Lumen
Selected Proceedings from the Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies
Travaux choisis de la Société canadienne d'étude du dix-huitième siècle

LUMEN

Introduction [in English]

Charlène Deharbe and Stephen Ahern

Volume 40, 2021

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1083164ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1083164ar

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies / Société canadienne d'étude du dix-huitième siècle

ISSN

1209-3696 (print)
1927-8284 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this document

Deharbe, C. & Ahern, S. (2021). Introduction [in English]. *Lumen*, *40*, xix–xxx. https://doi.org/10.7202/1083164ar

Introduction[1]

> Moral science must serve only to make people happy.
> *La morale ne doit tendre qu'à rendre les hommes heureux.*
>
> – Abbé de Mably, *Principes de morale* [*Elements of Moral Science*] (Paris, 1784)

In October 2019 Quebec City hosted the 45th annual conference of the Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (CSECS), on the theme "Ethic(s) of/in the Enlightenment." The valuable discussions that ensued at many paper sessions demonstrate the ongoing interest in questions of moral agency to scholars of our period. Surveying the key concepts of these scholarly conversations is a worthwhile way of introducing the selected papers collected in the present volume. If today the word *éthique* is omnipresent in French-language public discourse[2]—be it scientific, juridical, or philosophical—to the point where it has even overtaken *morale* to characterize investigations into the relation between subjects and their actions, this was far from the case in the Enlightenment. In France, certainly, over the course of the eighteenth century *éthique* essentially referenced the elements of Aristotelian philosophy as taught in Jesuit colleges or in

1. The editors of *Lumen* would like to thank Nicholas Dion for the generous advice he provided throughout the preparation of the volume, as well as Philippe Robichaud for the translation he supplied of this Introduction.

2. On this subject, it is interesting to note that the Quebec government's *Commission de l'éthique en science et en technologie* presents *l'éthique* as a "*mot à la mode*" [a fashionable word], and offers this general observation: "For certain thinkers, *morale* and *éthique* have the same meaning: the first comes from the Latin *mores* and the second comes from the Greek *êthos*. Both signify 'mores.' For others, these terms take on different meanings and are not equivalent." (https://www.ethique.gouv.qc.ca/fr/ethique/quest-ce-que-lethique/ethique-un-mot-a-la-mode/). [Editors' note: To ensure linguistic fluency we have translated this quotation and all others in this Introduction; the original text can be found in the French version of this chapter, above.]

university.[3] The entry for *éthique* in the fourth edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (1762) reflects this classical influence: the three main branches of philosophy are identified as *la logique*, *l'éthique*, and *la physique*. Aristotle's *Ethics* are said to constitute his "ouvrages moraux" ["moral works"].[4] It is in this vein that Scipion Dupleix—philosopher and counsellor to King Henri IV—published the first philosophy course in the French language for his student the Count of Moret. Titled *Cours de philosophie contenant la logique, la physique, la métaphysique et l'éthique* (1623), the work testifies to the principally pedagogical and scholarly use of the term *éthique* in the early modern period. Over a century later, Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* (1751–1772) defines *l'éthique* as the "science of morals," observing that the word "is no longer used" and that it "only serves on rare occasions to designate works such as Spinoza's *Ethics*."[5] As Jean-Pierre Cléro notes in his contribution to this issue of *Lumen*, "the French-speaking world of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries remains to all intents and purposes ignorant of the notion of ethics": French thinkers largely preferred the term *morale*.

A quick bibliographical search in the catalogue of the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* (BnF) certainly does seem to show the century's preference and corroborates Cléro's claim. In point of fact, not a single title containing the word *éthique* comes up between 1700 and 1799 in the BnF catalogue. For the same period, by contrast, the word *morale* appears in over 1600 titles. A significant spike in use can be observed after 1780, with 229 titles appearing between 1780 and 1789, and 320 between 1790 and 1799, compared to an average of only 161 for each of the century's other decades. The French Revolution, a major historical event, is a likely cause for this upsurge in printed works advertising an ethical purpose: the nation's legislators and thinkers were in the midst

3. See Simone Mazauric, *Savoirs et philosophie à Paris dans la première moitié du XVII^e siècle. Les conférences du bureau d'adresse de Théophraste Renaudot (1633–1642)* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1997), 181.

