

Living the Enlightenment

CHRISTOPHE LITWIN

Enlightenment philosophy was invented in salons and coffee houses. It was spread by men and women of letters, but also in the dynamic context of major cities. In his book, Stéphane Van Damme explores the history of these Enlightenment practices.

Reviewed: Stéphane Van Damme, *À toutes voiles vers la vérité. Une autre histoire de la philosophie au temps des Lumières* [On Course to the Truth: An Alternative History of Philosophy in the Age of Enlightenment] Seuil, 2014, 386 p., 24 €.

A Pragmatic History of Modern Philosophy

“Your Republic is free enough, most free in the permission of philosophical speculation. Your own discretion would of course counsel you to present your views and opinions in the most guarded language; for everything else trust to fortune. Go forward, then, most excellent Sir, and cast aside fear of giving offence to the pigmies of our day ... Let true Science now proceed on her own course, and penetrate more deeply than she has yet done into the innermost sanctuary of nature. Your inquiries, I should imagine, may be freely published in Holland.”

This letter of 1661-62 from Oldenburg to his friend Spinoza, which, breaking with the concealment that was necessary in other political contexts, encouraged him to present his philosophy frankly and fearlessly before the public, is the inspiration behind the title of Stéphane Van Damme’s latest book. Clearly influenced by the late Foucault’s work on “the courage of truth” (or *parrhesia*¹), Van Damme, in this study of cultural history, sets out to identify, by examining the social practices of early modern philosophers, what he calls an “old truth regime.”

Van Damme’s project is to write an alternative history of philosophy in the Age of Enlightenment. He does so not by writing a history of ideas, but rather a “historian’s history” of philosophy. Rather than beginning with a canonical body of texts or doctrines (the selection of which is frequently incomplete or ideological), Van Damme, building on Bruno Latour’s work in the history of science and Antoine Lilti’s and Etienne Anheim’s work in the journal *Annales*, while also drawing inspiration from the historical geographer Jean-Marc Besse, approaches the history of philosophy in a manner that is decidedly contextual, material, and pragmatic. Unlike literature, art, and science, Van Damme notes, philosophy had, until the past decade, largely avoided cultural history’s probing gaze. Consequently, though the recent literature in the field is daunting—as evidenced by the book’s abundant critical and bibliographical apparatus (305-

¹ See Michel Foucault, *Le courage de la vérité. Le gouvernement de soi et des autres II. Cours au Collège de France*, 1984, Gallimard, Paris 2009.

375)—a history of philosophy conceived as an early modern cultural practice had yet to be written.

Where, when, how, and in what circumstances were the activities we refer to by such terms as “knowing,” “living philosophically,” “being a philosopher,” and “teaching,” “doing,” “reading,” and “writing” philosophy practiced? Can the tools and methods of cultural history offer insight, in this way, into Enlightenment philosophy’s distinctive “truth regime”? These are the questions to which Van Damme’s book seeks to provide some initial answers. This pragmatic approach covers a remarkably wide range of topics and methodologies. This makes organizing the table of contents difficult, not least because it contains many previously published articles. The author has chosen to organize his analyses by situating philosophical practice in three types of spaces: the public sphere, geography, and politics. The book consists of a foreword (11 pages), four parts of varying length (104, 44, 55, and 65 pages, respectively), and a conclusion (7 pages).

Disseminating Practices

The first part focuses on practices through which philosophy was inscribed into old regime society and the public sphere. Van Damme seeks “to dispense with a conception of philosophy which professionalizes it *avant la lettre*” (p. 52) by studying the construction of the gender, economic, and social identities not only of authors belonging to the philosophical canon, but also of those who constituted philosophy’s *milieu*, by considering teaching and studying practices in *collèges* and correspondence, as well as material objects (chapter 1).

Chapter 2 examines a tension inherent in Enlightenment philosophy’s location in the public sphere. Indeed, pre-revolutionary modernity was characterized by philosophers’ gradual affirmation of their right to speak publicly in the name of reason: public reason was thus critical of prevailing opinion even as it sought to shape the *doxa*. Habermas² (p. 56) had often emphasized the role played by such spaces as fashionable salons, coffee houses, and masonic lodges in the production and development of forms of sociability resulting from the publicization of philosophical reason. Drawing on recent historiography, this chapter shows rather how the practical modalities of judgment procedures (such as institutions and procedures giving form and validity to scientific statements), writing practices (notably through Hume’s distinction, in the first *Enquiry*, between easy and abstruse philosophy), the practice of spreading knowledge through popular spectacles, and mobilization in support of universal causes (such as Voltaire and the Lally Affair) all contributed to publicizing Enlightenment philosophy.

