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“Do the People Benefit from Being Deceived?” A Debate on the Politics of the Enlightenment

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“DO THE PEOPLE BENEFIT FROM BEING DECEIVED?”
A DEBATE ON THE POLITICS OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Elisabeth Décultot

ABSTRACT: In 1777, the Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences published its prize question for the year 1780: “Est-il utile au Peuple d’être trompé, soit qu’on l’induisse dans de nouvelles erreurs, ou qu’on l’entretienne dans celles où il est?” Whether the people drew benefit from being deceived, either by being induced into new errors, or by being maintained in existing ones: the question attracted 42 essays, the largest number ever received for a Prussian Academy contest in the eighteenth century. This paper analyses the genesis and the course of this contest. To this end, it will begin by tracing the evolution of Frederick the Great’s political thought regarding the interrelation of people, the art of governing and deceit; it will then examine the status of this contest in the history of the Academy, before lastly focusing on one of the two winning entries and its relationship to the idea of enlightenment.

In 1777, the Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences published its prize question for the year 1780: “Est-il utile au Peuple d’être trompé, soit qu’on l’induisse dans de nouvelles erreurs, ou qu’on l’entretienne dans celles où il est?”¹ Whether the people drew benefit from being deceived, either by being induced into new errors, or by being maintained in existing ones: the question, formulated in French, attracted 42 essays, the largest number ever received for a Prussian Academy contest in the eighteenth century.² Thanks to Hans Adler, we have a complete edition of these memoirs, published in two volumes in 2007.³

This question was bound to arouse attention for many reasons. First of all, it brought together in a single sentence two terms which seemed to have nothing in common: utility and deceit. How could deception be useful, especially if, as the question suggests, utility is considered from the point of view of the deceived

¹ *Nouveaux Mémoires de l’Académie Royale des Sciences et Belles-Lettres. Année 1777. Avec l’histoire de la même année* (Berlin: Georges Jacques Decker, 1779), 14.

² *Est-il utile de tromper le peuple? Ist der Volksbetrug von Nutzen? Concours de la classe de philosophie spéculative de l’Académie des Sciences et des Belles-Lettres de Berlin pour l’année 1780*, ed. Werner Krauss (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1966), 5.

³ Hans Adler, ed., *Nützt es dem Volke, betrogen zu werden? Est-il utile au peuple d’être trompé? Die Preisfrage der Preußischen Akademie für 1780*, 2 vols. (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 2007).

party? Secondly, the question was remarkable for the provocative nature of its connotations. Though the sentence is apparently focused on the people as the object of deception, the impersonal turn of phrase suggests another party: the deceiver, who may “induce” the people “into new errors”, or “maintain them in existing ones”. It implied that some instances of power, either political, religious or of some other nature, may have an interest in maintaining such errors. The sentence thus established a close yet unstable relation between the concepts of people, truth, deceit and the art of governing, which it invited the contestants to examine. Thirdly, the political and institutional circumstances surrounding the genesis of this question are quite unusual. The Academy’s archives show that the academicians did not conceive of the prize question themselves. That topic was forcibly imposed on them by Frederick the Great, who had been king of Prussia for nearly 40 years and had written in his younger years *Anti-Machiavel, ou Essai de critique sur le Prince de Machiavel*.⁴ In other words and paradoxically enough, political power here imposed on science to examine a theoretical issue which could undermine its very hold on power. We are therefore dealing here with a complex constellation, as much from the theoretical point of view as from the institutional and political one. The prize question, which might be read first as an act of scholarly emancipation by an academy publicly calling for power-challenging debates, results in fact from the sovereign’s bidding itself, who imposes his power on academia. Last but not least, one may wonder at the surprising rules devised for the contest: the academicians stated that the prize money was to be divided between two entries, one vindicating the question and the other refuting it.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the genesis and the course of this contest, seen by some as a breakthrough in the transition from *Aufklärung* to *Spätaufklärung*.⁵ To this end, we will begin by tracing the evolution of Frederick’s political thought regarding the interrelation of people, the art of governing and deceit; we will then examine the status of this contest in the history of the Academy, before lastly focusing on one of the two winning entries and its relationship to the idea of enlightenment.⁶

⁴ [Frederick II], *Anti-Machiavel, ou Essai de critique sur le Prince de Machiavel, publié par Mr. de Voltaire, Nouvelle Edition où l’on a ajouté les variations de celle de Londres* (Amsterdam: Jacques La Caze, 1741).

⁵ Werner Schneiders, *Aufklärung und Vorurteilstheorie: Studien zur Geschichte der Vorurteilstheorie* (Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1983), 260.

⁶ The prize question, most of the entries and the debates were originally in French, as well as the correspondence between Frederick the Great and French philosophers. Some entries are

The Evolution of Frederick the Great's Political Thought

The prize question of 1780 should be read in relation to the history of Frederick's political thinking. This story begins, as briefly mentioned, with the *Anti-Machiavel*, a political essay written by Frederick in 1739–1740, shortly before his accession to the throne, and conceived as a strict refutation of Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Like many of Frederick's essays, this text is politically ambiguous. The future Prussian monarch may have tried to win over famous European philosopher – a successful enterprise, with the help of Voltaire. But it could also be seen a rigorous philosophical reflection on the art of governing, as suggested by the very form of the essay, which consists partly of a linear commentary on Machiavelli's text. The future Frederick the Great insists on the need to govern according to reason and proffers a strong opposition to wars of conquest. He describes several instances of bad despotic governments, such as that of Ferdinand of Aragon, who “did not simply wage war” but “used Religion as a veil to cover his designs. He abused the faith of oaths, he spoke only of justice, & committed only injustices”.⁷ Although Frederick's essay provides several examples of manipulation and deception in the exercise of despotic power, the general question of the relationship between the art of governing, deceit and the people is not directly addressed.

His correspondence with d'Alembert was the driving force behind Frederick's interest in the relations between the people, truth, deceit and statecraft.⁸ Frederick has a deep admiration for d'Alembert, the French mathematician and philosopher who took over with Diderot the publication of the *Encyclopédie* from 1751. D'Alembert became a member of the Prussian Academy in 1746 and a regular correspondent of the king of Prussia from 1754. They started discussing the topic of the relations between the people, truth, deceit and statecraft in 1769–1770, at Frederick's own initiative. In November 1769, after ranting against the pope, whom he compared to a “miserable quack” (*miserable charlatan*), Frederick wondered “whether it is possible for people in a religious system to do without fables” (*s'il se peut que le peuple se passe de fables dans un système religieux*), to which he replied firmly:

in German. All English translations of these sources are our own; the original text is indicated in notes or (when short) in the body of the text.

⁷ [Frederick II], *Anti-Machiavel*, pt. 3, chap. 21, 3: “Ferdinand d'Arragon ne se contentoit pas toujours de faire simplement la guerre; mais il se servoit de la Religion, comme d'un voile pour couvrir ses desseins. Il abusoit de la foi des sermens, il ne parloit que de justice, & ne commettoit que des injustices.”

