



## Re-assessing the Marquis de Sade

*The materialist philosophy*

### **Priest**

Now that the fatal hour is upon you, wherein the veil of illusions is torn aside, only to confront every deluded man, that the cruel tally of his errors and vices, do you my son, earnestly repent of the many sins to which you were led by weakness and human frailty?

### **Dying Man**

Yes, I do so repent.

### **Priest**

Then in the short space you have left, profit from such timely remorse to ask that you be given general absolution of your sins, believing that only by considering the reverence of the most comfortable and holy sacrament of penitence may you hope for forgiveness at the hand of Almighty God, Our Eternal Father.

### **Dying Man**

I understand you, no better than you have understood me.

### **Priest**

What's that?

### **Dying Man**

I said, I repented.

### **Priest**

I heard you.

### **Dying Man**

Yes. But you did not understand what I meant.

### **Priest**

But what other interpretation...

### **Dying Man**

..the one that I shall now give. I was created by Nature, with the keenest appetites and the strongest of passions and was put on this Earth with the sole purpose of placating both by surrendering to them. They are components of my created self and are no more than mechanical parts necessary to the functioning of Nature's basic purposes. Or if you prefer, they are incidental effects essential to her designs for me and conform entirely to her laws. I repent only that I never sufficiently acknowledged the omnipotence of Nature and my remorse is directed solely against the modest use I made of those faculties criminal in your eyes, but perfectly straightforward in mine, which she gave me to use in her service. I did at times resist her and am heartily sorry for it. I was blinded by the absurdity of your doctrines, to which I resorted to fight the violence of desires, planted in my by a power more divinely inspired by far. And I now repent of having done so. I picked only flowers when I could have gathered in a much greater harvest of ripe fruits. Such is the proper cause of my regret. Respect me enough to impute no other to me.

### **Priest**

Toward the paths have you been brought by your errors. How misled you have been by such sophisms....

### **Alex Barber**

That was the opening of the Marquis de Sade's dialogue between a priest and a dying man, in which a dying atheist rejects the Last Rites. You'll hear other performances of Sade's work, most, like this one, giving voice to the view that ultimate pleasure comes from acting in accordance with our material nature and in opposition to conventional norms. Apart from me and these performances you'll also hear two other contributors. Angelica Goodden is a Fellow and Tutor in French at the University of Oxford and has written extensively on 18th century European literature. Timo Airaksinen is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Helsinki and has written a book called *The Philosophy of the Marquis de Sade*. They'll describe Sade's significance to the liberty and tradition. You'll also hear about Sade's response to the French revolution and some discussion of his literary style. For example how it may have been shaped by his having spent much of his life in prison

But the main focus is going to be on his materialist theory of human nature and on the agenda that springs out of this theory. This agenda is reasonably well known through association with the term 'sadism'. Sade's books are filled with scenes of extreme violence and debauchery, most often in combination. Between those scenes are the less well known philosophical claims that purportedly justify the agenda. I call them philosophical claims, but Sade can't really be thought of as a philosopher in the modern sense of the term. His work is peppered with inconsistencies and non-sequiturs and he seems either not to notice or not to care about this. What subtlety there is in his reasoning tends to be found in the sections he's effectively lifted straight from the work of other materialists, like Le Mettrie or d'Holbach. Timo and Angelica both suggest that Sade's inadequacies as a philosopher in the modern sense shouldn't compel us to reject his work in its entirety.

### **Timo**

Certainly he is a kind of philosopher and his books contain long sections, pages and pages of philosophy, in a sense, philosophy, not academic philosophy, but literary philosophy. He's also a scientist and cultural anthropologist and a psychologist, he has read a lot, he has a lot of....lots of time in prison to think of these things then write them down. So he wanted to be everything really.

### **Angelica**

I was wondering whether there was any connection with the familiar 18th century figure in French culture, of the philosophe, who is not someone who is an academically trained disputational philosopher, but someone who according to a famous contemporary essay on what the word 'philosophe' meant in French, believed simply that nothing pertaining to human life is foreign to him. It's a humanist's definition of philosophy.

### **Alex Barber**

To the extent that Sade can be said to have had a worked out theory of human life, it was a materialist one. Everything in his work springs from this in one way or another. Materialism, crudely stated, is the thesis that there's nothing more to human beings than their material properties. We differ from tree trunks and worms only by virtue of the complexity of our inner organisation. The soul is either a myth or it's simply a material entity or a material process. In the next performance you'll hear this materialist position defended by a corrupt nun. The passage is from *Juliet*, originally a novel, but performed here as a dialogue. Madame Delbene is instructing the young Juliet on the faults in religious doctrine. She begins by dismissing talk of an immortal and immaterial soul as nonsensical.

### **Madam Delbene**

Is there really anything more extraordinary than this superiority to animals which humans arrogate to themselves. Ask them upon what basis their superiority rests. We have a soul, that's their silly response. Ask them to explain what they mean by this vocable soul and you'll see them stutter, flounder amidst contradictions. If I ask them their motives for supposing the soul deathless, they pipe up at once, 'because it is in man's very nature to desire eternal life'. But I reply 'does your desire become proof of its own fulfilment?' By what peculiar logic dare

one decide that something cannot fail to happen because one wishes it to. Oh Juliette, oh my beloved friend, doubt thereof, there may be none. When we die, we die. The dogma of the soul's immortality assumes the soul to be a simple substance, in short, a spirit, but I never understood what a spirit is.

