

PhD Thesis

**Distance and counter-directedness in the thinking of
Montaigne, Diderot and Sade**

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1. Aims and topic of dissertation

The present dissertation focuses on three authors; the essayist Montaigne, the encyclopaedic Diderot, and Sade who catalogues the pleasures and pains of body. These labels might provide some orientation but they are not much suitable for revealing dilemmas of these oeuvres which lack in a unified philosophical position but contain the same motives, metaphors.

On the one hand, all three authors belong to a tradition which had not yet specialized in disciplines or distinctions between artistic and scientific attitudes. This is evidenced, among other facts, by Diderot's *Thoughts on the Interpretation of Nature*. Its author has no well-defined preconception about the meaning of philosophy and accordingly his distinction does not cover disciplines or territories of thinking but attitudes only, the duality of rational and experimental philosophy. By representing the latter, Diderot introduces assumptions based on unfinished scientific results which the imagination transforms into hypothetical combinations destined to expand the perspective of scientific experiments.

The primary objective of philosophy relies in unearthing the relations between phenomena which renew and vary permanently. Therefore, the horizon of imagination as well as cognition cannot be reduced to the circle of familiar (already-experienced) configurations (see e. g. *An Apology for Raymond Sebond* by Montaigne, *D'Alembert's dream* by Diderot, or any of the experiments of Sade). The temporal horizon of knowledge expands and the fantasies become the configurations of an unexperienced but conceivable progress. We interpret this tendency as a pursuit of an undifferentiated intensity of thinking.

This sort of experimental philosophy presupposes an intellectual character of radical impartiality and distance against the internal impulses and emotions of the self. Montaigne came to realize that self-identity (incapability of distancing ourselves) encumbers the passions to manifest themselves. The renowned paradox of Diderot states that the less one experiences the emotions the more capable he or she is of displaying them. Likewise, the characters of Sade become only impersonal elements in the sexual practices.

We share the view that all three authors represent a sort of anti-Cartesian fault line in modern French philosophy where the ontological positioning of the subject is replaced by the

intentional decentralization of the self. Following the paradox, the manifestation presupposes the eradication of the ego, the disappearance of Cartesian subject. From this perspective can we come to seemingly illogical (paradoxical) conclusions like nothing and everything, incapability and capability are identical to each other. Basically, we aim to clarify the meaningful aspects of the paradox by exposing these back and forth movements.

The configuration dominating our interpretation is nothing but the counter-directedness which can be defined as a sort of equivalence of contraries (a transition in the extremity of poles like point-infinity, nothing-everything, unproductivity-productivity). This philosophy avoids oppositional standpoints and distinctions like small-grandiose, interior-exterior (see e. g. Montaigne's allegory in which human body appears as complex and multiple as universe itself).

Because of the interdependence of poles, objective entities, in lack of any subjective formulation, are not more than unarticulated intensities while subjective self-creation becomes arbitrary and undiversified without considering the diversity of objective circumstances. This way of thinking is motivated by a sort of 'back-and-forth' stimulation instead of mutual exclusion.

Nevertheless, the possibility of formulating the renewing intensities, unrevealed zones of our existence develops as a challenge for all three authors who are driven by the same project to articulate every possible intensity. The world and almost each of its phenomenon enjoys a hypertrophic attention with the purpose of avoiding deadlock. In this teleology, the notion of one and only truth, the authenticity and self-identity inevitably becomes subordinated to the conception of plurality, intensity and individuality.

The possible historical framework of our dissertation is outlined by Alfred Baeumler's book titled *Das Irrationalitätsproblem in der Ästhetik und Logik des 18. Jahrhunderts bis zur Kritik der Urteilskraft* in which the problem of irrationality is not contextualized on Cartesian basis. As stated in Baeumler's book, the origin of individualism comes from the Renaissance which, however, was dominated by the unconscious experience of existence. Then it was the 18th century that founded the doctrine of taste giving rise to the self-awareness of the subject and an emancipation from authorities. Thus, irrationalism is defined as the essence of individuality unavailable to logic or authorities like religion, science or natural determination.

Baeumler pays a special attention to the influence of French philosophy of 17th and

18th century on (mainly Kantian) German philosophy. He thinks that French philosophers like Bouhours and Dubos contributed to the development of German aesthetics.

Although it should be emphasized that characteristics of anti-Cartesian individual cannot be reduced to an entire liberation of objective reality and certain regulations of reason. Absence of authorities does not equal an unlimited arbitrariness. The critical thinking is based upon the elimination of both the only absolute found and indefinite diversity of individual experiences.

According to Baeumler, this way of thinking combines the results of two different tendencies (Cartesian rationalism and Renaissance). The same duality (coexistence of unity and diversity) can be detected in the nature of metaphor which is plural and identifiable at the same time.

