Enlightenment sensibilism and its implications for the *persona* of the philosopher in the mid-eighteenth century: some first thoughts

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In the first half of the eighteenth century, there emerged a conception of knowledge in which perceptual judgement was integrated into sensation, so that what in the Cartesian tradition had been separated out as two activities—sense perception and perceptual judgement—became united into a single activity. The core sensibilist claim derived from Locke and it was that perception is not sensation plus a perceptual judgement: rather, perception is simply successful sensation. Because the realm of perceptual judgement had also, broadly speaking, been that in which reflection upon one’s conception of oneself occurred, this had implications for the understanding of the *persona* of the philosopher. The embedding within sensation of what had been taken to be the reflective faculty had the effect of embedding not only cognition, but also affective states, and ultimately morality, in sensibility. This new sensibilist conception offered a very different set of resources for exploring the formation of the *persona* generally, and the philosophical *persona* in particular, from that available to seventeenth-century thinkers. Amongst other things, it had profound consequences for psychological, political, moral, and aesthetic questions.

Sensibilism addresses a very fundamental question, that of why our cognitive representations of the world are as they are. It answers this question in a novel way which integrates affective and cognitive factors.\(^1\) This has been obscured by the traditional construal of the Lockean legacy in terms of ‘empiricism’, with the focus on Berkeley and Hume, as those who bring the Lockean position to fruition. But if we see Locke as critically engaging a number of tenets of Cartesianism, as represented both by Descartes himself and by the main contemporary representative of the Cartesian tradition, Malebranche, then in fact it is striking how much Berkeley and Hume owe to Malebranche and how little they owe to Locke. In particular, the systematic use of scepticism to drive epistemological considerations is not a Lockean initiative but rather a distinctive feature of the Malebranchian approach, by contrast with those traditionally deemed Descartes’ ‘rationalist’ successors, Spinoza and Leibniz, who rejected scepticism out of hand as being of no philosophical value. Once we move from Britain to France, however, from Berkeley and Hume to Condillac and Diderot, we find a very different story: a wholesale rejection of the Cartesian tradition, and a serious and systematic exploration and development of Lockean sensibilism without reference to sceptical concerns. As a result, we might expect significant differences in how sensibilism is deployed and what consequences are drawn from it. Although both Diderot and Hume are empiricists in the sense that both insist that all knowledge (at least outside mathematics) derives exclusively from sensation, their respective conceptions of the *persona* of the philosopher differ significantly. Hume complains that he is ‘affrighted and confounded with that forlorn solitude, in which I am plac’d in my philosophy’, feeling that he has been ‘expell’d all

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human commerce, and left utterly abandon’d and disconsolate.’  Diderot, by contrast, identifies such feelings as characteristic of a wholly misguided Cartesian ‘rationalist’ way of pursuing philosophy, for which his version of sensibilism provides the answer.

One might consider that since it is scepticism that induces the feelings of futility and despair in Hume, and since scepticism has been abandoned in the French sensibilist tradition, the solution to Hume’s problems may lie in the abandonment of scepticism. But Humean scepticism is not the Cartesian variety, something to be jettisoned once one has cleared the ground epistemologically; rather, it is a way of life — a distinctively philosophical way of life — which is a source of intellectual discomfort yet crucial to an enlightened understanding of the world and our place in it. If the Enlightenment sensibilist project as Hume conceives it is to be realised, scepticism plays a key role.

One of the consequences of the move from a Cartesian to a Lockean picture of the constitution of our cognitive life is a shift from the construal of the cognitive realm as self-sufficient to a conception on which cognitive, affective and moral questions are essentially interrelated. This is fundamental to the French Lockean and to Hume, and pits them both against the Cartesian tradition, yet it is above all the ways in which they flesh it out that drives the radically different programmes.

**Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century transformations of the understanding of the natural philosopher**

Whatever differences emerge between Hume and Diderot on the understanding of philosophy and what it is to be a philosopher, they share a number of fundamental assumptions that go beyond commitment to a broadly-construed ‘empiricism’. These are a result of developments that bear directly on the understanding of the *persona* of the philosopher. In particular, there are three traditional developments that converge on the question of how the resources available for engaging the *persona* of the philosopher are transformed.

The first of these is the shift from the model of the *persona* of the philosopher as essentially contemplative to that of the philosopher as someone who actively engages and transforms the world. It was Francis Bacon who, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, gave detailed attention to the issue, setting out how natural philosophy might be transformed from a contemplative text-based discipline to one in which the aim was to master natural processes and put them to productive use. The understanding that resulted is summed up nicely by Hume’s statement in the *Inquiry* that ‘The only immediate utility of all sciences, is, to teach us how to controul and regulate future events by their causes.’ The second move is that from the cleric to the *honnête homme* as the paradigmatic practitioner of philosopher.

Third, there is the contrast between someone whose principal aim is integration into and defence of a system, and someone who assesses questions purely on their merits. In its early development, this is usually little more than a rhetorical strategy, but it is one which offers a radically new vision of natural-philosophical practice. The

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5 See my *Descartes’ System of Natural Philosophy* (Cambridge 2002), ch. 8.
issues here are particularly important because it is on them that the question of intellectual morality was largely made to hinge. That is to say, intellectual morality was a question of independence from a system, because prior commitment to a system meant that in assessing arguments one was not assessing them with respect to the evidence but with respect to how well they fit views one already held. This meant a lack of objectivity and a absence of an ability to, or willingness to, assess arguments on their merits. Both Galileo and Descartes levelled arguments against opponents along these lines, albeit for different reasons. In the 1660s in England, however, there began to emerge a different form of challenge to the idea of a system, one which wasn’t a holding position adopted until one’s own system was accepted, but rather one in which genuine questions were raised about whether systematic understanding was always the most suitable and fruitful form of understanding in natural philosophy. The anti-system rhetoric of the Galileo/Descartes era was replaced by something that was genuinely anti-system, and this offered, correlatively, a different view of what the intellectual honesty of the persona consisted in. The new experimental natural philosophy was pursued by Boyle in his pneumatics and Newton in his optics, but it was only with Locke that a developed philosophical alternative began to be offered to the notion that all physical explanation must take the form of reduction to a single underlying system. Later thinkers such as Diderot and Hume took this development differently, but Diderot’s eclecticism and Hume’s scepticism were each offered as alternatives to systematic philosophy.

In part, the move to the philosophical defence of anti-systematic forms of understanding in the wake of Locke turns on a new concern with how knowledge is acquired, and in particular with the sensibilist view that all knowledge derives from sensation, and is, simply in virtue of this, acquired in a piecemeal manner. This is in contrast to the Cartesian view that fundamental ideas about the world are ‘innate’, given prior to experience and not the kinds of thing that could be revised by experience. Such fundamental ideas provide us with a systematic guide to understanding the world, and a criterion for judgement that is prior to experience, that of clarity and distinctness, routinely overrides purely sensory judgements in writers like Descartes and Malebranche. The existence of innate ideas and criteria does not in itself render knowledge unitary in the Cartesian tradition (as it will do for example in the Kantian one), but it does provide some kind of template into which sensory experience can be fitted. Moreover, for Descartes himself, it provides the only way of unifying what would otherwise be—and in the case of automata is—a wholly modularized cognitive life. An independent world comes with a sense of self.

The crucial point here is that, on the Cartesian account, a separate act of conscious judgement is required for us to grasp that our perceptions reflect a physical reality independent of us. But this separate act is just what is Locke removes. For the Lockean tradition, perception is not sensation plus something else, but simply successful sensation. For Locke, the perceptual unity of the thinking thing that engages in the perceptual judgement of the world is just the phenomenal unity of perceptual experience, and we cannot infer anything from this alone about the ultimate unity or simplicity of any further underlying self.