⁸ Adler, *Nützt es dem Volke*, 1:xxx–xxxiii.

I do not think so, because there is little reason in those animals that Aristotle has deigned to call reasonable. Indeed, what are a few enlightened professors, a few wise academics, compared to the vast mass of people who form a great State? The voice of these preceptors of the human race is little heard, and does not extend beyond a narrow sphere. How can we overcome so many preconceptions sucked from the milk of the mother? How can we fight against custom, which is the reason of fools, and how can we uproot from the hearts of men the germs of superstition which nature has placed there, and which the feeling of their own weakness nourishes? All this leads me to believe that there is nothing to be gained from this beautiful two-footed and featherless species, which will probably always be the plaything of the rascals who want to deceive it.⁹

This first development by Frederick is marked by a simple and strong dichotomy: on the one hand, the people, “the plaything of the rascals who want to deceive [them]” (*jouet des fripons qui voudront [le] tromper*), because they are by nature locked up in “preconceptions” (*préjugés*), “custom” (*coutume*) or “superstition” (*superstition*); on the other hand, “a few enlightened professors, a few wise academicians” (*quelques professeurs éclairés, quelques académiciens sages*), a small elite circumscribed to a “narrow sphere” (*sphère resserrée*). This dichotomy stems from a pessimistic vision of mankind, who is portrayed as easy prey for all kinds of subterfuge. No question here of the art of governing, nor of the third party whose intervention might shift position lines, that is, the ruler.

Frederick first addressed the issue of statecraft in a letter dated from April 1770, in which he dialectically comments on the use of deceit in the exercise of power:

Should this be the first day of the world, and should you ask me whether it is useful to deceive the people, I would answer no, because error and superstition would still be unknown and should not therefore be introduced, and must even be prevented from blossoming. Sifting

⁹ Letter from Frederick II to d’Alembert, 25 November 1769, in *Œuvres de Frédéric le Grand*, ed. Johann D.E. Preuss, 30 vols. (Berlin: Imprimerie Royale R. Decker [= Rudolph Ludwig Decker], 1848–1856), here vol. 24 (1854), 514: “Je ne le crois pas, à cause que ces animaux que l’école a daigné nommer raisonnables ont peu de raison. En effet, qu’est-ce que quelques professeurs éclairés, quelques académiciens sages, en comparaison d’un peuple immense qui forme un grand État? La voix de ces précepteurs du genre humain est peu entendue, et ne s’étend pas hors d’une sphère resserrée. Comment vaincre tant de préjugés sucés avec le lait de la nourrice? Comment lutter contre la coutume, qui est la raison des sots, et comment déraciner du cœur des hommes un germe de superstition que la nature y a mis, et que le sentiment de leur propre faiblesse y nourrit? Tout cela me fait croire qu’il n’y a rien à gagner sur cette belle espèce à deux pieds et sans plumes, qui probablement sera toujours le jouet des fripons qui voudront la tromper.”

through history, I have found two kinds of impostures: one founded on superstition, and one which, with the help of a few preconceptions, may have been used to manipulate the minds of the people to their own advantage. The first of these impostors are the bonzes, the Zoroasters, the Numatics, the Mohammedans, etc.; I would not have anything to do with them. The other kind are the politicians who have striven to foster compliance in men to lead them towards the common wealth. A most marvellous system! I count among these the Roman augurs who were often instrumental in stopping or calming popular seditions stirred up by enterprising tribunes. I would not condemn Scipio the African for his dealings with a nymph, a trick by which he gained the confidence of his troops, and which enabled him to carry out remarkable feats; I do not blame Marius for his old lady, nor Sertorius for the hind he kept with him. Those aiming to lead large numbers of men towards one purpose will be forced at times to harness illusions, and I do not believe them at fault if they impose them on the public, by the reasons I have just given. The same is not true of gross superstition. It is one of the evil drugs which nature has sown in this universe, rooted in the very character of mankind; and I am morally persuaded that superstitions will arise even in a numerous colony of unbelievers, some years after its establishment.¹⁰

On the one hand, therefore, Frederick condemns religious “impostors” (imposteurs) such as Zoroaster, Numa and Mohammed, whose subterfuges he

¹⁰ Letter from Frederick II to d’Alembert, 3 April 1770, in *ibid.*, vol. 24 (1854), 529–30: “Si nous nous plaçons au premier jour du monde, et que vous me demandiez s’il est utile de tromper le peuple, je vous répondrai que non, parce que, l’erreur et la superstition étant inconnues, on ne doit pas les introduire, on doit même les empêcher d’éclorre. En parcourant l’histoire, je trouve deux sortes d’impostures, les unes à la fortune desquelles la superstition a servi de marchepied, et celles qui, à l’aide de quelques préjugés, ont pu servir à manier l’esprit du peuple pour son propre avantage. Les premiers de ces imposteurs, ce sont les bonzes, les Zoroastre, les Numa, les Mahomet, etc.; pour ceux-là, je vous les abandonne. L’autre espèce sont les politiques qui, pour le plus grand bien du gouvernement, ont eu recours au système merveilleux, afin de mener les hommes, de les rendre dociles. Je compte de ce nombre l’usage qu’on faisait à Rome des augures, dont le secours a souvent été si utile pour arrêter ou calmer des séditions populaires que des tribuns entreprenants voulaient exciter. Je ne saurais condamner Scipion l’Africain de son commerce avec une nymphe, par lequel il acquit la confiance de ses troupes, et fut en état d’exécuter de brillantes entreprises; je ne blâme point Marius de sa vieille, ni Sertorius de ce qu’il menait une biche avec lui. Tous ceux qui auront à traiter avec un grand ramas d’hommes qu’il faut conduire au même but seront contraints d’avoir quelquefois recours aux illusions, et je ne les crois pas condamnables, s’ils en imposent au public, par les raisons que je viens d’alléguer. Il n’en est pas de même de la superstition grossière. C’est une des mauvaises drogues que la nature a semées dans cet univers, et qui tient même au caractère de l’homme;

denounces; but on the other hand, he is sympathetic to “the other kind” (l’autre espèce), that of “politicians” (politiques) who, by virtue of statesmanship, resort to the subterfuges of the “marvellous” (système merveilleux), that is, to deceit, “to foster compliance in men to lead them” (afin de mener les hommes, de les rendre dociles) – like Marius or Sertorius.¹¹

It should be noted, however, that Frederick’s position on religious superstition is more dialectical than previously. In the letter of November 1769, he condemned superstition per se in the name of reason, which was to his eyes the province of an enlightened elite; yet he recognised it may be useful and necessary for the people:

This marvellous system seems made for the people. As a ridiculous religion is abolished, a more extravagant one is introduced; one may see revolutions in opinions, but only to the extent that one cult succeeds another. I believe that enlightening men is good and very useful. To fight fanaticism is to disarm the most cruel and bloodthirsty monster; to cry out against the abuse of monks, against those vows so opposed to the designs of nature, so contrary to multiplication, is a great service to one’s country. But I believe that it would be clumsy, dangerous even, to suppress the meals of superstition which are distributed publicly to children, whom the fathers want to be fed in this way.¹²

And what about d’Alembert? D’Alembert plays a central role in the correspondence that paved the way for the prize question. He encouraged the king to turn into a

et je suis moralement persuadé que si l’on établissait une colonie nombreuse d’incrédules, au bout d’un certain nombre d’années on y verrait naître des superstitions.”