**Juliette**

I was taught that a spirit is a substance lacking extension, incorruptible and having nothing in common with matter.

**Madam Delbene**

That being the case, tell me how your soul arranges to be born, to grow, to strengthen itself, to agitate itself and to age, and all this concurrently with the evolution of your body. We hear the objection that materialism reduces the human being to a mere machine, that materialist is hence a dishonour to our kind. But it is to honour this species to say that man acts at the behest of the secret impulses of a spirit or of a certain, I don't know quite what, which serves to animate him, nobody knows quite how? Let there be no doubt of it, priests have had their motives for contriving and fostering this ridiculous rumour of the souls immortality, lacking such devices how would they have rung pennies from the dying. Ah, if these loathsome dogmas of God and of a soul that outlives us are of no use to humankind, we must at least admint that they are indispensable to those who have taken upon themselves the chore of infecting public opinion.

**Juliette**

But, is not the dogma of the immortality of the soul comforting to the downtrodden and unlucky? Illusion though it may be, is it not soothing, is it not gladdening, is it not a boon, that man may believe he will be able to survive himself and his woes and someday in heaven taste the bliss this world denied him?

**Madam Delbene**

Frankly I fail to see that the desire to set a few ill-starred dolts at ease warrants poisoning the minds of millions of respectable people, and besides, is it rational to trim the truth to fit one's wishes?

**Juliette**

But what shall become of me? I am afraid of this darkness, this eternal annihilation scares me.

**Madam Delbene**

And pray tell, what were you before birth? Several unqualified lumps of unorganised matter, as yet without definite form or at least lacking any form you can hope to remember. Well, you're going to turn back into those same or similar lumps of matter, you're going to become the raw material out of which new beings will be fashioned, and this will happen when natural processes bring it about.

Nature prohibits nothing: but laws are dreamt up by men, and these petty regulations pretend to impose certain restraints upon people; it's all a question of the air's temperature, of the richness or poverty of the soil in the district, of the climate, of the sort of men involved, these are the un-constant factors that go into making your manners and morals. But at our leisure, we shall return to these subjects. Let's now put our theories into practice, and after having demonstrated to you that you can do everything without committing a crime, let's commit a villainy or two to convince ourselves that everything can be done.

**Juliette**

I owe you more than life itself, my beloved Delbene. What is an existence without philosophy? Is life worth living when one lies crushed beneath the yoke of lies and stupidity?

Come then, I feel worthy of you at last, 'tis upon your breast I take sacred oath never to return to the illusions which through gentle friendship you have just exterminated in me. Continue my instruction, continue to direct my footsteps toward happiness. I entrust myself to your guidance; do with me what you will, and be sure of this; that you have never had a disciple more ardent or more docile than Juliette.

Delbene was beside herself with delight; for a libertine intelligence, there is no more piercing pleasure than that of making disciples. Delbene gave me back all the kisses I showered upon her; she said I was going to become a wayward girl like her, an undisciplined and very disrespectful little whore, that's where I was headed. I'd wind up an atheist, and when God should begin to wonder, what on earth had happened to good little Juliette, she, Delbene, would most gladly step forth and accept the blame for having caused the loss of this soul.

### **Alex Barber**

Sade was a materialist but with a difference. Other materialists talked of studying, understanding, predicting and controlling human action with a view to improving society. Sade saw society as the enemy of our material nature. He sees our spiritual existence as a myth. Acting in accordance with our true material natures therefore means we should aim to reduce any manifestations of a soul or a self to nothing. Self abandon and suffering, is thus the first step towards ultimate pleasure. Here is Timo re-constructing the process Sade is recommending we undertake.

### **Timo**

You need to educate your own emotions so that they become your active emotions and you get rid of these passive emotions. But you must start from passive emotions, you must start from being a masochist who suffers because of the pleasures of the heroes who are actively emotional. And then you graduate from this kind of position of scavenging pleasure simply, you graduate from those to being what I call a free predator, that you are actively emotional and you are master of your own emotions.

### **Alex Barber**

There's a clear path then from Sade's materialist philosophy to his advocating what we would call a sado-masochist agenda. Sade finds confirmation for this agenda in judgements he makes about human psychology. He thinks we all have strong desires to harm others, but these desires are hidden beneath a veneer of commitment to society's moral order. Or perhaps they are also a reaction against society's moral order. Either way, Sade proposes that we submit to these deeper desires.

### **Timo**

We have a counter-ethical voice within us that says, kill, maim, destroy, enjoy, be selfish. There's a very strong voice inside us that has some features that are analogous to moral voice and moral conscience. But this is just the opposite and that's one of Sade's paradoxes.

### **Angelica**

We must follow the natural law, we can't help following the natural law of Sade. Thinks, which decrees that we destroy, maim, torture and all the other things that you said.