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6 For the details see Gaukroger, Emergence, ch. 6.
7 See Gaukroger, Emergence, ch. 10.
8 See Gaukroger, Descartes’ System, chs. 7 and 8.
Sensibilism in Diderot
Diderot’s concerns are most helpfully approached via the Molyneux problem. In 1688, on reading a French extract of Locke’s Essay in which Locke distinguishes ideas acquired by one sense alone, such as our idea of colours, and ideas acquired by means of more than one sense, such as space, rest, motion, and shape, Molyneux posed a problem about the last, perception of shape. In a letter to Locke of the same year, Molyneux imagines a man blind from birth who is able to distinguish various shapes by touch, who subsequently gains his sight. He asks whether such a person would be able, using his newly restored vision alone, to identify a shape with which he had been familiar through touch. Locke and Molyneux believed that the man would not be able to identify the shape distinguished visually as the same shape he had identified by touch, by contrast with Leibniz, for example, who argued that he would know immediately that the shape was the same as the one identified by touch. The interesting issue here is not so much what answers were given, however, but the basis on which they were given. Locke and Molyneux saw the issue in terms of innate ideas: their view was that Descartes and other advocates of innate ideas mistakenly argue that we have an innate idea of shape and so are able to identify shapes no matter what the organ used to detect them. But in fact the arguments did not hinge on innate ideas as such. Rather, there was a three-way dispute, which turned on the sensus communis, the faculty in which the sense impressions from the various sense organs were unified into a coherent whole, into a unified image of the world. First, there were those, such as Leibniz, who held that the sensus communis consisted of ideas of things, as opposed to purely visual or tactile representations of things, from which the previously blind person can reconstruct the visual image of a cube or a sphere: after all, cubes and spheres are geometrical figures which are abstract ideas, not concrete images. Second, Locke and Molyneux likewise held that visual and tactile experiences of shape held a basic essential relationship to one another: but whereas Leibniz held that the correlation between visual and tactile figures followed automatically from the possession of general non-sense-specific geometrical ideas, Molyneux and Locke held that these correlations had to be learned through ‘exercise’ or ‘experience’. Third, there was the view that the very idea of a sensus communis containing ideas which are not those specific to particular senses is mistaken; in particular, that there is no geometrical ‘abstract extension’ common to sight and touch. This was Berkeley’s radical view.

Berkeley’s theory of the heterogeneity of sense perception raises the key question of modularity in a stark form. For Descartes, the animal has cognitive faculties just as we do but lacks a unifying and unified locus of subjectivity, a self, and has a modularised cognitive life as a result. Human beings, by contrast, because they possess a rational soul, are able to stand back from their cognitive representations of the world, recognise them as their representations, make judgements about them, and exercise free will in respect to them: these are requirements of moral agency, language use, and various other distinctive features of human beings in Descartes’ view. The transcendence of modularity is also crucial for Locke, though he has a more difficult problem because the unification now takes place at the level of sensation itself: perception is simply successful sensation, there is no question of a

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13 See Gaukroger, *Descartes’ System*, chs. 7 and 8.
separate process of judgement. The idea of a unity of sensibility plays much the role that unity of subjectivity plays in Descartes, and in particular, the homogeneous nature of the content of sensations means that they represent something that goes beyond our particular sense organs. They provide us with access to something that goes beyond the capacities of our particular sense organs, even if this access only established the existence of something independent of us, not its nature.