¹¹ Letter of Frederick II to d’Alembert, 3 April 1770, in *ibid.*, vol. 24 (1854), 529–30: “Ce système merveilleux semble fait pour le peuple. On abolit une religion ridicule, et l’on en introduit une plus extravagante; on voit des révolutions dans les opinions, mais c’est toujours un culte qui succède à quelque autre. Je crois qu’il est bon et très-utile d’éclairer les hommes. Combattre le fanatisme, c’est désarmer le monstre le plus cruel et le plus sanguinaire; crier contre l’abus des moines, contre ces vœux si opposés aux desseins de la nature, si contraires à la multiplication, c’est véritablement servir sa patrie. Mais je crois qu’il y aurait de la maladresse et même du danger à vouloir supprimer ces aliments de la superstition qui se distribuent publiquement aux enfants, que les pères veulent qu’on nourrisse de la sorte.”

¹² *Ibid.*: “Ce système merveilleux semble fait pour le peuple. On abolit une religion ridicule, et l’on en introduit une plus extravagante; on voit des révolutions dans les opinions, mais c’est toujours un culte qui succède à quelque autre. Je crois qu’il est bon et très-utile d’éclairer les hommes. Combattre le fanatisme, c’est désarmer le monstre le plus cruel et le plus sanguinaire; crier contre l’abus des moines, contre ces vœux si opposés aux desseins de la nature, si contraires à la multiplication, c’est véritablement servir sa patrie. Mais je crois qu’il y aurait de la maladresse et même du danger à vouloir supprimer ces aliments de la superstition qui se distribuent publiquement aux enfants, que les pères veulent qu’on nourrisse de la sorte.”

public tender their joint reflections on “whether it is possible for the people to do without fables in a religious system” (s’il se peut faire que le peuple se passe de fables dans un système religieux) and pointed out the Prussian Royal Academy would distinguish itself “from other literary companies, which still have only too many preconceptions” (des autres compagnies littéraires, qui n’ont encore que trop de préjugés).¹³ On the topic at hand, d’Alembert himself states unambiguously: “I myself think that the truth should always be taught, and that deception never yields any real advantage.”¹⁴ D’Alembert again, in March 1770, was the one who placed the notion of power into the relation between the people and preconceptions (or superstition), by introducing a third party, the government. He thought the action of government may turn people away from their preconceptions, severing a connection Frederick thought stable and inevitable:

I beg your Majesty to allow me to reflect on another question which I had the honour of discussing with him, and upon which I received such a beautiful and philosophical letter, namely: whether in matters of religion, or even in any matter whatsoever, it is useful to deceive the people. I agree with your Majesty that the multitude feeds on superstition; but it seems to me that they would not feed on it if they were presented with something better. Superstition, when taught since childhood and entrenched, undoubtedly resists reason when the latter comes to the fore; reason arrives too late, and the place is taken. But what if the ignorant multitude was presented, at the same time and for the first time, on the one hand such absurdities as we know, and on the other hand, reason and common sense? Doesn’t your Majesty think that reason would prevail? I would add: reason, even if it arrives too late, only has to persevere in order to triumph eventually and drive out its rival. One should not, like Fontenelle, keep one’s hand closed when certain of holding the truth; opening the fingers one after the other, cautiously, will lead, little by little, to the hand been fully extended, and truth will out. Philosophers who open their hands too suddenly are fools: their fists are cut off, and that is all they gain. But those who keep their fists tightly closed are failing mankind.¹⁵

¹³ Letter from d’Alembert to Frederick II, 18 December 1769, in *ibid.*, vol. 24 (1854), 517.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*: “Je pense, pour moi, qu’il faut toujours enseigner la vérité aux hommes, et qu’il n’y a jamais d’avantage réel à les tromper.”

¹⁵ Letter from d’Alembert to Frederick II, 9 March 1770, in *ibid.*, vol. 24 (1854), 527: “Je prie V. M. de me permettre aussi quelques réflexions sur une autre question dont j’ai eu l’honneur de l’entretenir, et qui m’a valu de sa part une lettre si belle et si philosophique, savoir: si en matière de religion, ou même en quelque matière que ce puisse être, il est utile de tromper le peuple. Je conviens avec V. M. que la superstition est l’aliment de la multitude; mais elle ne doit, ce me semble, se jeter sur cet aliment que dans le cas où on ne lui en présentera pas un

D'Alembert refers here to one of Fontenelle's quips, reported by La Porte: "M. de Fontenelle often said, that if he held all the truths in his hand, he would be careful not to open it and show them to men. The discovery of a single truth led Galileo to the prisons of the Inquisition."¹⁶

By refuting Fontenelle, d'Alembert shared some of the views expressed in the *Essai sur les préjugés*, published anonymously in 1770 and attributed to d'Holbach.¹⁷ This work contrasted the people, "credulous" (crédules) by dint of the ignorance in which they are kept, with the rulers who are "always tempted to abuse their credulity" (toujours tentés d'abuser de leur crédulité),¹⁸ and will use the instrument of religion to this end. It depicts the pernicious and conflictual relationship between power, people and superstition:

Men who have put themselves in a position to regulate the destinies of others ... usually find momentary advantages in deceiving them [i.e., the people]; they believe themselves interested in perpetuating their errors or their inexperience; they make it their duty to dazzle them, to embarrass them, to frighten them about the danger of thinking for themselves & of consulting reason ...

Governments, everywhere shamefully allied with superstition, support such sinister projects with all their might. Seduced by the

meilleur. La superstition, bien inculquée et enracinée dès l'enfance, cède sans doute à la raison lorsqu'elle vient à se présenter; elle arrive trop tard, et la place est prise. Mais qu'on présente en même temps et pour la première fois, même à la multitude ignorante, des absurdités, d'un côté, telles que nous en connaissons, et, de l'autre, la raison et le bon sens; V. M. pense-t-elle que la raison n'eût pas la préférence? Je dirai plus; la raison, lors même qu'elle arrive trop tard, n'a qu'à persévérer pour triompher un jour, et chasser sa rivale. Il me semble qu'il ne faut pas, comme Fontenelle, tenir la main fermée quand on est sûr d'y avoir la vérité; il faut seulement ouvrir avec sagesse et avec précaution les doigts de la main l'un après l'autre, et petit à petit la main est ouverte tout à fait, et la vérité en sort tout entière. Les philosophes qui ouvrent la main trop brusquement sont des fous; on leur coupe le poing, et voilà tout ce qu'ils y gagnent; mais ceux qui la tiennent fermée absolument ne font pas pour l'humanité ce qu'ils doivent."