The termination of authorities' dominance results in the development of individuality which, however, remains to be objective and impersonal abstained from romantic sentimentalism, projection of emotions.

This sort of impersonality lacks the depth of thought, increasing of the dramatic intensity which are compensated by a quantitative plurality, accumulation of horizontally expanding thoughts. None of these authors' oeuvre includes psychological analysis, moving memory recalls or any other meticulous description of characters. The self of the *Essays* is similar to a brain working constantly on reproduction of anecdotes and commentaries. Sade's characters are like telling machines without any past or future resuscitated by permanent retelling of stories varied to infinity. The characters of Diderot are also given shape by mainly rhetoric constructions like unceasing disputes and monologues.

Nonetheless, we must hereby declare our intention to clarify – beyond the identical motives – the differences between these oeuvres in the closing chapter. According to our thesis, influence of humanism and intellectual flexibility becomes less significant from Montaigne to Sade. This tendency leads to a cessation of renaissance zest for life in favour of preferring representation to experience. The centre of this progress is marked by the paradox (e. g. the *Paradox of the Actor* by Diderot) promoting the priority of display versus experience.

2. Methods Applied

We put a motive-based interpretation to the centre of our methodological assumptions since we turned out to explore the same motives below the surface of contextual diversity. We faced the same movements in these texts whether they be epistemological, aesthetic, literary or philosophical. Most of the *Essays* can be identified both as confessions and philosophical discourses like Diderot's studies (e. g. the study on beauty) and dramas encompass the same motives. These consonances maintain unity while unity is decentralized by the diversity of themes and contexts.

Following another methodological assumption, the function of definitions does not lie in marking boundaries but rather in their capacity to produce new layers or aspects to thinking that is meant to reflect an impression of endless vivacity. Therefore, concepts are principally replaced by metaphors which are not only additional parts of the text but rather act like 'hinges', interaction points of the discourses.

Hence, no essential difference can be taken between a concept and a metaphor (see e. g. Diderot's oeuvre in which the configuration of the spider or the actor follow the same movement). Thus, counter-directedness becomes the dominant configuration being able to produce some sort of continuity among these eclectic oeuvres reflected by the diversity of themes and metaphors irreducible to clear and distinct definitions or concepts.

This position presupposes a direction towards the enlightenment of discursive nodes instead of clandestine textual sources causing difficulties in selection of unifying motives among the vast variety of discourses.

Some may object that distance and counter-directedness highlighted in our dissertation do not qualify as concepts not even tropes but only reflect a spatial positioning or the mechanics of movements. In the course of the thesis elaboration, several concepts and tropes offered themselves, the central role of which was considered to be worth rejecting for various reasons. *Hyperbolic* was one of them in the sense as used in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's study entitled *Diderot: Paradox and mimesis*. Following Lacoue-Labarthe's interpretation, hyperbolic movement – in correlation with the *Paradox of the Actor* and presumably certain mathematical and function theory definitions – means an infinite exchange of contraries, an equivalence of opposite poles. In this case, what is the difference between hyperbolic and

paradoxical? Is hyperbola (or hyperbole!) a type of paradox? How would it be appropriate to contextualize hyperbole (the rhetoric sense of the term) which means overstatement and may not be less relevant in terms of the three authors? Overstatement does not definitely involve counter-directedness and vice versa.

Chiasmus as a trope of exchange can also be taken into consideration. However, in case of chiasmus it is not necessary that exchange supervenes between radical contraries and it frequently entails two completely different meanings or conclusions.

In *The Concept of Irony*, Paul de Man depicts this process (namely the development of distance between the author and the text) with the concept of irony associated with negative attributes like *error*, *madness* and *simpleminded stupidity*. De Man unreflectingly assumes bipolarity between playfulness and madness (positivity and negativity).

Thus, irony expresses discontinuity and instability in the place of continuity and stability. By contrast, counter-directedness makes us turn to an opposite task of trying to demonstrate identity and equivalence where difference and discrepancy appears to be more obvious.

Regarding Montaigne, Diderot and Sade, we find ourselves in the state of reflected instability. Nowhere can we get hold of the unexpected factor that forms an integral part of the irony. Discourse voluntarily commits itself to the absence of centre.

It must be emphasized that we do not wish to entirely separate our conception from deconstruction which will be most obvious in the style and orientation (certain interpretive preferences) of our dissertation. We firmly believe that although deconstruction cannot be considered a school, it implies basic elements (transition between concepts and contexts, highlight of metaphoric movements etc.) the influence of which we cannot escape.

Nevertheless, we found it more appropriate to apply certain conceptual limitations (for instance using the term of distance instead of the concept of irony or ignoring the conceptualization of metaphysics and critics of metaphysics). The reason of this self-limitation is primarily due to the uncertainty as well as irrelevance to decide whether these authors represented a metaphysical or an anti-metaphysical way of thinking. Naturally, numerous hyperbolic, chiasmic or ironic movements can be detected in these texts the metaphorical activity of which cannot be reduced to any privileged configuration.