4. "Éthique," in *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, 4th ed. (Paris: La Veuve de Bernard Brunet, 1762), 677.

5. "Éthique," in Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (Paris: Briasson *et al.*, 1766), 6.56.

of laying the groundwork for the young *République* on the principles of "moral regeneration."[6]

So, the Latinate *morale*, appearing throughout the early modern period as an exact synonym of *éthique*, seems to have surpassed its Greek counterpart in the lexicon of eighteenth-century French thinkers. Only a few works drawn from the *dix-huitiémiste*'s canon need to be cited to illustrate this trend: Maupertuis's *Essai de philosophie morale* (1749), d'Holbach's *La Morale universelle, ou les Devoirs de l'homme fondée sur sa nature* (1776), or the Abbé Mably's *Principes de morale* (1784), not to mention both Diderot's and Rousseau's entire corpus, which are endlessly preoccupied with moral questions.[7] This dimension of these thinkers' work is still very much an object of contemporary research, as last summer's Cerisy colloquium on *Les Morales de Diderot* confirms.[8]

In fact, in the eighteenth century the notion of *éthique* is an invitation to question and reflect on its relationships with related terms such as *morale*. Jacques Domenech attests to the heuristic value of the term in *L'Éthique des Lumières. Les fondements de la morale dans la philosophie française du XVIII^e siècle* (1989). This study's title itself shows, on one hand, the intimate imbrication of *éthique* and *morale*, and, on the other, their properly philosophical application, a viewpoint that pervaded much of the French Enlightenment's literature and visual arts. While these concepts might once have been understood as synonymous, the presence of *éthique* is effaced by the ubiquitous use of *morale*: one readily finds "morale religieuse," "morale speculative," "morale expérimentale," "morale naturelle," "morale sensitive," and even "morale universelle," but no counterparts to *éthique*.

---

6. See, for example, Lambert Rivière's *Palladium de la constitution politique, ou régénération morale de la France* (Paris: Chez l'Auteur et les Marchands de nouveautés, 1790).

7. On the treatment of ethics and morality in Diderot's works, see: Marco Menin, *La Morale sensitive de Rousseau. Le livre jamais écrit* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2019); Colas Duflo, ed., *Lumières, matérialisme et morale. Autour de Diderot* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2016); "Diderot et la morale," a special issue of *Cultura*, vol. 34 (2015); Gabrielle Radica, *L'Histoire de la raison. Anthropologie, morale et politique chez Rousseau* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2008); and Ida Hisashi, *Genèse d'une morale matérialiste: les passions et le contrôle de soi chez Diderot* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2001).

8. See Odile Richard and Gerhardt Stenger, eds., *Les Morales de Diderot. Actes du colloque de Cerisy, 10–17 août 2020* (Paris: Hermann, forthcoming).

A caveat must be registered, however, when we consider usage on the other side of the Channel. In his contribution to this issue of *Lumen*, Jean-Pierre Cléro notes that "English-language dictionaries such as Chambers' *Cyclopædia* (1728) or the *Dictionarium Britannicum* (1721) make a clearer distinction between the ethical and the moral, especially concerning English authors who have made space in their own works for such a separation, one already operative in their own thought, and expressed through an opposition between the terms." The *Cyclopædia*'s exceptionally comprehensive entry for "Ethicks" refers to it as "the first Part, or Branch of Moral Philosophy," meaning that "Ethicks" proper is seen as a sub-category of the more general category of moral philosophy. Its object is "the Exercise of right Reason," its end is "to make [people] good and happy," and the principal topics that concern it are "Happiness and Manners." From these priorities stem the two corresponding branches of ethics: "moral Happiness" and "Moral Virtues, or good Manners."[9] And so, as with French language dictionaries, *ethics* and *morals* seem closely intertwined, albeit, as Cléro observes, with a marked insistence by English thinkers on the importance of the exercise of reason and, to some extent, on the careful calculation of human actions. This is equally the case with the *Dictionnarium Britannicum*'s definition of ethics, as "a science which shews those rules and measures of human actions, which lead to true happiness."[10] The definitions for *éthique* in both the Académie française's *Dictionnaire* and Diderot's *Encyclopédie* whittle the notion down to next to nothing, the result of this term's restrained application within a narrow field of pedagogical or didactic purpose; by contrast, English thinkers circumscribe its meaning by emphasizing practical reason, understood as a sort of applied mathematics for human behaviour.

