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The secularism of Destutt de Tracy's "IDEOLOGY"

In the second edition of his anonymous summary of Charles Dupuis' *Origine de tous les cultes*, Destutt de Tracy associated his own views about religion with those of Dupuis. "Both," he wrote, "profess with great assurance that nothing is known and nothing can be known [...] [as to whether] the first cause of the universe be blind or intelligent [...] But we also consider that, if it is blind, all prayer is without purpose, if it is intelligent, all worship is unworthy of it and insults it [...]" (Tracy 1804, 160).

One can consider this a declaration of agnosticism, a term that was coined only a century later by T.H. Huxley. Tracy's gloss is not atheist: He does not say God does not exist, but only that nothing can be known as to whether God exists. His is a declaration of ignorance, except that he professes it "with great assurance" – an ironical juxtaposition.

This is Tracy's boldest and most explicit statement about religion, but his previous statements are perfectly consistent with it, if less bold. His first enunciation came in 1790 when he was a deputy in the Constituent Assembly, which in November 1790 had nationalised all church properties. Efforts from all sides were being made to establish a new relationship with what was left of the Gallican church. Opposing the view that the church should be independent from the state, Tracy intervened:

"No one has the right to limit the powers of the Legislative Body, because nobody is superior to it. One could never prove that our religion prevents us from making the arrangements which the National Assembly has made for the good of the kingdom... The spiritual authority is foreign to the National Assembly." (*Archives parlementaires*, 21 janvier 1791, XXII, 367; hereafter abbreviated *A.P.*)

Subsequently, Tracy defended the Assembly's right to establish as few parishes as it saw fit (*A.P.* XXII, 477). On April 13, 1790, the abbé Gerle, a Carthusian, made a last ditch motion to save the country's Catholicity by suggesting the Assembly declare it the religion of France. The rejection of his proposal was a major decision in the history of the National Assembly (*A.P.* XII, 716, 719). It steered France in a direction she had not intended to go at the epoch of the formation of the *cahiers de doléances* or the early weeks of the Estates General or even the first months of the Constituent Assembly.

On 19 May 1791, Tracy defended the establishment of the *état civil*. More than any other law, including that of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy of July 1790, this act secularized France. Subsequently, one's identity as a Frenchman was established by the state: In the old regime if one were not a Catholic one was not legally a Frenchman. After 1792, all acts of

passage – birth, marriage and death – were recorded by the state. Churches could also keep records but they did not have the force of law in secular France. Tracy's support of this institution referred back to his earlier intervention about the sovereignty of the Assembly in matters of religion. He makes no profession of belief or unbelief as he did in 1804 with respect to Dupuis. But there is from the start a marked tendency to deny the nation and individual Frenchman their plurisecular Catholic identity (*A.P.* XXVI, 238).

As commander of cavalry in Lafayette's army of the Center, Tracy foiled, by his own account, a defection to the enemy and then retired to Auteuil only to be imprisoned in October 1792. There, according to François Mignet, Tracy devoted himself to studying Locke and Condillac in prison and came up with a series of "equations" which were meant to solve the problem of man in general and revolutionary man in particular. It was due to the lack of palpable identity and understanding of the basic components of human life, beginning with perceiving=knowledge=truth, proceeding through virtue=happiness=sentiment of living to liberty=equality=philanthropy that society's problems arose. As might be surmised by the use of equations (à la Condorcet), he sought to make a mathematically certain social philosophy: "Morality and politics are susceptible of demonstration" (Mignet 1842, I, 414). By their omission from these equations, religion and theology were certainly *not* susceptible of such demonstration. The notion, however, is here if only by its omission. Happiness, understood in the immanentist terms of the Enlightenment, is the goal of life, not the love of God.

Liberated in October 5, 1794, Tracy was elected to the newly formed Institut national, Section de l'Analyse des Sciences et Idées, as an associate member on February 18, 1796. The Institute quickly acquired the reputation of being irreligious in spite of contrary pronouncements by such members as Louis-Sébastien Mercier and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre.