With regard to this irreducible intensity, we must mention another author, namely

Gilles Deleuze, whose books significantly influenced us (perhaps more significantly than reflected in the number of citations).

Another objection may concern the proportionality of the chapters. The chapter on Diderot is much longer than any of the other chapters which can be traced back to a less complex but all the more firm premise: among the three authors basically Diderot is the only one whose oeuvre (and very often one piece of this oeuvre) includes contradictions imposing a great load on the interpreter. Certain contradictions might be noticed in the oeuvre of Montaigne and Sade, notwithstanding these do not lead to polemic constructions and seemingly insoluble discrepancies within the entire oeuvre.

3. Results

According to our assumption, the oeuvre of Montaigne, Diderot and Sade represents a certain fault line in modern French philosophy. We argue that this fault line is based on the elimination of oppositions (e. g. between reason and imagination, science and art) which is related to the pursuit of an undifferentiated intensity of thinking as well as individuality as described by Baeumler.

Although, individuality was not one of our most frequently used terms, its main attributes (disappearance of ego, perspective diversity, dissolution in metaphors, effacement of presence and conceptual thinking) have a significant impact.

The disappearance of ego is identical to the lack of its presence in the moments when the challenge of experiencing the passion arises. The ego is shrunk to a tiny point and regains its contours only by way of distance. Therefore, its presence becomes indirect and represented which results in the interaction of actuality and potentiality. Following one of our main theses, distance and indirectness replaces presence-centred thinking both in terms of epistemology and experience of existence. However, the importance of presence is preserved in the form of an intensity stimulating supplementation and re-presentation.

This tendency commenced to take form in Montaigne's oeuvre as demonstrated by several examples. According to some approaches, Montaigne can be regarded as an apologist of conformism (Pascal) while others found him the philosopher of stoic resignation and

balance. The passages highlighted by us, on the contrary, aim to portray the dynamics of contrasts below the seemingly balanced surface of the essays. This is true in the context of epistemology as well as life philosophy. The former enumerates several configurations that seem to be unrealistic while the latter shows us passages confronting the impossibility of direct experience in terms of basic capabilities like procreating, crying or speaking. As demonstrated by several examples, Montaigne's solution to the problem lies in a particular method of combining negative and positive.

Distance and counter-directedness also play a decisive role in Diderot's philosophy. *Paradox of the Actor* can serve as a cornerstone, a sort of epicentre, in outlining Diderot's eclectic oeuvre. As claimed by its renowned thesis, the less an emotion is experienced the more productive its display can be. The distance makes its appearance between experience and representation. Since most of Diderot's examples cannot be reduced to the sphere of theatre, we argue that his paradox has a philosophical relevance far beyond the context of aesthetic. Following our thesis, the paradox is to be conceived as a reflection on the issue of enunciation, and thus can be linked to other issues emerging in other texts (e. g. status of the ego, limits of cognition, position of god). Basically we attempt to clarify the presence of the same – back and forth, counter-directed – configuration among the variety of themes in Diderot's oeuvre.

According to our thesis, the paradox is a reflection on the issue of enunciation as convincingly outlined in Lacoue-Labarthe's study. Lacoue-Labarthe's local reading (almost every citation comes from the *Paradox of the Actor*) fails to contextualize the role of paradox and distance in Diderot's oeuvre. We assume that the *Paradox of the Actor* can be associated with problems appearing in other texts (for example the status of the self, the boundaries of cognition, the position of God). We basically attempt to clarify that the same movements lie behind the variety of themes. *D'Alembert's dream* is also centred around the problem of self-identity, the formula of 'I am myself' which is permanently destabilized by counter-arguments. Finally, the brain remains to be the only stable point of existence. Despite its small size, the brain is capable of continuous regeneration and has an unlimited receptive potential: stimulus centre in lack of any autonomous existence. As in the case of the actor, we face the duality of reductive and expansive orientation presupposing one another.

According to our interpretation, the suspension of the self, the dominant role of distance reaches its culmination point at Sade who, in any case, preferred the representation to

the experience. In the texts of Sade, the body and each of the physical activities appears only as part of a narrative or in the form of a visual display completely subordinated to an absolute indirect representation.

In the closing chapter, we sum up the main conclusions of our thesis as well as make some remarks on the historical framework unfolding in Baeumler's conception. In addition, by considering the differences we give reasons in support of the idea that the indirect, artificial and represented way of experience becomes more and more prevailing from Montaigne to Sade which can be traced back to an intensifying mistrust against the organic and spontaneous.



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List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian book chapters (6)

1. **Sós, Cs.:** A dekonstrukció peremvidékein: A metafizikai érintettségre vonatkozó kérdés Jacques Derrida és Paul de Man esetében.
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