Just how they provide us with such access, however, is a deep and delicate matter. In his *Traité des sensations* of 1754, Condillac, the greatest advocate of sensationalist epistemology in France, asked how, starting from a Lockean account of the nature and origin of our ideas of the world, we could know anything outside our own mental states. He asks us to imagine a statue which we bring alive, as it were, by attributing, one-by-one, various sensory faculties to it, asking what its experience of the world would be like.\(^{14}\) Let us say, for example, that we give the statue the power to smell. We place a flower in front of its nose, and the statue experiences the odour of a rose, or a carnation, or whatever, depending on what object stimulates it. However, the olfactory sensation is not experienced as being that of an external object, but simply as an experiential state. Suppose that we give the statue the power to hear, so that it can experience the full range of auditory variation in pitch, tone and intensity. Again, there is nothing in this experience that would lead it to imagine that that experience had an external source. Vision likewise: the statue would experience light and colour, but there is nothing in this experience that would even suggest an external source of the experience. Arguably, even a statue with all five of the senses which was able to compare, reflect, remember, and accomplish the other intellectual operations, would not be led, on these grounds alone, to imagine that its states were anything but internal and self-contained. Despite having a grasp of spatial relations, for example, the statue would be solipsistic: its sensory experiences would not project it into, or connect it with, the world.

The upshot of Condillac’s position is that we cannot form a conception of an independent world simply in virtue of some cognitive relation that we stand in to the world: its independence can only be established through the affective relations that, on the sensibilist conception, come as part and parcel of cognition. This is the direction that Diderot follows up.

Diderot’s interest in Molyneux’s problem was different from that of his predecessors and contemporaries. Locke, Berkeley and others had used Molyneux’s problem as a means of reflecting on our original perceptions: putting ourselves in the position of someone born blind so that we might reconstruct what it would be like to see without prior judgements and habits. Diderot engages the issue of the means by which one sees the world, whether by sensation alone or a combination of sensation and geometry, coming down firmly on the side of the former. But he sees limited value in such an exercise, doubting whether investigation of a blind person having his sight restored was in fact an appropriate way of discovering the relation between sight and touch, arguing that ‘primitive’ people, metaphysicians, and mathematicians might in fact react very differently on having their sight restored.\(^{15}\) The question that really interests Diderot is how the ‘mentality’ of a blind person, not just his perceptual states, differs from that of a sighted person, and what this tells us about sensibility in general. His interest focused on two cases, Cheseldon’s 1728 report of the recovery of


a boy, previously blind, from cataract operations, and the memoir prefacing the *Elements of Algebra*\(^{16}\) by the blind Cambridge mathematician Nicholas Saunderson.

In his *Letter on the Blind, for the use of the sighted* (1749),\(^{17}\) Diderot uses the case of Saunderson to pit unity of sensibility against a Cartesian unity of subjectivity, arguing that the unity of sensibility, properly construed, is essentially something socially responsible that encourages a well-formed *persona*, whereas the Cartesian is insensible to the world and works merely in abstractions. It is Saunderson’s very blindness that in effect denies him a fully-developed unity of sensibility. A deficient sensibility is primarily a question of an emotional, aesthetic, and moral challenge for Diderot. Because of their impoverished sensibilities, the blind turn their minds inwards and are drawn to thinking in terms of abstractions. Jessica Riskin puts the point well, noting that ‘this made them natural mathematicians and rationalists: in a word, Cartesians. Conversely, Cartesians’ abstract, inward focus made them insensible to the world outside their minds: philosophically blind.’ This leads Diderot to suggest that both the blind and Cartesians, because of their solipsistic cast of mind, were inhumane.\(^{18}\) The blind offer a crucial case study for Diderot because he believes that their abstract manner of experiencing pain in others weakens their sense of sympathy for the suffering of others.\(^{19}\) The situation is in effect the analogue of what in the Cartesian case would be someone — lacking the ability to unify their mental life (perhaps because of melancholia or what we would now think of as various forms of neuroses), and thereby failing to shape themselves satisfactorily into a moral *persona* — whose moral agency, and humanity, would be deficient in comparison with someone (an *honnête homme*) who had achieved this.