The location of Enlightenment critique in the public sphere has often been associated with the contrast between philosophical modernity’s innovative outlook and classical philosophy’s rootedness in tradition. While historians of ideas (see Jean-Luc Marion, p. 88) have rightly questioned the validity of so rigid a contrast, cultural history makes it possible to problematize the category of “tradition” through an examination of practices of philosophical transmission. Van Damme examines many of its facets (notably the teaching in Jesuit *collèges* in

² See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society*, Polity, Cambridge, 1989 [1962].

the Lyons region³). He shows how historical inquiry into the reliability of textual sources opened the door to a material examination (through archaeology or philology) of documents and objects, and how this interest in the material character of transmission manifested itself in practices seeking to conserve, collect, and publicly appropriate philosophers' writings, archives, and artifacts (notably Descartes'⁴). As a result, the relationship between the public and philosophy gradually changed. One can then trace the emergence of an original process for reappropriating ancient philosophy, in which modern philosophers redescribe their own gestures (as skeptical, cynical, Epicurean, Stoic, etc.) using ancient terms. In various ways, these practices allow us to see philosophy as a truth ethics rather than as a doctrinal position: "By disconnecting tradition from its textual content, the fruitfulness of the Enlightenment project lies in the way it brings philosophy back to its value as a model of wisdom and living" (p. 98).

Philosophy's Archipelago Trade

Parts 2 and 3 set out to consider these philosophical practices from the standpoint of the spatial logics and territorial issues that become apparent at the peripheries and "boundaries" of European empires. Chapter 4 thus offers an overview of recent historiography devoted to the ways in which modern philosophy circulates, the networks through which it has spread, and the processes that have rendered its practices uniform. Van Damme reminds us of the role of salons and coffee houses, the importance of the court as a place for experiments in natural philosophy, and the correspondence networks tied to the Republic of Letters, freemasonry, and the academies (pp. 129-136). He shows how philosophy was disseminated through commercial distribution circuits, notably as a result of the increasing consumption of philosophical instruments (globes, barometers, eudiometers, and natural history textbooks) and the organization of spectacles. In this way, the emergence of modern philosophy is inseparable from those spaces which the eighteenth century dubbed "metropolises."

Since Antonella Romano's work on Rome and his own work on Paris⁵ have already examined the case of philosophical metropolises that were simultaneously European political centers, Van Damme has chosen in this book to focus on the interesting case of Edinburgh. He first considers (in chapter 5) its university milieu, its European networks, the relationship between Scottish Enlightenment views about cities and the transformation of Edinburgh's urban geography due to its intellectual effervescence, and the proliferation of learned societies. This metropolis of universalistic philosophy is inextricably bound to complex assertions of national and political identity vis-à-vis the British Empire, its status as a cultural metropolis being inseparable from the fact that, in 1707, it had ceased to be a political capital (p. 173). Chapter 6 explores the articulation of the development of philosophical practices within the university milieu and major demands promoting local identity. Van Damme shows how Scottish scholars' taste for enquiries at the parish level, as well as in faraway colonies, contributed to the Scottish Enlightenment's complex self-understanding: thus in 1748, the chairman of the Society of the Antiquaries of Scotland wrote: "As a man, I have always felt myself to be a Citizen of the

³ Van Damme is thus building on the research he presented in *Le temple de la sagesse. Savoirs, écriture et sociabilité urbaine (Lyon, XVIIe-XVIIIe siècle)*, Editions de l'EHESS, 2005.

⁴ See Van Damme, *Descartes. Essai d'histoire culturelle d'une grandeur philosophique*, Presses de Sciences Po, 2002.

⁵ See Antonella Romano, ed., *Rome et la science moderne. Entre Renaissance et Lumières*, Rome, 2008; Van Damme, *Paris, capitale philosophique. De la Fronde à la Révolution*, Odile Jacob, 2005.

World; as a friend of Peace and Liberty, I can see myself only living in the United Kingdom; but as a Citizen, I can never forget that I am a Scot” (p. 177).