Tracy lost no time as an associate member to deliver a series of memoirs on the "faculty of thinking" from April 1796 onward. Perhaps his most famous one was the second of June 20, 1796, in which he launched a new (more agnostic) name for this new "science of ideas." It would be called "ideology," the exact Greek transcription of science of ideas, rather than metaphysics, which was too discredited by the Enlightenment even though philosophers continued to use it. Nor could it be called psychology which denotes a knowledge of the soul, which he stated rhetorically "You certainly do not flatter yourselves as having" (Destutt de Tracy 1992, 71). Although Tracy saw this as a first philosophy leading to "the greatest of the arts [...] that of regulating society [...]" (Ibid 39), it was initially intended to be more restricted: a science which would rescue the mind from the domain of the priests – a "positive" approach to human understanding which would be pursued in a materialistic method, wary of all

vestiges of what would soon be called spiritualism and its supposition of “active” faculties of the mind, consciousness, particularly “reflection.” For Tracy there was no real difference between sensing and thinking (“penser c’est toujours sentir,” Destutt de Tracy 1801, 35). Pierre-Louis Ginguené, Joseph-Marie Degérando, Joachim Le Breton, F.M.G. Maine de Biran would be the revisionists and dissenters of this bold reductionism of Tracy and his colleague and dear friend, the Doctor Pierre Jean Georges Cabanis, who pursued a parallel and physiological reductionism in simultaneous memoirs at the Institute.

Tracy went further in shaking off the traces of any residual religion in an article, “Sur un système complet de bibliographie ou ordre des facultés,” published anonymously in the official state newspaper, the *Moniteur Universel*, of 8/9 Brumaire Year VI [29/30 October, 1797], later acknowledged in his *Elémens d'idéologie*, III *Logique* (Paris an XIII [1805], 81). It is based on Debure’s Bibliography as Diderot’s *Encyclopedia* had been based on Chamber’s and the exercise was similar to D’Alembert’s revision of Bacon’s Encyclopedic Tree in his “Preliminary Discourse to the *Encyclopedia*.” D’Alembert excluded theology from the rational branches of learning, relegating it to the Imagination (rather than Reason). Destutt excluded all religious sciences from Debure’s bibliography, thus proceeding much further than had D’Alembert. The rationale was “primo vivere deinde philosophari” (Destutt de Tracy 1992, 16). Explaining further he asserts all theological science “comes from God if it is true, or is a dream, if it is false; thus it is above or below human reason, and in both cases does not belong with the products of human reason” (Ibid 1972, 26). One will note the resemblance of the wording of this last sentence to the anonymous 1804 introduction to Dupuis’ *Origine*. The publication of this article occurred just weeks after the coup de Fructidor, 1797, when recently elected royalist deputies were eliminated from the Councils and a nation-wide *enquête* into public and private schools was undertaken to determine whether the religious or republican nature prevailed in public and private schools. These months have been referred to as the second Terror, when, for instance, 1100 priests were deported to Guyana and elsewhere. Tracy’s article affirmed the spirit of Fructidor.

A few months after the resolution of this royalist electoral victory by the coup d’etat of Fructidor, the Institute posed a question for a prize competition (in the tradition of the old academies): “What are the means of founding morality among a people?” The ideologue and public administrator Pierre-Louis Roederer, a correspondent of Tracy, had established the orientation of the Institute on this question. It would be secular; there was no need to base public morality on religion (Staum 1996, 68-70). The hostile 1795 separation of church and state in France was thus quite different to that of the 1791 US First Amendment.

Roederer and others focussed their attention on funerals which tested the conflict between Catholic ceremonies, which were not supposed to be public, and secular rites. Moreover, recent years had witnessed profanations of royalist tombs. It was important for the republic to get control of death and dying (Staum 1996, 68), so the question was restated as a prize competition in 1799. Meanwhile the Institute supported essays emphasizing other secular, public ceremonies and festivals as a means of creating public morality. It was to these latter that Tracy addressed a thoroughly secular, and again, anonymous “Quels sont les moyens de fonder une morale chez un peuple?” (Destutt de Tracy 1970).

He did not think the government ought to instill morality through festivals. That was to neglect the artillery of an army for its music. Tracy here postures as a steely, unsentimental realist. In addition to festivals, he also dismisses speeches, orations and sermons (all so common in the observance of the *decadi*, the revolutionary calendar’s day of rest), by municipal officials that apparently bored listeners to death. Nothing direct could be adopted to foster morality. Everything had to be instilled by indirection, by the creation or support of institutions. Much of this involves a complete disestablishment of religion. Tracy’s jabs against priests leave little doubt as to his desire to establish a more secular morality than that of his Institute colleagues: “The legislator will stop paying all priests and will not permit them to interfere in any way with civil acts or with education: at the end of ten years, everyone will think like the professor, without his having said a word.” (Destutt de Tracy 1970, 468).

Consequently, it is necessary to exclude priests “from all salary or public function” (Ibid). Salaries had been instituted for the first time by the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, discontinued by the Convention in 1793 and ruled out by the Law of Separation of Church and State of 1795. They would be re-instated by Napoleon’s Concordat of 1801 with the Catholic Church. Characteristically thorough and consistent, Tracy is uncompromising on this issue. His reason seems to be more than legal. He wishes the state to accord no sanction to what cannot be admitted by reason.