What is ultimately at stake for Diderot is the sensory basis of civic life, where the contrast is between sensibility and solipsistic rationalism. The general question underlying this is where the ideas that regulate our lives — our moral, emotional, social, political and intellectual lives — come from. The consequences for language, culture, and history of the Lockean claim that all knowledge derives from sense perception had been drawn in detail by Condillac in his *Essai sur l’origine des connaissances humaines* (1746). Eight years later, in his *Traité des sensations*, his uncompromisingly sensationalist epistemology was employed in the service of the reform of social and political ideas, fundamentally recasting the origins of human abilities and capacities in an effort to reject all outdated sources of authority. This approach is followed up in Diderot, in a distinctive effort to separate morality completely from religion and to rebuild it on a sensationalist basis. It is axiomatic to the sensationalist project that one begins life with a *tabula rasa*, and the question is how one develops a cognitive, affective, and moral life on this basis. For Diderot the question is, having grasped that traditional sources of authority, most notably religious authority, can no longer play this role, whether there are any guidelines that we can follow in cultivating responsible citizens.

Here we have arrived at something that is in a way a starting point for both Diderot and Hume, but also the point at which their paths diverge most strongly. There are three readings of the contrast. First, there is that on which both Diderot and Hume

\(^{16}\) Nicholas Saunderson, *The Elements of Algebra* (Cambridge, 1740), i-xxvi.

\(^{17}\) [Denis Diderot], *Lettre sur les aveugles, à l’usage de ceux qui voient* (London, 1749).


\(^{19}\) See, for example, Diderot, *Oeuvres Philosophiques*, 92-3, where he suggests that the reaction to a man urinating and spurting blood is effectively on a par in the blind.
follow radical programmes, rejecting religious and other forms of belief, and establishing a radically new understanding of what legitimate understanding consists in. In Hume this is achieved by taking scepticism seriously, in Diderot by investigating the legitimacy of various ways of getting from a *tabula rasa* to our present beliefs. Both strategies undermine the idea that traditional religious and cultural beliefs can be considered natural to the human mind, and both set out the replace these with something that embodies rational reflective decisions about how to live and behave. Indeed on this reading neither position looks that far from the Cartesian view that the whole realm of thought can be reformed by founding it on clear and distinct principles. Second, there is the view that Hume is in fact following a more conservative programme in which tradition and custom are constitutive of our lives and thereby irreplaceable, even though their content and role can be modified philosophically, whereas Diderot remains a radical, as on the first reading. Third, there is a reading of both Hume and Diderot on which neither of them advocates that tradition and custom can be completely rejected and replaced by something which has a demonstrably rational basis.

I am not at a stage of thinking about these questions where I can claim to establish one of these readings with certainty, and in the space of this paper I would not in any case have the opportunity to canvass all the options. Instead, I want to offer some brief suggestions as to why the third option seems to be the most promising.

**Scepticism and Eclecticism**

Let us begin with Hume, and particularly with the role that scepticism plays in his work. It is worth distinguishing from the outset two kinds of sceptical project, one distinctive of Descartes, the other distinctive of Pyrrhonism. The first is a very much a means to an end. Cartesian hyperbolic doubt questions even those things that we are, and remain, certain about. The point of Cartesian doubt is not to lead to us wonder whether there might genuinely not be an external world after all, for example, but to prompt the thought that if we are unable to justify such a basic belief — on the grounds that anything that we might say in vindication of that belief would be compatible with the evil demon hypothesis for example — then how are we ever to assess contentious beliefs? Descartes takes this approach in order to force us to accept a particularly demanding criterion for knowledge — clarity and distinctness — which constrains our basic thinking about the mind, the physical world, and God in a way which, he believes, is the only one that yields true and certain knowledge, where what he is interested in is the contentious cases, e.g. in natural philosophy. Pyrrhonism was an entirely different type of enterprise. The Pyrrhonists were in competition with Stoics, Epicureans, and others on the question of the appropriate form of understanding of the world and our place in it in. The main schools of Hellenistic philosophy had each sought to present a philosophy that transcended the flux and disorder of life and achieved peace of mind (*ataraxia* or *apatheia*). The Stoics had argued that this was to be achieved by grasping the underlying reality of things in terms of their general principles. The Epicureans had maintained that knowledge of the principles governing things was a means to an end: we understand things so that we need no longer fear them, with fear of death being paramount amongst those forms of fear we must overcome. The Pyrrhonists and later Academics — using the image of the painter Apelles, who failed to create the effect of the foam on the horse’s mouth, gave up, and flinging his sponge at the wall, accidentally hit the painting in such a way that it produced the required effect — had argued that peace of mind came
when one realised that no understanding was possible: the tranquillity we seek comes to us, as if by chance, once we stop searching for it.