¹⁶ Joseph de La Porte, *Ressources contre l'ennui*, 2 vols. (The Hague: s.n.; Paris: Veuve Duchesne, 1766), 2:48: "M. de Fontenelle disoit souvent, que s'il tenoit toutes les vérités dans sa main, il se garderoit bien de l'ouvrir pour les montrer aux hommes. La découverte d'une seule vérité a fait conduire Galilée dans les prisons de l'Inquisition." Werner Krauss was the first to note Fontenelle's quip to La Porte. Werner Krauss: "Eine politische Preisfrage im Jahre 1780," in *Studien zur deutschen und französischen Aufklärung* (Berlin: Rütten und Loening, 1963), 63–70, here 67.

¹⁷ [Paul Henri Dietrich baron d'Holbach], *Essai sur les préjugés, ou De l'influence des opinions sur les mœurs et sur le bonheur des hommes, ouvrage contenant l'apologie de la philosophie* (London: s.n., 1770). Whether this text was written by d'Holbach or by du Marsais is discussed in Schneiders, *Aufklärung und Vorurteilkritik*, 257.

¹⁸ [d'Holbach], *Essai sur les préjugés*, 8.

transient interests wherein lies its greatness and power, the Political order feels it must deceive the people, holding them to their sad preconceptions, destroying in all hearts the desire to learn and the love of truth. Political order, itself blind and unreasonable, wants only blind and unreasonable subjects; it hates those who seek to enlighten themselves and cruelly punishes anyone who dares to tear or lift the veil of error.¹⁹

But for d'Holbach the art of governing does not always coincide with the art of deceiving. On the contrary, d'Holbach strives to prove that "truth" (vérité) is "equally necessary for the Sovereign to secure his power, and for the subjects to be happy, submissive and tranquil" (également nécessaire & au Souverain pour assurer son pouvoir, & aux sujets pour être heureux, soumis et tranquilles).²⁰ He argues that "philosophy" (philosophie), defined as the "search for truth" (recherche de la vérité),²¹ will lead to a mutual understanding whereby the individual and collective happiness of the subjects is guaranteed as well as the power of the sovereign.

Frederick published a staunch rebuttal of d'Holbach's essay, which he described as "a mixture of truths and false reasonings, bitter criticisms and chimerical projects, professed by an enthusiastic and fanatical philosopher".²² Frederick pointed out from the outset that the author of the *Essai sur les préjugés* "masterfully asserts that truth is made for mankind, and that he must speak

¹⁹ Ibid., 8–11: "Les hommes qui se sont mis en possession de régler les destinées des autres ... trouvent pour l'ordinaire des avantages momentanés a les [i.e., les peuples] tromper; ils se croient intéressés à perpétuer leur erreurs ou leur inexpérience; ils se font un devoir de les éblouir, de les embarrasser, de les effrayer sur le danger de penser par eux-mêmes & de consulter la raison ... Le gouvernement, partout honteusement ligué avec la superstition, appuie de tout son pouvoir ses sinistres projets. Séduite par des intérêts passagers dans lesquelles elle fait consister sa grandeur et sa puissance, la Politique se croit obligée de tromper les peuples, de les retenir dans leurs tristes préjugés, d'anéantir dans tous les cœurs le désir de s'instruire et l'amour de la vérité. Cette Politique, aveugle et déraisonnable elle-même, ne veut que des sujets aveugles et privés de raison; elle hait ceux qui cherchent à s'éclairer eux-mêmes et punit cruellement quiconque ose déchirer ou lever le voile de l'erreur."

²⁰ Ibid., 142.

²¹ Ibid., 135.

²² Frédéric le Grand, *Examen de l'Essai sur les préjugés* (London: Nourse, libraire [actually: Berlin: Voss], 1770). For a reprint, here used for references: Frédéric II, *Examen de l'Essai sur les préjugés*, in Preuss, *Œuvres de Frédéric le Grand*, vol. 9 (1848), 149–75, here 151: "mélange de vérités et de faux raisonnements, de critiques amères et de projets chimériques, débités par un philosophe enthousiaste et fanatique".

it on all occasions”.²³ But this axiom is questionable on two accounts. Firstly, people “are drawn to the marvellous”,²⁴ an inclination in which Frederick sees a constant feature of mankind: “it is common lore that one is naturally drawn to supernatural tales.”²⁵ Secondly, “a reasonable man must not abuse anything, not even the truth”;²⁶ in other words, not all truths need to be voiced. “What gain would there be in setting a man right when illusions make him happy?”²⁷ No doubt the king of Prussia saw in the *Essai sur les préjugés* the seeds of a radical political challenge that might lead to dangerous upheaval:

Let us forgive the author his enthusiasm for the truth, and admire the skill with which he achieves his goals. He set upon a powerful enemy, the established religion, its priesthood and the superstitious people marching under its banners. But to face such a formidable enemy still appears insufficient to illustrate his triumph. To make his victory more striking he excites yet another; he assaults the government, maligning it with coarseness and indecency, and such contempt as revolts sensible readers. The government, holding a neutral ground, may have remained the peaceful spectator of the battles which such an advocate of truth would have waged against the apostles of falsehood; but he himself forces the government to take up the cause of the Church to oppose a common enemy. If we did not respect this great philosopher, we would have thought this some careless schoolboy’s sally, rightly earning him a rigorous correction from his teachers.²⁸

²³ Ibid., 151: “affirme magistralement que la vérité est faite pour l’homme, et qu’il la lui faut dire en toutes les occasions”.

²⁴ Ibid., 152: “a un penchant irrésistible pour le merveilleux”.

²⁵ Ibid., 153: “Tout le monde le sent, on ne peut s’empêcher de prêter attention aux choses surnaturelles qu’on entend débiter.”

²⁶ Ibid., 154: “un homme raisonnable ne doit abuser de rien, pas même de la vérité”.

²⁷ Ibid., 155: “Que gagnerait-on à détromper un homme que les illusions rendent heureux?”

²⁸ Ibid., 158: “Passons à l’auteur son enthousiasme pour la vérité, et admirons l’adresse dont il se sert pour arriver à ses fins. Nous avons vu qu’il attaque un puissant adversaire, la religion dominante, le sacerdoce qui la défend, et le peuple superstitieux rangé sous ses étendards. Mais comme si ce n’en était pas assez pour son courage d’un ennemi aussi redoutable, pour illustrer son triomphe et rendre sa victoire plus éclatante il en excite encore un autre; il fait une vigoureuse sortie sur le gouvernement, il l’outrage avec autant de grossièreté que d’indécence, le mépris qu’il en témoigne révolte les lecteurs sensés. Peut-être que le gouvernement, neutre, aurait été le spectateur paisible des batailles qu’aurait livrées ce héros de la vérité aux apôtres du mensonge; mais lui-même il force le gouvernement de prendre fait et cause avec l’Église pour s’opposer à l’ennemi commun. Si nous ne respectons

The 1780 Prize and the Academy

The topic of the 1780 Academy prize stands in line with the evolution of Frederick's reflections on the exercise of power, starting with the *Anti-Machiavel* of 1740 and extending from the 1770s onwards to his exchanges with d'Alembert and his appraisal of the *Essai sur les préjugés*.