Rather than seeing philosophical practices as uniformly spread throughout European and colonial space, Van Damme suggests that we think of philosophy as emerging in archipelagos (p. 198): urban archipelagos, as well as archipelagos confronting challenges to their local identity, thus requiring them to apply universal philosophical frameworks to specific territorial concerns. Chapter 7, which is particularly wide ranging, examines the decentering of European philosophical universalism from the standpoint of postcolonial studies. Van Damme seeks “to understand to what extent procedures for ‘detaching’ and distancing oneself from Europe through a condemnation of its colonial past became tied to a valorization of indigenous philosophy” (p. 198), showing, for example (p. 213-222), the role that the collection of Indian artifacts played in the invention of a uniquely American experience of nature, which distinguished the New World’s philosophy from the Old’s.

A Philosophers’ Party?

The final part examines the practices through which early modern philosophers organized themselves within the political sphere as “the party of truth” (p. 227). Returning to part 1’s consideration of transmission practices and the reappropriation of ancient models of *parrhesia*, chapter 7 seeks to demonstrate that an ongoing rhetoric of friendship in sixteenth and seventeenth century letter-writing played an essential role in the economy and transmission of knowledge, in addition to creating a collective space in which truth ethics were liberated from early modern philosophy. Friendship made possible intimate circles of readers and textual communities in which philosophy could circulate, if not clandestinely, at least protected from censorship, in the antechamber of the public sphere. A good example is the Oldenburg letter mentioned above. Yet there remained considerable tension between this “regime of familiarity” and a general tendency towards a “depersonalization of philosophy ... [which was required] to access the truths of science” (p. 230). It was often resolved through a transformation of “the intellectual authority of individual work” into work that, through friendship, was “jointly produced” (p. 246-249).

If friendship played an essential role in constituting the Enlightenment as a party in this “old truth regime,” it does not completely explain it. This process seems inseparable from what Van Damme, borrowing Bruno Latour’s terminology, calls ordeals—moments of crisis in which actors are simultaneously the targets and subjects of violence (p. 6).

The Limits of an Alternative History of Philosophy

Van Damme acknowledges that his book only traces in a “fragmentary, *pointilliste* and excessively external way” a “historian’s history of philosophy” (p. 300). This shortcoming is due to the way he organizes recent historiography, which is varied and wide-ranging, around problems that are often rather abstract and general. Yet this *pointillisme* is undoubtedly integral to the very project of a material and pragmatic history of philosophy. For not only is the field of philosophical practice more difficult to circumscribe than that of a specific body of works, but the plasticity of the shifting and polemical category of “philosophy” makes the project of this pragmatic history more elusive than is the case, for example, with the history of science. Herein lies the project’s fruitfulness and weakness. The book’s fruitfulness lies in the way that, relating philosophy to its practices, it pulls the activity of philosophy out of its narrowly textual confines,

showing that it also refers to concrete ways of living and “truth ethics,” or, as the author puts it, “philosophy out in the open.” It is also fruitful in the way that this plasticity brings to light the spatial and territorial issues tied to scholarly activity. Yet this approach is also limited: the association of the word “philosophical” with the various practices it considers can often seem vague and arbitrary. This category, it would seem, becomes too vague to distinguish adequately between so-called “philosophical” practices and those of the scholar, the man of science, the *homme de lettres*, or even the *honnête homme*. Thus Van Damme readily acknowledges, in an aside, that the phenomenon of “hunting for philosophical manuscripts” (to which he devotes many pages) is part of the broader problem of the “cult of the great writer” (p. 119). But then to what extent is this a “philosophical” practice? Or consider another example: when Van Damme shows how the collection of Indian artifacts contributed to the cultural elaboration of the idea of an American “nature,” one does of course understand the way in which “nature” and “wilderness” play an essential role in the construction of North American philosophy. Yet it is not clear why such collection practices should be seen as specifically philosophical. And yet the author draws on this very example to point to “two ways of envisaging philosophy: one tied to writing, while the other makes artifact the criterion of defining philosophy,” corresponding to “two visions of philosophy” (p. 225). But how does the contrast between one vision, “which corresponds to written and textual traditions and which emphasizes the production of ideal objects,” and “another, which is based on material and technological production,” provide us with criteria for defining philosophy? Thus as a result of this unnecessarily expansive conception of philosophy and its lack of practical criteria that are sufficiently precise to delimit the project, the very meaning of an “alternative history of philosophy” becomes obscure.

