorée ou connue? (DPV XVI: 186)

Diderot's notion of order refers to the state of being interconnected (which fits very well to his holistic conceptions about nature), that everything has its very own place, and, most important, that there are reasons to explain place, origin and effect of everything. Contrasting this consideration with Diderot's quote about order, the romantic aspect becomes diminish, and at the same time his position becomes more distinct: Although it is romantic to understand imagination as principle of order, this judgement depends on a particular understanding of order that rates artistic genius higher than philosophical reason. Diderot's conception does not abolish reason but turns towards it. It is a rational view about the world to regard every place, origin and effect as knowable. When using imagination for encompassing single impressions by concepts, then we do know the origin of every concept. Although Diderot is typically regarded as an empiricist who argues against innate ideas and a priori truths and who pledges for a union between empirical experiments with philosophy (cf. DPV IX), the claim about the general epistemological access to complete nature is a very rational position.

Beside these epistemological thoughts that concern an order of nature, there is an order present in the human mind as well. Everything in the mind is connected with each other; if in an imagination is interrupted and a speaker suddenly stops, possible links raise from memory. If the linking does not work anymore, either in imagination or in memory, a person becomes a pathological case: "[...] distraction, premier degré de la folie" (DPV XVII: 478)³.

So, memories are linked and combined by imagination; the use of imagination refers to memories, and arranges and rearranges them. Diderot contrasts memories and imaginations along with memories being monotone repetitions; and imaginations being the lively and vivid images; In the *Éléments* there are several, metaphorical questions similar to the statement: "L'imagination est un

³ "distraction" is meant in the sense of confusion, not in the sense of being inattentive

coloriste, la mémoire est un copiste fidèle.” (DPV XVII: 480). Also, the notion of image as “représentation sensible“ should be clearer now: Diderot’s use of image in the context of imagination means something else than a filled canvas.⁴ It also means something else than straight logical model, like, i.e. Ludwig Wittgenstein’s use of the notion of image, or picture, in the *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*. So, Diderot’s use of the notion image is neither purely visual nor purely logical but it is sensitive. Sensitive representations are synesthetic personal experiences that have been linked together. When he uses the term of “l’œil intérieur” (DPV XVII: 475) to refer to imagination in the *Elements*, he uses another metaphor. It is a reoccurring metaphor: Imagination is like eyesight (with possible weaknesses like blindness) – but in every case it is a rational eyesight.

Are there any problems with this view? Occupying the position between perception and memory, imagination has the power to blur the boundaries between of those faculties. The ability to make absent objects present is an advantage in the same way as it is a problem. How can one know if an imagined object is just made-up or refers to something in the world? Imagination can interfere with the senses. Diderot mentions an example: “Par l’application un peu forte l’imagination réalise au loin sans rêver. C’est ainsi qu’un enfant fit voir sur un toit un serpent à tout un collège” (DPV XVII: 477). He also refers to pathological cases when people have imagined being something or someone they are not (cf. DPV XVII: 480).

This is an important point for the use of imagination in philosophy. Diderot wrote that poets use imagination to, in my words, assemble images according to a hypothesis. Philosophers assemble pictures that resemble nature. If a picture, does not only resemble nature but corresponds to nature, imagination leads to truth. As a writer he turns from being a poet into being a poet-philosopher, or philosopher, if a hypothesis about nature turns out to be true in that sense that it is confirmed and found in nature. Although the distinction between poet and philosopher is not set up sharply in Diderot, the described use of imagination is indeed a philosophical problem concerning method. How can one know if an object is just absent and imagined or mere made-up phantasy?

With imagination, it is possible to imagine anything. This is the philosophical risk (so to speak) as well as the source of enjoyment, or pleasure, as given in the title quote that is taken from the *Éléments*:

⁴ Not taking the term „image“ literal should be clear; nevertheless Diderot plays with the terms polysemy and the ambiguity of the literal and metaphorical meaning; in *La Promenade Vernet* he discusses the difference between art and imagination.

