

Returning Man to Nature. Paul Thiry d’Holbach. “The essence of man is to feel, to think and to act”

Part II

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Theme: [History](#)

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Read Part I:



[Bringing People Back to Nature. Paul Thiry d’Holbach](#)

By [Dr. Rudolf Hänsel](#), November 02, 2022

Paul-Henry Thiry d’Holbach (1723-1789), one of the leading figures of the French encyclopaedists, in his book “System of Nature”, published in 1770, wants to lead man, who is the “work of nature, exists in it and is subject to its laws”, back to nature (1). On this, see Part I: “Men must know the truth.” (2)

Holbach’s book is still acknowledged today as one of the key works of the Enlightenment because of its radically sensualist argumentation, which attributes all knowledge to sensory perceptions alone. With it, he openly declared war on the ruling ideology and powers.

For the sensing, thinking and acting human being, Holbach’s “discoveries” from the time of

the “Enlightenment” can still lead to the purification of human consciousness from individual and collective prejudices. The “enlightened mind” is capable of envisaging healthy life goals.

Quote from Pliny as dedication

Holbach dedicated a quotation from **Pliny** (“Natural History”) to his book. This is presumably a quotation from the Roman historian and writer **Gaius Plinius Secundus Maior** (also **Pliny the Elder**) (23-79) from his encyclopaedic work on natural history “Naturalis historia”. This “natural history” deals with topics that today would be assigned primarily to the natural sciences. It is the oldest completely preserved systematic encyclopaedia. It comprises 37 books with a total of 2493 chapters. According to the bibliography, nearly 500 authors were involved (3):

“Naturae rerum vis atque majestas in omnibus momentis fide caret, si quis modo partes eius, ac non totam complectatur animo.” (The power and dignity of nature always remain incomprehensible, if one grasps only its parts and not its totality). (4)

The essence of man consists in feeling, thinking, acting, in short, in moving in a way that distinguishes him from other things with which he compares himself.

The following is a selection of quotations from the 1st chapter “Of Nature” (5):

“Men will always err if they abandon experience for the sake of such systems as have been created by imagination. Man is the work of nature, he exists in nature, he is subject to its laws, he cannot free himself from it, he cannot even get away from it by thinking; in vain does his spirit strive beyond the limits of the visible world, he is always forced to return to it.

(...)

Let man, therefore, cease to seek beings outside the world he inhabits, which are to provide him with a happiness which nature denies him: let him study nature, learn its laws, and contemplate its energy and the unchanging way in which it acts; let him use his discoveries for his own happiness, and tacitly submit to laws from which nothing can escape him; let him refrain from inquiring into the causes which are surrounded for him with an impenetrable veil, let him bear without grumbling the decisions of a universal power which can neither turn back nor ever deviate from the rules which its nature prescribes for it.

(...)

It is also because man has insufficiently studied nature and its laws, and has made insufficient attempts to discover its auxiliary sources and properties, that he is profoundly ignorant or takes such slow and uncertain steps to improve his lot. **His indolence finds satisfaction in preferring to be led by example, by conventionality, by authority, rather than by experience, which requires action, and by reason, which requires deliberation.**

Hence that aversion which men show to everything which seems to them to deviate from the rules to which they are accustomed; hence their stupid and fearful respect for

everything old and for the most nonsensical institutions of their fathers; hence the fear which seizes them when the most advantageous changes or the most promising experiments are proposed to them.

For this reason we see the peoples caught in a shameful lethargy and groaning under abuses dragged along from century to century. They tremble at the very idea of what might remedy their sufferings. It is through the same inertia and lack of experience that medicine, physics, agriculture, in a word all useful sciences, make so little perceptible progress and remain so long in the fetters of authority: those who practise these sciences prefer to follow the paths marked out for them rather than to blaze new ones; (...).

(...)

In short, by renouncing, either through laziness or fear, the testimony of their senses, men have been guided in all their actions and undertakings only by imagination, by rapture, by habit, by prejudice, and especially by authority, which has known how to use the ignorance of men to deceive them. Systems created by imagination took the place of experience, reflection, reason: (...).

(...)

In this way the human race (...) has remained in a long childhood, from which it costs it so much effort to free itself. (...).

(...)

So let us rise above the mists of prejudice. (...). Let us distrust a fickle imagination, let us take experience for our guide; let us ask nature for advice; (...); let us go back to our senses, which we have been falsely led to regard as suspect; let us consult reason, which has been shamefully slandered and degraded; let us look attentively at the visible world, and see if it is not sufficient to enable us to judge of unknown realms of the spiritual world; perhaps we shall find that no right has been had to make a distinction between the two, and that two kingdoms have been separated without reasons, which are equally under the dominion of nature. “

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Notes

(1) Holbach, P.-H.T. (1978). System der Natur oder von den Gesetzen der physischen und der moralischen Welt. Frankfurt am Main

(2) <https://www.globalresearch.ca/bringing-people-back-nature-paul-thiry-dholbach/5797669> and <http://www.nrhz.de/flyer/beitrag.php?id=28317&css>

(3) https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plinius_der_Ältere and https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naturalis_historia

(4) Holbach, P.-H.T. (1978). System der Natur oder von den Gesetzen der physischen und der moralischen Welt. Frankfurt am Main, p. 16

(5) Holbach, P.-H.T. (1978). System of nature or of the laws of the physical and moral world. Frankfurt am Main. Part I: "Of nature and its limits, Of man, Of the soul and its faculties, Of the doctrine of immortality, Of happiness". Chapter 1: "Of Nature", pp. 17-25

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