In sum, the upshot of this brief survey of the notion of *éthique* in the eighteenth century is twofold. First, primarily due to its imbrication with moral philosophy, the meaning of the word itself elicits much discussion. Second, these very discussions demonstrate the necessity for scholars of our period to seek to broaden national perspectives

9. Ephraim Chambers, "Ethicks," in *Cyclopædia: or, an Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* (London: James and John Knapton *et al.*, 1728), 1.349.

10. "Ethicks," *Dictionarium Britannicum* (London: T. Cox, 1730), [n.p.].

through intellectual exchange; it is through scholarly conversations that we learn to recognize the differing vantage points afforded by the French and British Enlightenments on this fascinating, if challenging, object of study.

Considering the Theme of "Ethic(s) of/in the Enlightenment"

Closer to us, the history of the CSECS annual conference itself offers a telling example of the complex relations between ethics and moral philosophy. The conference held in 1991 at the University of Calgary was themed "Morality, Amorality, Immorality of the Enlightenment / Moralité, amoralité, immoralité des Lumières," in line with terminology that was prevalent during our period of study (in the French tradition especially). By contrast, while our recent theme of "Ethic(s) of/in the Enlightenment / Éthique(s) des Lumières" also sought to investigate the eighteenth century with an eye to the proper historicity of its concepts and practices, it also wished to showcase the myriad ways in which present day debates are direct descendants of those formulated in the Enlightenment. Accordingly, the program committee for the 2019 CSECS conference opted for "ethic(s)" over "moral(s)."

On the question of moral agency, it is also important for us to remember that if the eighteenth century valued personal, sensitive experience with its aggregate desires, pleasures, and dreams, at the same time, the period certainly did not neglect the relationships that individuals cultivate with others and the world. When Enlightenment philosophers, writers, or artists insist on the importance of *sensibility* (or its French cognate *sensibilité*), they often emphasize the human propensity to share in the emotions of others. In other words, concern for self and concern for other are interdependent. The ethical dimension of the eighteenth century's inquiry into the relation of self to world demands all the more attention today, a period in time when questioning the foundations of social order is as urgent a task as ever. A lasting contribution of the eighteenth century is the period's insights into what draws human beings towards one another, to nature, and to the world at large, as the articles presented in this issue of *Lumen* make clear.

Between Ethics and Morals

In the eighteenth century, *l'éthique*, understood in its broadest possible sense, spurred reflections on its ties to related concepts, the foremost of which is *morale*. Jean-Pierre Cléro's article explores this wide domain of complex interrelations connecting ethics and morals. From the outset Cléro asserts their difference: "ethics cannot be the equivalent of morals because ethics resolves moral disputes." Addressing in turn the works of Locke, Hutcheson, Hume, and Bentham, this contemporary scholar seeks to demonstrate "the innerworkings of the separation English authors trace during the eighteenth century between ethical, moral, religious, and legal realms." If Locke clears a space for an ethics conceived as that which allows one to compose "with a plurality of moral viewpoints," Hutcheson, for his part, "sets a milestone" regarding the "problem of the realization of ethics as an autonomous realm, distinct from morals and law," notably concerning the will to "compute the moral value of actions." For Hutcheson, "ethics becomes a calculation." In Bentham's work, Cléro elucidates, ethics—in a strict sense—denotes self-government within a context in which "neither morals nor religion can replace" it, because the matter at hand boils down to evaluating actions "from the perspective of the grief or contentment that they bring."