Eliminating religion will secularize public morality. Swiftly executed “repressive laws” (Ibid 439), which Beccaria recommended; policemen rewarded in proportion to their captures, will be the means of enforcement. Tracy seems to even be wary of more popular instruction. (The enquête of Year VI of primary schools had shown the prevalence of religious instruction in public as well as private primary schools. They constituted a sea of belief which might be hard to dry up. In any case the Directory proved fairly unequal to the task.) Dispersion of accumulated wealth, equality of inheritances and prohibition of wills, prevention of speculation and of property sequestrations, balance of payments, legalization of divorce (thus

eliminating marriages of interest), freedom of commerce, destruction of privileged bodies, reduction of taxes of the laboring class were further measures he recommended for instilling public morality. The last suggestion alone he claimed, would do more good than any direct moralizing whether through education or religion (Ibid 425-462).

We have seen in the commentary of Dupuis, that Tracy is not a theist. Socially, he is not a proponent of man as a free moral agent in the classic or Christian sense, but rather stresses mechanistic inducements to civic morality. His moral theory is thus both functional and materialistic – functional in that he sees the reproduction of morality as a function of something else like taxes or property arrangements; materialism because he believes human beings do not do so much what they ought, as what they perceive to be in their interests. These interests are for the most part material so that if you want to create industries, for instance, you should make laws against fast speculation, rather than teach the virtue of moderation. This approach to morality presumes that human beings do not have free will and we know from his *Mémoire sur la faculté de penser* that Tracy did not go beyond Locke's famous formulation that the individual will is free to execute his will but not to create it. If individuals do not have free will, exhortation is useless. They will only act as their will dictates. Music, speeches, ceremonies will do no good. But if the legislator impinges on other material interests, then they will react as to a physical stimulus.

The “Quels sont les moyens” is obviously a secular document. It is not a tirade against the clergy, but an accumulation of subtle suggestions that cut them out of the picture, as indeed the government was trying to do by deportations. While supporting the Directory's overall anticlerical stance, he is arguing that the secularized spirituality of theophilanthropy, festivals and ceremonies is not fully secular. His more fundamental approach dismisses more elevated forms of human behavior as derivative of something deeper and material.

It is insulting to one's sense of humanity to be told that only a more repressive police force and a more liberal divorce law is going to induce one to be more legal or more faithful. It is deeply disturbing to the laboring class to be told that it is not motivated sufficiently to be schooled. (Although, frankly the idea of cutting its taxes makes perfect sense.) Tracy's attack on revolutionary moralism undercuts the basic intellectualist presumption of the French Revolution found in the 1789 preamble of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizens: that “ignorance, or contempt for the rights of man are the sole causes of public misfortunes and the corruption of governments [...]”. If sermons, ceremonies and lessons are eliminated, the task of moralisation, of enlightenment, will come from secular savants, not priests, and morality will emerge from material channels, rather than descend from heaven.

That environment, institutions and laws are the sole cause of public misfortunes – is an exaggeration of one sub-text of the Enlightenment: the materialist reductionist one, rather than the Voltairean or Rousseauian deist ones.

Tracy's materialism consists in 1) asserting the secularity of the public domain and the primordial authority of the Legislature to enforce it as he had said in 1790; 2) undercutting the spiritual mission of priests, above all, but also of the government through ceremonies, speeches, festivals, music; 3) relying on institutional physical means of repression and encouragement such as a motivated police force and intelligent law-makers.

Similar tendencies can be found in Tracy's more abstract writings of the period. Several articles on Berkeley, Kant and Descartes maintain the same materialist orientation (Destutt de Tracy 1992). Tracy was a sensationalist realist whose major contribution to philosophy was the proof that we do know that bodies external to us exist – something which the idealists tended to deny. He disputes Berkeley, because in spite of the fact that he would agree with him and Locke that all we know are our ideas, Tracy's ideology does not require a perceiving God for the perceived sensible thing to exist. For Berkeley the sensible object exists only in so far as it is sensed and thus absolutely only in the perception by God. Kant maintained we cannot know the thing in itself and revised Aristotelian categories to explain how we do know them. Tracy considers Kant's categories of the understanding to be a variation on the Leibnizian, Cartesian theme of innate ideas. In his *Mémoire sur la faculté de penser*, his *Projet d'Elémens d'Idéologie*, Tracy pursued further a materialist analysis of the faculties of thinking, the chief characteristic of which was to deny any Lockean, Condillacan or Kantian "spirituality" to the thinking process and to the faculties that generate it and consequently to thought which is only not even as much as "transformed sensation" but sensation itself ("penser c'est toujours sentir"). All this, as we well know, is a materialism which ran up against the psychology of the "Christian idéologues" as F. Picavet (1891) called them: Degérando, Laromiguière and Maine de Biran, Mercier, and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. A strong case could be made that the reason why history has privileged the names of Cabanis, Tracy and Volney is that the latter published more and their conclusions were more novel, more pronounced and presumably more "scientific." It would be good to review the question of representativity in the Institute's Class of Moral and Political Sciences. Maine de Biran, after all, won the Institute prize competition for the question "On the influence of Habit on the Faculty of Thinking" (1799). How did the Institute get its reputation of being a secular "college of atheists"? Could not one do an analysis similar to the one Alan Kors did so well on the "cotérie holbachique," supposedly composed of atheists (Kors 1976)?