The 1780 setting of the prize also reveals important aspects of Frederick's relations to "his" Academy. Indeed, the king had worked on recasting the founding principles of this institution shortly after his accession to the throne in 1740, and often used the possessive pronoun to refer to his Academy.²⁹ According to the statutes of 1746, each of the four sections of the Academy (experimental philosophy, mathematics, speculative philosophy, and literature) had to issue a prize in the form of a question. The formulation of these questions was largely left to the guidance of the academicians, provided they met the conditions of usefulness set out in the statutes.

In 1777, the speculative philosophy section, under the direction of Johann Georg Sulzer since 1775, issued a question inspired by the "gnoseological" concerns of many of its members. Sulzer had been admitted to the Academy in 1750 and had devoted numerous essays to questions of gnoseology, a scientific field that partakes of psychology and metaphysics. No doubt he was familiar with the formulation of this question, the wording of which was rather obscure:

The Speculative Philosophy Class proposed the following Question:

In all of nature Effects are observed: there are therefore Forces.
But these forces, in order to act, must be determined; this presupposes that there is something real & durable, capable of being determined; & it is this real & durable that we call primitive & substantial force.

pas ce grand philosophe, nous aurions pris ce trait pour une saillie de quelque écolier étourdi, qui lui mériterait une correction rigoureuse de ses maîtres.

Mais ne peut-on faire du bien à sa patrie qu'en renversant, qu'en bouleversant tout l'ordre établi? et n'y a-t-il pas des moyens plus doux qui doivent, par prédilection, être choisis, employés, et préférés aux autres, si on veut la servir utilement? Notre philosophe me paraît tenir de ces médecins qui ne connaissent de remèdes que l'émétique, et de ces chirurgiens qui ne savent faire que des amputations."

²⁹ Cf. e.g. Letter from Frederick II to d'Alembert, 25 November 1769, in Preuss, *Œuvres de Frédéric le Grand*, vol. 24 (1854), 514: "For our Academy, without being very brilliant, it is slowly making its way" (Pour notre Académie, sans être bien brillante, elle va doucement son chemin).

The Academy therefore requests:

What is the distinct notion of that primitive & substantial force, which when determined produces the effect? Or in other words: what is the FUNDAMENTUM VIRIUM?

Now, to conceive how this force can be determined, it is necessary either to prove that one substance acts on another; or to demonstrate that primitive forces determine themselves.

In the first case, we also ask:

What is the distinct notion of the primitive passive power? How can one substance act on another? And finally, how can the latter suffer from the former?

In the second case, it will be necessary to explain separately:

How are the frames that limit the activity of such forces established? And why can the same force sometimes produce an effect, & sometimes not? How, for example, can one conceive distinctly what another instructs him of, & could not conceive of it himself? Why can't we readily reproduce ideas that we have forgotten, even though we were able to produce them in the past & that the axiom always remains, that from will & power united, action must follow? And finally, what real difference is there, if the primitive force draws everything from its own strength, between been able to distinctly represent a learned music by a great Composer, or the solution a remarkable Geometrician proposes for a difficult problem; & being oneself the author of this music, of this solution; or at least being able to compose music, to solve mathematical problem, at the same level, if one really sets to it.³⁰

Clearly the singularly abstruse nature of this prize question prompted d'Alembert to pick up the thread of a previous epistolary conversation with

³⁰ *Nouveaux Mémoires de l'Académie Royale des Sciences et Belles-Lettres. Année 1778. Avec l'histoire de la même année* (Berlin: George Jacques Decker, 1780), 27–28: “La Classe de Philosophie spéculative a proposé la Question suivante:

Dans toute la nature on observe des Effets: il y a donc des Forces.

Mais ces forces, pour agir, doivent être déterminées; cela suppose qu'il y a quelque chose de réel & de durable, susceptible d'être déterminé; & c'est ce réel & durable qu'on nomme force primitive & substantielle.

En conséquence l'Académie demande:

Quelle est la notion distincte de cette force primitive & substantielle, qui lorsqu'elle est déterminée produit l'effet? Ou en d'autres termes: quel est le FUNDAMENTUM VIRIUM?

Frederick on the relationship between people, deceit and the art of governing. To spare the Academy the “ridicule” (ridicule) of a “very strange” question “since unintelligible” (bien étrange par son inintelligibilité), d’Alembert suggested to the king that the following “very interesting and very useful” (très-intéressante[] et très-utile[]) question be imposed for the prize set by the philosophy section: “Can it be useful to deceive the people?” (S’il peut être utile de tromper le peuple).³¹ The

Or, pour concevoir comment cette force peut être déterminée, il faut ou prouver qu’une substance agit sur l’autre; ou démontrer que les forces primitives se déterminent elles-mêmes.

Dans le premier cas on demande en outre:

Quelle est la notion distincte de la puissance passive primitive? Comment une substance peut agir sur l’autre? Et enfin comment celle-ci peut pâtir de la première?

Dans le second cas, il faudra expliquer distinctement:

D’où viennent à ces forces les bornes qui limitent leur activité? Et pourquoi la même force peut tantôt produire un effet, & tantôt ne le peut pas? Comment, par exemple, quelqu’un peut concevoir distinctement ce dont un autre l’instruit, & n’a pas pu l’inventer lui-même? Pourquoi on ne peut pas reproduire, dès que qu’on le veut, les idées qu’on a oubliées, quoiqu’on ait pu les produire autrefois & que l’axiome subsiste toujours, que du vouloir & du pouvoir réunis l’action doit suivre? Ou enfin, quelle différence réelle il y a, si la force primitive tire tout de son propre fond, entre se représenter distinctement une musique savante d’un grand Compositeur à laquelle on assiste, la solution d’un problème difficile, trouvée par un Géometre du premier ordre; & être soi-même l’auteur de cette musique, de cette solution; ou du moins être capable de composer une musique, de résoudre un problème, de la même force, dès qu’on le voudra bien sérieusement.”