Ethics, Reasoned Calculations, and Politics

Ethics, reasoned calculations, happiness: these are the steps in the path explored by French political thought, as Carole Dornier shows in her article on the Abbé Castel de Saint-Pierre. Author of a *Projet de paix perpétuelle* (1713) and of several reform projects documented in his collected works, *Ouvrages de politique et de morale* (1733–1741), this prolific man of letters aspired to improve society by searching for the "greater good for the greatest number." To this aim, the Abbé sought to channel desires and, in particular, the desire to distinguish oneself—to be esteemed—and thereby ultimately to benefit the "collective well-being." At stake was the substitution of an iniquitous system based on birthright and inherited wealth with a meritocratic system. The ethics at the heart of the Abbé's work rests on the idea that one must judge acts based on the "results they produce, expressed in terms of sadness or pleasure, all the while involving the computation on a

collective scale of the total right and wrong created." All political, military, religious, scientific, cultural, and educational institutions are impacted. The "pleasure of distinguishing oneself … becomes one of the delights of organized society" and is "useful and beneficial only when favouring the welfare of the greatest possible number of people." Such a system of ethics depends on the possibility of measuring "the foundations of esteem and *grandeur*," and Saint-Pierre suggests their evaluation with regard to "general interest" and "common usefulness." In his mathematical system of ethics, the state plays a proper regulatory role, granting reprimand or praise accordingly.

In her article on Mirabeau and Sade, Sophie Rothé also considers government interventionism, particularly regarding the penal system. Her work examines the "ethical problem" brought to light by the two writers' correspondence with acquaintances while imprisoned, regarding the forms of "reparation that a penal system can enact when it is itself guilty of cruelty towards its inmates." Detained at the same time in the Vincennes dungeon, the two aristocrats shared a common experience of painful incarceration at a time when a "reflection on penal law reform" was already underway. The letters they exchanged with their correspondents preach a form of "penal ethics" that denounces arbitrariness in justice, particularly the practice of letters under the sovereign's seal authorizing imprisonment without trial (*lettres de cachet*); "the illegitimacy of detention motives"; the discrepancy between the gravity of the offence and the severity of the punishment; widespread disregard for the right to a fair trial; and the myriad abuses regularly inflicted on prisoners. Their epistolary exchanges act as a makeshift "tribunal" that offers the accused not only a forum in which to register his plea, but also the means to "unmask" or denounce the moral perversion of the institution and its agents (administrators, guardians, etc.) whose abuse of power prevents the exercise of "equitable justice that might bring the detainee to proper reform."

Ethics and the Morality of Sentiment

Conceiving of ethics as the calculation of proportionality between crimes and penalties is only one of the many intellectual paths that moral philosophy followed in the Enlightenment. Zeina Hakim's contribution draws our attention to the morality of sentiment, and more

specifically to what she terms an "ethics of tears," closely "associated with trends in sociability" over the course of the eighteenth century. A taste for the lachrymose imbues the century's theatrical theory and practice: playwrights seeking to move spectators to tears often resorted to filling their works with poignant scenes. One would be hard-pressed to find a term more suited to this phenomenon than an "ethics of tears," as eighteenth-century theatre performances in the sentimental mode manifest a clear desire to educate the public through displays of feeling. New social rituals and forms of sociability were thought to develop when individuals cried freely together, propagating moral effects stirred by a contagion of sympathies. Hakim shows how weeping in the eighteenth century was conceived as an integral part of sociability. Critical of Parisian theatre, Rousseau of course refused to confer on staged emotions the power to awaken any genuine moral sentiment; yet most playwrights in his time shared a belief in the moralizing virtues of the theatrical arts, staging sentimental scenes that might bear witness to a "feeling of shared humanity" and testify to the moral value of each to all.