Il est possible que l'imagination nous fasse un bonheur plus grand que la jouissance. [...] un amant avec imagination [...] voit [sa maîtresse], l'entend, lui parle; elle lui répond et exécute en lui-même toute la scène de voluptés qu'il se promet de sa tendresse et de sa complaisance. (DPV XVII: 478)

This joyful and erotic statement about imagination is followed by the disenchanting statement that imagination makes greater promises than the reality can hold:

L'imagination met dans cette scène tout ce qui peut y être, mais ne s'y trouve que rarement. L'imagination est la source du bonheur qui n'est pas, et le poison du bonheur qui suit. C'est une faculté qui exagère et qui trompe [...] (DPV XVII: 478–479)

This is a problem stated. Readers of Diderot, as well as philosophers in general, have to deal with it. Imagination is of great use, it allows giving joyful, vivid images but in the same time, it exaggerates and misleads. In the second part, I want to give a few examples of Diderot's own use of imagination and show how he is dealing with this problem.

2 Diderot's use of imagination in philosophy

As announced, I want to point out that Diderot does not only have a particular view on imagination but that he also makes frequent use of imaginative thinking. In the following, I will discuss a few passages in which Diderot uses imagination to make arguments and take a closer look at the end of these passages. I will refer to other writings as previously discussed.

One of his most famous and well known texts, *Le rêve de d'Alembert*, deals with metaphysical questions about substance, the origin of life and various other topics. It is written as dialogue, split in three parts, and contains various passages with, what can be called, imaginative arguments. For instance, he argues for the contingent genesis of species over time with the imagination that he extinguishes the sun, a few thousand years pass and then the sun is relighted again (cf. DPV XVII: 98f.), he argues for the unity of consciousness with the imagination of a spider in a web (cf. DPV XVII: 140ff.), he argues for a link between morality and species with the imagination of a race of goat people and their interaction with humans (cf. DPV XVII: 195ff.). In the first part, Diderot compares the fibres of an organ with sensitive, vibrating strings (DPV XVII: 101f.) and he explains, with reference to his concept of *sensibilité*, how ideas are evoked and how thought associations work; in order to show that this explanation is compatible with his

ontological substance monism he extends the analogy to a harpsichord with those strings; and: it is a harpsichord that plays itself:

Supposez au clavecin de la sensibilité et de la mémoire, et dites-moi s'il ne saura pas, s'il ne se répétera pas de lui-même les airs que vous aurez exécutés sur ses touches. Nous sommes des instruments doués de sensibilité et de mémoire. Nos sens sont autant de touches qui sont pincées par la nature qui nous environne, et qui se pincent souvent elles-mêmes; et voici, à mon jugement, tout ce qui se passe dans un clavecin organisé comme vous et moi. (DPV XVII: 102)

Diderot asks – as the writer he asks the reader and as a character of the dialogue he asks d'Alembert – to suppose a harpsichord, un clavecin, that is sensitive. Imagining the sensitive piano, Diderot argues that it has sensitivity and memory. It is musician and the instrument at the same time, its chords can vibrate from causes outside of it – just as our senses are activated from outer causes – as well as from causes inside the harpsichord – just like our memory does. D'Alembert listens to Diderot's explanations and remarks, rather dry, "J'entends" (DPV XVII: 103). D'Alembert then asks, what happens, if the harpsichords have the abilities to nourish and to generate themselves, which evokes the weird picture of eating pianos that have sex: "il vivrait et engendrerait [...] de petits clavecins vivants et résonnants" (DPV XVII: 103). Diderot confirms d'Alembert's idea and answers: "Sans doute" (DPV XVII: 103) and then the pianos are not mentioned any more.