³¹ Letter from d’Alembert to Frederick II, 22 September 1777, in Preuss, *Œuvres de Frédéric le Grand*, vol. 25 (1854), 95–96: “I shall take the liberty on this occasion of making a representation to your Majesty; its object is the progress of philosophical enlightenment, which is proceeding so slowly in spite of your efforts and especially your example. You have, Sire, in your Academy, a section of speculative philosophy, which could, being directed by your Majesty, propose for the subjects of its prizes some very interesting and very useful questions, this one, for example: Can it be useful to deceive the people? We have never dared, at the Académie française, to propose this beautiful subject, because the speeches sent for the prize must have, for the misfortune of reason, two Sorbonne doctors as censors, and it is not possible, with such people, to write anything reasonable. But your Majesty has neither prejudice nor Sorbonne, and a question like that would be worthy of being proposed by him to all the philosophers of Europe, who would be delighted to deal with it. Such subjects would be better, it seems to me, than most of those that have been proposed so far by this metaphysical section. The last one especially seemed to me very

king visibly appeared to have been piqued by d'Alembert's criticism of such an abstruse topic: he then came back to the academicians, who, after some back and forth and several rewordings, finally accepted the question he imposed on them.

The difference between d'Alembert's approach and that of the Berlin academicians points to two distinct meanings of the term philosophy – both in form and content. The Prussian question on the “*fundamentum virium*” was aimed at professional philosophers, familiar with the fields of metaphysics or gnoseology. Their understanding of philosophy was primarily scholarly, disciplinary and academic. D'Alembert, on the other hand, conceived his question for a broader group of enlightened writers. For him, the scope of “philosophy” is vast, extending well beyond the academic sphere, encompassing the whole of intellectual commerce and addressed to a “public”, this social body which precisely lacks determinacy, corresponding neither to a specific trade, nor to a given discipline or class of society.

There was undeniably some political risk in putting forth such a question, of which Frederick and the academicians were well aware. Two measures were taken to prevent this risk. First of all, the king ordered that any entry attacking any government should be excluded from the competition.³² This was tantamount to annulling or at least circumventing the 1749 edict on censorship, which stipulated

strange in its unintelligibility; I have seen no one who did not think as I do about it, and I am quite sure that my friend la Grange was not consulted; he would certainly have spared the Academy the inconvenience of seeing its questions ridiculed.” (“Je prendrai, à cette occasion, la liberté de faire une représentation à V. M.; elle a pour objet le progrès des lumières philosophiques, qui va si lentement malgré vos efforts et surtout votre exemple. Vous avez, Sire, dans votre Académie, une classe de philosophie spéculative, qui pourrait, étant dirigée par V. M., proposer pour sujets de ses prix des questions très-intéressantes et très-utiles, celle-ci, par exemple: S'il peut être utile de tromper le peuple? Nous n'avons jamais osé, à l'Académie française, proposer ce beau sujet, parce que les discours envoyés pour le prix doivent avoir, pour le malheur de la raison, deux docteurs de Sorbonne pour censeurs, et qu'il n'est pas possible, avec de pareilles gens, d'écrire rien de raisonnable. Mais V. M. n'a ni préjugés, ni Sorbonne, et une question comme celle-là serait bien digne d'être proposée par elle à tous les philosophes de l'Europe, qui se feraient un plaisir de la traiter. De pareils sujets vaudraient mieux, ce me semble, que la plupart de ceux qui ont été proposés jusqu'ici par cette classe métaphysique. Le dernier surtout m'a paru bien étrange par son inintelligibilité; je n'ai vu personne qui ne pensât comme moi là-dessus, et je suis bien sûr que mon ami la Grange n'a pas été consulté; il aurait certainement épargné à l'Académie le désagrément de voir ses questions tournées en ridicule.”)

³² Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Archive, I-VI-10, fol. 40r. See Hans Adler, “Ist Aufklärung teilbar? Die Preisfrage der Preußischen Akademie für 1780” in Adler, *Nützt es dem Volke*, 1:xiii–lxx, here xlv; Dieter Breuer, *Geschichte der literarischen Zensur in Deutschland* (Heidelberg: Quelle und Meyer, 1982).

that the entries to the Academy would not be subject to the censor's control.³³ Second and most importantly, the academicians set out to reduce the political risk by choosing from the outset to split the prize – a gold medal worth 50 ducats – in two: two entries, one answering the question in the affirmative and the other in the negative, were to be awarded.³⁴ The Academy awarded half of the prize to Rudolf Zacharias Becker's dissertation, which answered the question in the negative, thus rejecting the use of deceit; the other half went to Frédéric de Castillon, who answered in the affirmative. Nine runners-up were additionally awarded. Both dissertations were published together in French by Georges Jacques Decker in 1780.³⁵ German translations were separately published in 1781 (Becker) and 1788 (Castillon).³⁶

Becker's Dissertation

Becker's rigorous definition of concepts is remarkable.³⁷ The author began his dissertation by defining judgment and preconceptions: "[To judge] is to perceive the relations of things to one other and to us, and to issue propositions

³³ Heinrich Hubert Houben, *Der ewige Zensor*, with an afterword by Claus Richter and Wolfgang Labuhn (Kronberg im Taunus: Athenäum, 1978), 149.

³⁴ This decision was taken at the meeting of the speculative philosophy section on 25 May 1780, on the initiative of Nicolas Béguelin. See Adler, "Ist Aufklärung teilbar?," lii. Here are the key figures about the contest as presented by Adler: 42 entries were received; 6 were excluded because they arrived too late; 4 were excluded from the competition for formal reasons (because they were signed by name, which was prohibited); one entry appears twice (I-M 743, which is an earlier version of I-M 744); one entry withdrew from the competition (I-M 740); 30 entries were therefore taken into account.

³⁵ Rudolf Zacharias Becker, "Dissertation sur la question: Est-il utile au Peuple d'être trompé, soit qu'on l'induisse dans de nouvelles erreurs, ou qu'on l'entretienne dans celles où il est?" in *Dissertation sur la Question extraordinaire proposée par L'Academie Royale des Sciences Et Belles-Lettres, qui a partagé le Prix adjugé le 1. Juin MDCCLXXX* (Berlin: Decker, 1780) (76 pages); Frédéric de Castillon, "Dissertation sur la question: Est-il utile au peuple d'être trompé, soit qu'on l'induisse dans de nouvelles erreurs, ou qu'on l'entretienne dans celles où il est?" in *ibid.* (42 pages).

³⁶ Rudolf Zacharias Becker, *Beantwortung der Frage: Kann irgend eine Art von Täuschung dem Volke zuträglich sein, sie bestehe nun darinn, daß man es zu neuen Irrthümern verleitet, oder die alten eingewurzelten fort dauern läßt? Eine von der königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin gekrönte Preisschrift, mit einer Zueignungsschrift an das menschliche Geschlecht* (Leipzig: Crusius, 1781); Moritz Adolph von Winterfeld, *Prüfung der Castillonschen Preisschrift ueber Irtum und Volkstäuschung* (Berlin: Unger, 1788).