Ethics and a Feeling for Nature

If Enlightenment ethics increasingly emphasized the need to care for others as well as for the self, Lucinda Cole shows how serious the consequences of not respecting our interdependence could be. In her plenary address, "What Is an Animal? Contagion and Being Human in a Multispecies World," Cole investigates the spread of zoonotic diseases in early modern Europe, tracking attempts to stop cross-species contagion in the works of "writers and physicians who sought to articulate the ways in which human and animal health were biophysically and imaginatively linked." Cole surveys responses to the spread of pestilence across Britain and the continent, and in the process sheds light on contemporary struggles; she links this epidemiological history to our own time, as the world tries to control a pandemic caused by a virus that has jumped from one animal species to another (the human), evidently the result of our continual encroachment on the domains of the wild.

Another discussion that explores respect for nature as an ethical imperative is Jérémie LeClerc's "'Wise Passiveness': Wordsworth,

Spinoza, and the Ethics of Passivity," winner of this year's Mark Madoff Prize for best graduate student essay. LeClerc builds on recent critical interest in Wordsworth's depiction of a "range of alternative forms of embodiment" that diverges from the "narrow normative spectrum of the mature and healthy male body." LeClerc endeavours to push the analysis of the English poet's fascination with "bodies in motion" beyond a socio-economic critique, to a consideration of the fundamental ethics in play. Reading Wordsworth through Spinoza's philosophy, LeClerc sees in both writers "a marked concern for the process of ethical development as it is predicated on fulfilment of the body and the mind," and argues for the importance of "their shared pantheistic leaning and commitment to radical ontological equality."

Visual Media and the Ethics of Adaptation

A number of contributors to this year's *Lumen* explore the influence of eighteenth-century literary and cultural phenomena on later artists. Working in the visual realm, these interpreters breathe new life into Enlightenment texts in a process often fraught with ethical questions. Loren Lerner's "The Ethical Development of Boys in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile* and Jean-Baptiste Greuze's Artworks" considers the pervasive influence of the writer's famous novel on the paintings of the leading artist of the sentimental ethos. In a series of subtle readings of Greuze's canvases, Lerner focuses on works depicting the lives of boys that were intended "as a detailed visualization of the pedagogical theories of Rousseau." Lerner shows how Greuze "illustrates moral principles akin to those espoused by Rousseau," with an emphasis on the raising of sons who possess compassion and good conscience—and concludes that "this interpretative approach affirms that the artist and the philosopher shared a set of values and beliefs informed by the same social reality."

Two other essays in this issue of *Lumen* similarly explore the ethics and aesthetics of adaptation, albeit in a different medium. In "Legacies of Enlightenment: Diderot's *La Religieuse* and Its Cinematic Adaptations," Amy Wyngaard considers recent film versions of one of the most controversial early novels published in France, showing how portrayals of Diderot's nun have continued to challenge social conventions and mores. Wyngaard focuses her discussion on Jacques

Rivette's 1966 and Guillaume Nicloux's 2013 adaptations; reading both the filmic texts and the public reactions to them, she demonstrates that "analysis of the posterity of *La Religieuse* underscores the ongoing pertinence of French Enlightenment thought"—especially its defense of individual freedom against the moral hypocrisy of established religious institutions. The lasting legacy of Diderot's novel, Wyngaard argues, is in how at the same time that it "highlights difficult truths concerning the abuse of power, the corruption of institutions, and the vulnerability of women, it also underscores the possibility for resistance and the capacity of narrative—of 'moving images' in particular—to touch audiences and incite change."