What happens in this passage? Is the piano example a joke or intended to be serious? Is it serious until d'Alembert brings up his rather crazy idea? And most important: is this a philosophical consideration or poetic one? What Diderot writes is not literal true: Humans are neither harpsichords nor pianos. Nevertheless, the sensitive matter that we all consist of, according to Diderot, functions just like the imagined harpsichord would function. Not just the harpsichord makes music by itself, we, as thought machines, make our own thoughts. The harpsichord does not need a player; we do not need an immaterial substance. The imagined harpsichord can be understood as metaphor, as analogy, or as model. It also can be understood as philosophical joke. The eating baby pianos seem to be as far as the imagination works without being completely ridiculous. If he took it further, the philosophical point might be lost.

Le rêve de d'Alembert opens with the question about a being of which is said that it occupies space but does not have extension; it moves matter but does not to move itself etc. (DPV XVII: 89). This opening can plausibly be interpreted as discussion about the existence of God, an immaterial soul, or immaterial substance. After explaining the contradicting concept, Diderot offers the option

to accept either the contradiction or the assumption that stones can feel (and hence, they scream and cry if they are carved). The decision is not explicitly taken in the text (of course, Diderot chooses the second option) and the passage continues with a discussion of the active and passive force of sensitive matter. This example shows how that there are limits for the use of imagination, when it is used for a philosophical purpose. It cannot overcome a logical contradiction; instead, it helps to make something that sound rather absurd in the first place plausible.

In another text, the *Lettre sur les aveugles*, Diderot writes about the philosophy of perception, embedded in the report about a conversation with a blind born man. There are several excursions, and in one of them – that for which Diderot was arrested and kept in the prison of the *château de Vincennes* – he discusses the existence of God. A priest tries to solace the blind, dying mathematician Nicholas Saunderson and he tries convincing Saunderson about the existence of god. Diderot presents his position through Saunderson's words; although he could imagine a God, he refrains from doing so, because all points of the priest's arguments can be explained with his own views on nature, which do not include a divine power. He refrains from introducing an unnecessary element into his world view because all questions are answered:

Qu'est-ce que ce monde, M. Holmes? un composé sujet à des révolutions qui toutes indiquent une tendance continuelle à la destruction ; une succession rapide d'êtres qui s'entre-suivent, se poussent et disparaissent ; une symétrie passagère ; un ordre momentané. (DPV IV: 52)

Briefly, after this statement Saunderson dies without having accepted the arguments of the priest. It is possible to argue that the atheistic position did not allow accepting the concept of God. However, in the text he just repeatedly states that he is not willing to introduce superfluous concepts to an already sound explanation. Hence, also explanatory parsimony is a factor for Diderot's use of imagination.

So, I gave three examples in which imagination is used and its limits are given as well: Irony or ridiculousness, logical restrictions, and explanatory parsimony. Imagination could go further but then it would stop being reasonable. Does the reader always know if Diderot is serious about what he is writing, if s/he reads philosophy or literature? I do not think so. Diderot's writings favour creativity and the discussion of unusual and often absurd ideas. Nevertheless, absurdity is not the same irrationality. Diderot provides a philosophy that has its place for screaming stones (cf. DPV XVII: 89f.), goat people (cf. DPV XVII: 195ff.), and blind people that see with their skin (cf. DPV IV: 47ff.).

I want to come to the last point of my talk: Diderot's formal marking of statements as imagination and hence, emphasising their philosophical value. In the previously discussed examples the imaginations were identified with using statements like "imagine that", "assume that", "Supposez" (in the piano example). This use may have the contemporary equivalent of thought experiments (cf. Behrens, 2003, p. 134); and they were normally embedded in the text structure. I want to point out that many of Diderot's texts, both philosophical texts and his literature, contain dreams; The most prominent example is *Le rêve de d'Alembert*, in which the dream is present in the title. Diderot may use dreams for setting up a dream scenarios in order to develop philosophical models. Dream objects are embedded in a dream nature that works according to his metaphysic principles. Maybe the use of dreams is a strategical step against censorship; science fiction authors often wrote social criticism of totalitarian systems dressed up as science fiction stories to avoid sanctions from the totalitarian regime they actually lived in; in a similar way, Diderot used writing techniques to disguise his authorship of controversial views. Although there are certain aspects of symbolisation in his dream writings, Diderot is not a pioneer of psychoanalytical dream interpretation; prima facie, the objects in his dream writings represent the objects as they are labelled.