³⁷ On Becker, see in particular Reinhart Siegert, *Aufklärung und Volkslektüre: Exemplarisch dargestellt an Rudolph Zacharias Becker und seinem "Noth- und Hülfsbüchlein"; mit einer Bibliographie zum Gesamtthema* (Frankfurt am Main: Buchhändler-Vereinigung, 1978), cols. 626-38 (for Becker and his participation in the 1780 competition).

that express these relations. We are said to judge when we feel the resemblance or the difference, the suitability or the unsuitability of two objects of our attention.”³⁸ As for preconceived opinions, they are as much “a judgement as a true judgement; it is the statement of a relation of things to one other or to us; but it is a false judgement, stating a relation which does not exist”.³⁹ Becker was also precise in his definition of the people, which he understood in a very specific sense. For him, the people are all the “inhabitants who do not study”: a very broad social group which includes “a large part of the Aristocracy, the bourgeoisie from the Artist and the Merchant, with few exceptions, down to the Labourer, and all Farmers without exception”.⁴⁰

After these introductory philosophical remarks, Becker developed a vast overview of the history of empires since the origins of mankind. He then went on to list the causes of a nation’s preconceptions, falling into two types: first physical causes, which have to do with “the limits which Nature itself has ascribed to the human mind” (les bornes que la Nature même a prescrites à l’esprit humain), such as “the natural laziness of body and mind” (paresse naturelle du corps et de l’esprit), “passions” (passions), the “climate, the situation, the quality of soil in a country” (climat, la situation, la qualité du sol d’un pays); second, political causes, including “the oppression produced by despotism” (l’oppression que produit le despotisme), the “lack of attention of the Legislators to the intellectual needs of the nation” (défaut d’attention des Législateurs aux besoins intellectuels de la nation) and the hold of “a class of citizens who are charged with presiding over divine worship” (une classe de citoyen qui est chargée de présider au culte divin) and have “seized the reins of government” (s’est emparé[e] des rênes du gouvernement), in other words the clergy.⁴¹

³⁸ Rudolf Zacharias Becker, “Dissertation sur la question: Est-il utile au Peuple d’être trompé, soit qu’on l’induisse dans de nouvelles erreurs, ou qu’on l’entretienne dans celles où il est?” in Adler, *Nützt es dem Volke*, xiii–lxx, 4–64, here 4: “Car qu’est-ce que juger? C’est appercevoir les rapports des choses entr’elles et avec nous, et former des propositions qui expriment ces rapports. On dit que nous jugeons, lorsque nous sentons la ressemblance ou la différence, la convenance ou la disconvenance de deux objets de notre attention.”

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 5: “Le *préjugé* n’est pas moins un jugement que le jugement vrai; c’est l’énoncé d’un rapport des choses entr’elles ou avec nous; mais c’est un jugement faux, c’est l’énoncé d’un rapport qui n’existe pas.”

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 10–11: “Je comprends donc sous ce mot toutes les classes des habitans qui ne font pas profession des études, c’est-à-dire une grande partie de la Noblesse, la Bourgeoisie depuis l’Artiste et le Marchand, à peu d’exceptions près, jusqu’au Journalier, et tous les Cultivateurs sans exception.”

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 21–24.

Becker's main argument rests on the central notion of perfectibility, that "active faculty" (*faculté active*),⁴² "that natural instinct" (*cet instinct naturel*) which continually incites men to "improve their situation" (*rendre sa situation plus favorable*)⁴³ and which is universal, unmoved by differences in class and education.⁴⁴ Such a universal feature in mankind bears upon statecraft: in a world truly in accordance with man's nature, "every ordinance of government" (*ordonnance du gouvernement*) should aim at "human perfection" (*la perfection humaine*).⁴⁵ In other words, only those actions and laws that are likely to perfect human beings are politically useful. Becker suggests several concrete measures to reach this goal, such as the abolition of inheritance, an unfair right to "succeed to the paternal rank and property ... without personal merit" (*succéder dans le rang et dans les biens paternels ... sans un mérite personnel*). "The more limited this right, as when it extends only to males or elders, the more it harms the nation and those who appear to benefit from it."⁴⁶

In this line of thinking, preconceptions hinder the improvement of man and the "happiness of nations" (*bonheur des nations*).⁴⁷ "Only bad government are interested in deluding the nation, lest their exactions should raise anger."⁴⁸ As for religious opinions, they do not foster "pleasant sensations" (*sensations agréables*), but "bring down courage, diminish industry and patriotism, and detach man from society" (*abattent le courage, diminuent l'industrie et le patriotisme, détachent l'homme de la société*).⁴⁹ Thus, "a government which lulls the people into a chimerical prosperity and blinds them as to their real state, would betray the sacred rights of humanity, and harm itself by weakening nature, which is its strength."⁵⁰ Freedom of thought, to which Becker devotes a chapter, is presented as the central prerogative of a good government – as opposed to despotic regimes, ignoring "the very ground of a sound Politics, which teaches us that the State derives its strength from that of all its members,

⁴² *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 47–48.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 44: "Plus ce droit est limité, comme lorsqu'il ne s'étend qu'à des mâles ou à des aînés, plus il nuit à la nation et à ceux mêmes qui paroissent en profiter."

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 53: "Il n'y a que le mauvais gouvernement qui soit intéressé à faire illusion à la nation, de crainte que ses exactions ne soulevent ses esprits."

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 55–56.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 56: "Cela étant, le gouvernement qui prétendrait bercer le peuple d'une prospérité chimérique et l'aveugler sur son état réel, trahiroit les droits sacrés de l'humanité, et se nuirait à lui-même en affoiblissant la nature, qui fait sa force."

and that battles cannot be won nor money made from abroad with ignorant and dimmed down subjects.”⁵¹

The dissertation ends on a description of “good government” (bon gouvernement), whose duty is to “enlighten the people, and lead them to the temple of happiness by the path that Nature herself has made” (se servir des moyens propres à éclairer les peuples, et de les conduire au temple du bonheur par le chemin que la Nature elle-même a frayé).⁵² One of the core tenets of this “good government” is the preservation of the freedom of the press, which is the strong point of the dissertation:

A good government will regard its subjects as its children; it will use all possible means to improve education; it will attach public esteem and its pleasures to such actions and discoveries that are truly useful; it will ensure that the greatest perfection in every kind of work and effort should be awarded the highest reward. It will remove the obstacles that prevent the progress of the mind; it will give those who seek truth complete freedom to pursue it everywhere, and to share their successes with their fellow citizens, shielding them from the cruel hands of a spiritual or temporal Inquisition. To this effect freedom of the press should be unlimited, because the good government will not fear that unbound writings may stir up trouble or seduce the citizen; it knows that, by dint of its enlightened care, any action prejudicial to the general happiness naturally results in harm for the individual who is guilty of it, that the nation is educated enough to despise writings contrary to good sense and virtue, and that a thankful subject is an obedient subject.⁵³

As pointed out in the beginning of this article, the 1780 prize question was a breakthrough in the history of the *Aufklärung* in Germany and of the Enlightenment in Europe. Because the candidates were asked to answer either in the affirmative or

⁵¹ Ibid., 63: “Si de tels procédés ne sentent pas le despotisme et la tyrannie, du moins, du moins décelent-ils l’ignorance des premiers éléments d’une saine Politique, qui nous apprend que la force de l’Etat consiste dans celle de tous ses membres, et qu’avec des sujets stupides et abâtardis on ne gagne ni des batailles, ni l’argent de l’étranger.”