The continuing interest shown by filmmakers in eighteenth-century culture is also explored by Guy Spielmann in "Academe vs. Hollywood: *Sweet Liberty*, or the Dilemmas of Historical Representation on Film." Using Alan Alda's 1986 Hollywood comedy as a case study, Spielmann seeks to define the features of "a cinematic genre that somehow encompasses a historical vision" as he considers questions of authenticity and the representation of historical truth in popular culture. *Sweet Liberty* portrays a professional historian hired as a consultant for a period piece set during the American Revolution, in so doing "dramatizing the process of turning a scholarly study into a Hollywood film in a way that—perhaps unwittingly—brings out its complexities, and eventually takes them to a meta level rarely seen in non-experimental cinema." As Spielmann parses the at times dizzying narrative levels in this film about filmmaking, we are asked to ponder the ethical duties of the academic researcher drawn into a money-making and ego-building project that promises to introduce his work to a broader audience.

Research Ethics

In his article on anthologies of French poetry, Maxime Cartron also invites us to consider an "ethics of research" and aspires to "bypass the traps set by commonplace thought." Cartron contends that the familiar notion that there is an "apoetical eighteenth century" stems from a "strategic instrumentalization": the French Enlightenment—often presented as a "poetical desert"—acts as a negative foundation on which to construct and value the Baroque. In Cartron's account, the neglect still suffered by the poetry of the eighteenth century is largely due to a bias

in French literary history, namely the characterization of this period as rationalist and antipoetic. As the story goes, Enlightenment verse is a sorry affair that Romanticism fortunately then brought to an end. By reading a corpus of anthologies of seventeenth-century French poetry published in the twentieth century, his article investigates a particular aspect of this appropriation and devaluation: how the aesthetic merits of Baroque writings are highlighted against the supposed failings of eighteenth-century poetry. The critics who accuse Enlightenment-era poetry of insipidity deploy this contrast to define "their" object of study more forcefully. Should we believe these critics, the aesthetic of the Baroque and that of the Enlightenment would seem antithetical to each another: the former rife with orphic creative flare, celebrated as the cradle of modern poetry, while the latter suffering from a total lack of poetic virtues. Cartron aims to show the ways in which the Baroquist anthologies see eighteenth-century poetry as "post-classic" at best, and to uncover the rationale for such a damaging historiographical strategy.

Ethics of Faith

Questions of religious tolerance and intercultural ethics arose during the Enlightenment as increasing global travel and trade resulted in the meeting—and often clashing—of cultures. In "Defoe's Unchristian Colonel: Captivity Narratives and Resistance to Conversion," Catherine Fleming considers questions of freedom and faith through a focus on Daniel Defoe's *Colonel Jack*—a picaresque narrative that portrays a protagonist's journey from enslavement to eventual religious redemption. Fleming reads the novel "alongside narratives of European enslavement and captivity," showing how "Defoe deliberately reproduces the form of this popular genre," and concluding that "[t]he struggle against a foreign religion so central to the genre of the Barbary captivity narrative—the novel's inspiration—explains Jack's otherwise strange reluctance to embrace Christianity." While Jack himself claims that he was "bred … to nothing of either religious or moral knowledge," he does convert in the end, having learned the value of virtue through, he recounts, "some sober, religious company [he] fell into." Defoe's emphasis on the need for introspection and freedom of choice in religious belief offers us a quintessential example of the Enlightenment ideal of the self-examined life.

For those wishing to deepen their understanding of the eighteenth century and its legacies, the essays gathered here illustrate the extent to which ethical questions related to this period span a broad range of disciplines, topics, genres, and authors. We trust that these original scholarly investigations bear witness to the diversity of topics taken up at the 45th annual CSECS conference, as well as to the richness of the collegial discussions they prompted among our Society's members. From the sobs of an eighteenth-century theatre's audience to the metafictional strategies of modern cinematographic adaptations, from religious tolerance to biophysical interactions between animal species, from long-established philosophical debates on the distinction between "morals" and "ethics" to examination of our own methods as researchers, the present volume showcases the timeliness of the ethical questions that these productive days in Quebec City gave us the opportunity to address.

— Charlène Deharbe and Stephen Ahern