One key difference between Cartesian and Pyrrhonist scepticism is that the former is directed towards knowledge claims, leaving beliefs untouched, whereas Pyrrhonism is directed towards beliefs. In this very important respect, Humean scepticism is like Pyrrhonism in that it is the kind of thing that can offer itself as a way of life — it is a candidate for a philosophical way of life, as it were — and in that sense it is quite distinct from Cartesian scepticism, which explicitly leaves our beliefs as they are. But by contrast with Pyrrhonism, Hume is at pains to argue that it is not successful in this role. It is indeed directed towards beliefs, but despite appearances cannot in fact undermine these beliefs. Indeed, the distinctive features of the Humean position derive largely from his investigation of why philosophical enquiry generally, of which scepticism is a crucial ingredient, cannot completely undermine our ordinary unreflective beliefs, but can at best modify them in the light of a new understanding of the practices of common life which engender these unreflective beliefs. As Hume puts it, ‘philosophical decisions are nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected.’

Genuine scepticism, carried out properly, without smuggling in any of one’s favoured theses, leads nowhere in its own right, on Hume’s view: ‘the understanding, when it acts alone, and according to its most general principles, entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or in common life.’ Scepticism is a genuine route to self-understanding in Hume, but while it provides the means, it cannot generate such self-understanding in its own right because it is strictly contentless. It removes content; it does not supply its own. All it can generate in its own right (if pursued to the end) is philosophical melancholy and disenchantment. It completely clears the ground, not however so that one might start again from scratch, but rather so that one might reflect on the world of common life. The content it removes is not the world of common life, as in Cartesian scepticism, but those forms of religious and philosophical thought that have misled us in our reflections on it. The aim is to hone our understanding of the common world. Indeed, as Livingston points out, for Hume ‘civilisation is that process whereby the conventions of common life are raised to the level of critical self-consciousness.’

Hume’s ‘conservatism’ is often pitted against the ‘radicalism’ of the French philosophes, especially that of his contemporaries such as d’Alembert and Diderot. At the centre of such a contrast between, on the one hand, a commitment to the customs and traditions, and a rejection of the idea that these can be overturned, and, on the other, the attempt to reform culture from scratch, pointing to the wholly conventional nature of customs and traditions, and stressing that we inherit these by education and upbringing, not as part of a natural endowment. Hume, of course, doesn’t deny that traditions and customs change, and he doesn’t deny that they can be reformed. But, on his view, they are a constant feature of any human social arrangement and they cannot be reformed from outside, as philosophers have been wont to try. To attempt to stand outside them places one in a world permanently empty of content, not one full of potentialities.