⁵² Ibid., 64.

⁵³ Ibid.: “Le bon gouvernement regardera ses sujets comme des enfants; il emploiera tous les moyens possibles de perfectionner l’éducation; il attachera l’estime publique et les plaisirs qui l’accompagnent, aux actions et aux découvertes vraiment utiles; il aura soin qu’en tout genre de travaux et d’efforts la plus grande perfection remporte la plus grande récompense; il levera les obstacles qui empêchent les progrès de l’esprit; il donnera à l’ami de la vérité une entière liberté de la suivre par-tout, et de communiquer ses succès à ses contemporains, sans l’exposer à tomber entre les mains cruelles d’une Inquisition spirituelle ou temporelle. Pour cet effet la liberté de la presse sera illimitée, parce qu’il ne sera jamais dans le cas de craindre que des écrits trop libres excitent des troubles ou séduisent le citoyen; il sait que, par une suite de ses soins éclairés, toute action préjudiciable au bonheur général produit naturellement un mal pour le particulier qui

in the negative, the contest brought out in a very plastic way two major schools of thought on the relation between statecraft and the Enlightenment. Castillon, who was in line with the king's own positions, represents the party intent on protecting religion, largely sceptical about the universality of reason and its benefits for the happiness of humanity. Becker, on the other hand, and a number of writers in the tradition of d'Alembert, placed "truth" above everything else and thought it the only possible basis for good government. In choosing to divide the prize in two, the 1780 contest highlights both the gap between these two positions and their proximity, since both parties equally claim to be "enlightened".

The reception of this debate was significant, especially in the German-speaking world, as evidenced by the exceptionally high number of memoirs received, but also by the numerous references to this question long after the prize attribution. Traces of it can be found in Hamann's correspondence from 1781,⁵⁴ in a satire by Jean Paul in 1786⁵⁵ and even in an epigram by Goethe in 1790,⁵⁶ as Hans Adler has shown. The French reception seems to have been more limited. But it should be noted that Mirabeau devotes several pages to the prize in his description of Prussian monarchy of 1788.⁵⁷

Generally speaking, contemporaries noted the gap between the audacity of the question and the caution of the Academy. For example, Hamann regrets in a letter to Herder the ambiguous judgment of the Academy, which he qualifies as "two-headed" (zweyköpfig) or even "specious" (spitzfindig), because of its bipartition.⁵⁸ In this register, it is Mirabeau who formulates the most elaborate criticism. He first expresses his admiration for Frederick's audacity: "What a

s'en rend coupable, que la nation est assez instruite pour mépriser tout écrit contraire au bon sens et à la vertu, et que l'attachement des sujets assure leur obéissance."

⁵⁴ Johann Georg Hamann, Letter to Johann Gottfried Herder, 1 January 1781, in J.G. Hamann, *Briefwechsel*, 4 vols., ed. Arthur Henkel (Wiesbaden: Insel, 1959), 4:260; see Adler, "Ist Aufklärung teilbar?", xlix.

⁵⁵ Jean Paul, "Dumheit schickt sich auf alle Weise für das gemeine Volk [1786]," in Jean Paul, *Jugendwerke I*, ed. Norbert Miller and Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann (Jean Paul, *Sämtliche Werke*, section 2, vol. 1) (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 1996), 1108–10.

⁵⁶ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, "Epigramme, Venedig, 1790", in J.W. Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke nach Epochen seines Schaffens*, ed. Karl Richter, 20 vols. and 1 index vol. (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1985–1998) (Münchener Ausgabe), vol. 3.2 (1990), ed. Hans J. Becker, Hans-Georg Dewitz, Norbert Miller, Gerhard H. Müller, John Neubauer, Hartmut Reinhardt and Irmtraut Schmid, 83–153, here 137 (No. 55).

⁵⁷ Comte de Mirabeau, *De la monarchie prussienne sous Frédéric le Grand; avec un appendice contenant des recherches sur la situation actuelle des principales contrées de l'Allemagne*, 8 vols. (London: s.n., 1788), here 5:200–202.

⁵⁸ Hamann, Letter to Herder, 1 January 1781, *Briefwechsel*, 4:260.

man the king was who instructed his academy to propose this question.”⁵⁹ But he immediately underlines the mediocrity of the results achieved, a phenomenon due to two parameters according to him: the poor quality of the received entries and the lack of courage of the Academy, which “made its decision like a congregation of Capuchins, and not like an assembly of philosophers.”⁶⁰

One thing is striking in all these evocations of the 1780 competition: the multiplicity of reformulations of the original question. Hamann paraphrases the question of the Academy by adding a plural that profoundly modifies the notion of people by giving it a national connotation: “If it is useful for peoples to be deceived” (S’il est utile aux peuples d’être trompé [sic]).⁶¹ The “peoples” here can be understood as the different nations of Europe, conceived as distinct national political entities. As for Mirabeau, he completely evacuates the notion of people to focus the question on the central notions of error and utility: “Are there useful errors that should be prevented from being revealed?” (Est-il des erreurs utiles qu’il faille empêcher de dévoiler?).⁶² Mirabeau’s analysis also shows the extreme plurality of interpretations that contemporaries were able to associate with this enterprise. For Mirabeau, the 1780 competition can both be interpreted as the mark of an enlightened king and, in the execution, as the gesture of a “despot” (despote)⁶³ who, through censorship, directly or indirectly curbs the “freedom of thinking” (liberté de penser).⁶⁴ This plurality of interpretation still dominates the research on this prize: does the question of 1780, inspired by d’Alembert, imposed by Frederick and reformulated in an exchange with the Academy, inaugurate the transition to the late Enlightenment (*Spätaufklärung*), in accordance to the interpretation by Werner Schneiders?⁶⁵ or even to the “*Volksaufklärung*”?⁶⁶ Or could it even be a weapon of the “counter-Enlightenment”? The genesis, organisation and reception of the 1780 competition provide arguments for each of these interpretations.

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⁵⁹ Mirabeau, *De la monarchie prussienne*, 5:200: “Quel homme que le roi qui chargea son académie de proposer cette question.”

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 201–202: “L’Académie de Berlin prononça comme une congrégation de capucins, et non comme un congrès de philosophes.”

⁶¹ Hamann, Letter to Herder, 1 January 1781, *Briefwechsel*, 260.

⁶² Mirabeau, *De la monarchie prussienne*, 5:200.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁶⁵ Schneiders, *Aufklärung und Vorurteilkritik*, 260.

⁶⁶ Holger Böning and Reinhart Siegert, *Volksaufklärung: Biobibliographisches Handbuch zur Popularisierung aufklärerischen Denkens im deutschen Sprachraum von den Anfängen bis 1850*, vol. 2.1 (Bad Cannstatt, Frommann-Holzboog, 2001), xxii (see also xiv).