As mentioned before, *Le rêve de d'Alembert* has three parts; the first part is a dialogue between Diderot and d'Alembert who discuss Diderot's philosophical ideas. Diderot is not able to convince d'Alembert, they split, and d'Alembert goes to sleep. In the second part, d'Alembert dreams about Diderot's philosophy, he talks in his sleep and his partner, Julie de Lespinasse, takes notes of his mumbling. She thinks that d'Alembert fell insane because he mumbles such crazy things and she calls a doctor, Théophile de Bordeu. Julie de Lespinasse and Théophile de Bordeu discuss the dream talk of d'Alembert and it turns out that the sane and wake doctor can understand and make sense out of the alleged insane nonsense that d'Alembert mumbled while sleeping. He even can continue the dream after the notes have come to end.

What is the relevance of this text structure? The imagined propositions and the, so to speak, sober, reasonable propositions are ranked equal. There is a continuity between imagining and reasoning. Diderot delivers a performative demonstration that imagination provides proper arguments and allows drawing right conclusions just as awake reasoning does. As Yann Lafon (2011, p. 101) points out in his book on the epistemological role on fiction in Diderot, Bordeu addresses the relation between dream and truth in the text later on:

Dans la veille le réseau obéit aux impressions de l'objet extérieur. Dans le sommeil, c'est de l'exercice de sa propre sensibilité qu'émane tout ce qui se passe en lui. Il n'y a point de distraction dans le rêve ; [...] L'origine du réseau y est alternativement active et passive d'une infinité de manières, de là son désordre. Les concepts y sont quelquefois aussi liés, aussi distincts que dans l'animal exposé au spectacle de la nature. Ce n'est que le tableau de ce spectacle réexcité : de là sa vérité, de là l'impossibilité de le discerner de l'état de veille ; nulle probabilité d'un de ces états plutôt que de l'autre. Nul moyen de reconnaître l'erreur que l'expérience. (DPV XVII: 183)

Another example of use of a dream in his erotic satire novel *Les bijoux indiscrets* from 1748. The novel's plot is interrupted with a chapter that tells the protagonist's dream, which includes Diderot's philosophical principle of favouring experience over a philosophical system. Much has been written about Diderot's novels and about the meaning of the dream for this novel's plot. I do not want to go into details but I want point out that Diderot's philosophy, which is, for the most part, not present in the novel's plot, nevertheless is present in the novel; it is explicitly introduced – “Chapitre XXIX, Le meilleur peut-être, et le moins lu de cette histoire. Rêve de Mangogul, ou voyage dans la région des hypothèses” (DPV III: 130)⁵ – and allows to state that dreaming equals philosophising and philosophising equals dreaming.

Conclusions

Put metaphorically, imagination is the ability to paint images in the mind. The term image, “image”, refers to concepts as well as complex scenarios. The elements used in a picture are captured by memory and are arranged by imagination. They are lively interconnected and linked impressions. Diderot makes heavy use of imagination and regards it proper philosophical method that, nevertheless, oscillates between literature and philosophy. There are limits set for the philosophical use of imagination, but nevertheless, the use of imagination is an indication in his writings that philosophical topics are discussed.

⁵ It is chapter XXIX in the original edition from 1747 and chapter XXXII in modern editions. Jacques-André Naigeon added previously unpublished chapters to the novel for the 15-volume-edition of Diderot's collected works, which was published in 1798. This edition is the basis for modern translation; cf. introduction and notes in DPV III: 19–22.

References

Abbreviations

- DPV III:** Diderot (1978a).
DPV IV: Diderot (1978b).
DPV IX: Diderot (1981).
DPV X: Diderot (1980).
DPV XVI: Diderot (1990).
DPV XVII [p. 87–209]: Diderot (1987a).
DPV XVII [p. 291–574]: Diderot (1987b).

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