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20 Hume, Enquiry, xii. iii. ¶130 (162 in Selby-Bigge edn.)
21 Hume, Treatise, Book I, Part 4, sect. 7; Selby-Bigge edn. 267-8.
22 Donald W. Livingston, Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium (Chicago, 1998), 196; see also idem, Hume’s Philosophy of Common Life (Chicago, 1984).
23 Livingston, for example, in the works just cited, draws such a contrast.
One thing Hume and the French *philosophes* have in common is their rejection of any attempt to erect a systematic form of understanding. In part the kind of thing rejected is scholasticism, whereby to be a philosopher meant to be an advocate of a philosophical system. But another thing they rejected is what they took to be the Cartesian procedure of relying wholly on one’s own resources. Certainly writers such as d’Alembert and Diderot want to replace traditional religious and philosophical beliefs with new ones which have been subjected to the dictates of reason. But the subjection of beliefs to the dictates of reason is not by any means the same thing as the generation of beliefs by reason, and indeed, as I have presented it, Hume’s version of the Enlightenment project can be interpreted as subjecting beliefs to reason. The difference is not that Hume believes we are locked into a set of traditions and customs whether we like it or not, whereas d’Alembert and Diderot want to replace traditional beliefs with something completely new. The latter certainly reject the Humean position, but they do not advocate building up beliefs from scratch, or even rejecting existing beliefs, customs and traditions. Rather, they think we are free to choose from the stock of existing theories, customs and traditions, that our freedom consists in our ability to judge these and accept or reject them as we see fit, assessing them on results, so to speak, without committing ourselves to any views that their originators might have had about the universality and exclusivity of their theories.

Diderot and d’Alembert flesh out their anti-systematic form of understanding of the world in different terms. The very alphabetical ordering of the entries in the *Encyclopédie*, modelled on Chambers’ *Dictionary*, and in stark and conscious contrast to the thematic organisation of scholastic encyclopedic projects, and it offers the entries as discrete items which one can follow up as one wishes. This approach is thought through in terms of eclecticism. Consider for example the entry on eclecticism, drafted by d’Alembert:

The eclectic is a philosopher who, riding roughshod over prejudice, tradition, antiquity, universal consent, authority, in a word, everything that subjugates the mass of minds, dares to think for himself, goes back to the most clear and general principles, examines them, discusses them, allowing only that which can be demonstrated from his experience and his reason; and having analyzed all philosophical systems without any deference or partiality, he constructs a personal and domestic one that belongs to him. I say a personal and domestic philosophy because the ambition of the eclectic is not so much to be the instructor of the human race as its disciple; not so much to reform others as to reform himself; to know the truth rather than to teach the truth. He is not a man who plants and sows; he is a man who reaps and sifts. … The sectarian is a man who embraces the doctrine of a philosopher; the eclectic, on the contrary, is a man who recognises no master.24

Hume’s Enlightenment hostility to systematic forms of thought is achieved through an anchoring of philosophical thought in the unsystematic world of custom and tradition. For d’Alembert and Diderot, by contrast, this is achieved through a conscious eclecticism. This eclecticism also meets another core Enlightenment demand: autonomy. The eclectic philosopher shows his autonomy not by rejecting all systems but by freely picking and choosing those doctrines he sees merit in, and rejecting those he does not. Hume’s solution certainly preserves a role for philosophy as an autonomous practice whereby we can enter into a reflective relation with custom and tradition (something not just characteristic of the philosopher but, at a more general

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level, characteristic of civilisation for Hume), but it does not establish the degree of autonomy from the dominant culture than d’Alembert and Diderot seek.

With this difference on the question of autonomy comes a correlative difference between the two, which bears directly on the question of the persona of the philosopher. For d’Alembert and Diderot, the eclectic provides a model of a persona for the philosopher that embodies the aims both of an Enlightenment culture and of a sensibilist epistemology. Their distinctively Enlightenment version of eclectism is necessary and sufficient for the cultivation of the persona of the philosopher. Hume can allow no such sufficiency. For Hume, the model that is provided by the sole true philosophical path, scepticism, yields nothing in its own right, and the persona generated by this sole true philosophical path is one doomed to melancholy and loss of hope, which is not something that can be recommended. Nevertheless, once such a persona re-engages what he or she has rejected at the beginning of his enquiry, there emerges a persona that engages the world in a way that is far from melancholic and hopeless emerges. For this, philosophy is necessary, but, by contrast with the French Lockeans, it could never be sufficient.

25 Though Kierkegaard seems to recommend something close to this in the next century.