I wish to conclude, not by analyzing the *Elémens d’Idéologie* which several of us have already done. Instead I wish to offer a tentative exploration in rezeptionsgeschichte concerning Tracy and his public, specifically his reception in the Écoles centrales when he was the most important member of the Conseil d’Instruction publique (1799-1800), that was overseeing the implementation of the curriculum development in those schools. First it would be well to note that there was really no inconsistency between his article “Quels sont les moyens [...],” which denigrated popular education and his enthusiastic work for shaping the Écoles centrales. The Écoles centrales was not popular education, but rather the education of a *classe savante* as he pointed out in his *Observations sur le système actuel d’Instruction publique* (Paris an IX [1801]). He thought a secular education in the central (secondary) schools to be possible, but not immediately in the primary schools and ultimately there only in an “abridged form.” “Ideology,” one could bet, would never go over in a primary school! Would it go over in a central school is here the question. There have been a number of studies of these schools, a number of estimations as to how viable they were, whether they died a natural or a violent death. Let us here stick to the cahiers of the Écoles centrales in Grammaire générale and legislation (Palmer 1985, 242-257).

Martin Staum has studied the penetration of the idéologie in these schools (Staum 1985, 49-76). Some additional evidence can be cited after a review of the F17/1344 dossiers at the Archives Nationales (hereafter abbreviated A.N.). There is the humorous case of the constitutional bishop of Gers who fell off his horse and was laid up for 18 months. He had not compiled a *cahier* but he made it clear that he teaches about God and the existence of the immortal soul. A certain J.E.F. Boinvilliers, author of a text on morality and legislation, explains that the basis of equality comes from the fact that we are all children of God. A professor of the Deux Nethes similarly reveals he teaches international law (*droit de gens*) and political economy as part of the relations of men with each other and with the Supreme Being. The professor in the department of the Ourthe deduces legislation from moral laws and these from the faculties of the soul, which is described as immortal. Finally the professor from Mainz endorses Kantian love of duty and faith in the immortality of the soul.

The rest of the professors of ideology or general grammar, in 25 of 65 letters, indicate they do teach that subject, usually without using the word “ideology,” and most commonly by indicating they use the texts recommended by the Council of Public Instruction (Beauzée, Dumarsais, Buffier, Harris, Court de Gebelin, Condillac, Locke, Garat, Tracy etc.). One could not expect much more given the fact that the Council of Public Instruction had only been in operation for a year or two (most of these letters were written in Year VIII or Year IX). Many

had sent their *cahiers* already and were vexed by having to submit them again (A.N., F17/1344/4). In fact one claimed it was the third time he had sent his in.

It is rare, if not altogether non-existent, to find a professor using the word *idéologie*. But it did happen. A minister like François de Neufchâteau could praise a Citoyen Girard for the “système d’idéologie” that he had adopted. Again Citizen Guilhe of the Gironde did divide his course into “Idéologie,” “Logique” and “Parler.” It was not the first time he had answered the minister, who wrote him after this last inquiry that his cahier was praiseworthy for its “ideological systeme.” Citizen Mongin points out that his plan has logic following immediately ideology. Domange from the Meuse at Verdun, indicates his “Idéologie” is a “rigorous sensism.” Again a certain Thiebault from Paris condemns the obscurity of Kant, and indicates that his class of “ideology and general grammar is the substitute for the bold speculative philosophy.” Professor Escher at Strasbourg informs the minister that he teaches the “Elémens d’idéologie” after “Logique.” La Fontaine of Lyonne teaches “Idéologie” before the other parts of the course (A.N., F17/1344/4).

Such examples prove an influence of the science of *idéologie* by 1800, even though the word is ignored or simply a new name for a science that had existed for a century, and was frequently integrated into theism. As far as Tracy’s future *Elémens d’Idéologie* (1801-15) were secular in themselves, religion is mentioned infrequently there. This sidestepping of the issue is a removal of religion from the playing field, rather than a frontal attack upon it as was the Enlightenment and the Revolutionary campaign of dechristianization. This indirection could be called secularism.

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