The concepts of “truth” and “Enlightenment,” which are used throughout the work, would also benefit from being considered in broader terms. Van Damme’s title—*On Course to the Truth [À toutes voiles vers la vérité]*—alters the opening quote from Oldenburg. According to the latter, it is time not for truth, but for science to “proceed on her own course,” in order to “penetrate more deeply than she has yet done into the innermost sanctuary of nature”⁶. It is thus not so much truth as a deep knowledge of nature that Oldenburg declares to be the goal of this maritime navigation. Of course, in a Spinozist or materialist context, the distinction between truth and natural knowledge is perhaps more nominal than real. More generally, however, there is no question that the concept of truth goes far beyond that of natural knowledge and one over which, throughout this period, neither philosophical discourse nor the Enlightenment has a monopoly (revealed and sentimental truths exceeded human knowledge of nature). If this emphasis grabs our attention, it is because the concept of truth (in the genitive) seeps into the titles of most of the book’s sections (despite the fact that “truth” is not discussed at particularly great length in the chapters’ content). In a footnote that references Foucault (note 7, p. 57), Van Damme suggests that the period which interests him is characterized by a shift from a “will to knowledge” to a “will to truth,” yet without any further explanation or critical discussion of these terms.

This use of the concept of truth is all the more unusual in that it leads Van Damme to speak of Enlightenment philosophy as creating a “party of truth.” Yet it is clear that not even a

⁶ This translation is from Robert Willis, *Benedict de Spinoza: His Life, Correspondence, and Ethics* (Trübner, 1870), p. 231. The original text reads: “vela pandamus verae scientiae et naturae adyta penitus quam actenus factum scrutemur.”

minority of Enlightenment *philosophes* would have identified with the project of creating such a party. Rather, it is among philosophers who came before or after the Enlightenment, and who were often influenced by rational theology, that truth played a directional, driving, and central role (Malebranche's *The Search for Truth*, Hegel's speculative idealism, or Comte's positivism). To the contrary, Enlightenment philosophers, particularly skeptics like Bayle and Hume, were remarkably prudent in using the concept of truth—a prudence that is inseparable from their wariness of “parties” (or churches) that conceived of their mission in terms of a (subjective) genitive of truth. “To create a party of truth” would thus seem to be a very unfortunate characterization of the Enlightenment project.

But is the author actually committed to characterizing this project? Since he devotes many pages to the Scottish Enlightenment and cites Hume at length in chapter 2, let us pause for a moment on this example. In the passages from *An Enquiry into Human Understanding* which he cites, Van Damme interprets the opposition between “easy” and “abstruse” philosophy, which Hume tries to overcome as a distinction between popular and esoteric philosophy. Such a perspective perhaps makes it possible to show how, in a Habermasian as well as a Foucauldian perspective, Enlightenment philosophy replaced the *parrhesia* model of the seventeenth century⁷, a philosophical discourse addressed to the few and the many, taking the universal human race as both its audience and its judge, with no matter (be it religious or political) being declared off limits to the inspection and judgment of human understanding. Yet in these passages, Van Damme says nothing about the specific task that Hume assigned his philosophy: to fight superstition in its most hidden redoubts—that is, on the terrain of “adulterated metaphysics,” where reason deceives itself. Yet the struggle against superstition, particularly in this context (the dogmatic metaphysical systems, such as those of Malebranche), illustrates the Enlightenment's originality in relation to the seventeenth century: resorting to critical reason to fight superstition and prejudice everywhere—in other words, even in places to which common sense philosophy is denied entry, in those sanctuaries of superstition that are the great post-Cartesian metaphysical systems.

Does studying “philosophical practices” along the lines that Van Damme proposes lead to a clear distinction between the Enlightenment and seventeenth-century philosophy? The work covers the seventeenth as well as the eighteenth century. Though Van Damme does speak of the “age of Enlightenment” (*siècle des Lumières*), he makes virtually no distinction, except in chapter 2, between the philosophical practices of the Enlightenment and those of the preceding century: Pascal and the Jansenists are addressed alongside Bayle and Rousseau as examples of the practice of “archiving the Enlightenment” (pp. 116-117). They are all described as belonging to the same “old truth regime.” What then is one to make of a pragmatic history of “philosophy in the time of Enlightenment” which identifies so few criteria for differentiating, in and through practices, an event and philosophical category as important as the “Enlightenment”?

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⁷ To put the matter somewhat schematically, the philosopher, a crafty advisor to the Prince and other powerful people, speaks to them in the true language of the “reason of effects” (to use Pascal's terms) and uses, while keeping his thinking in the background, a different language with common people.