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Rousseau et les Anciens

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“L’Histoire de Cette Fatale Doctrine” Rousseau and the Background of the “Doctrine intérieure”

Perhaps no constellation of themes is more central to Rousseau’s thought than the one consisting of hypocrisy, imposture, dissimulation and their opposites. There have been noteworthy attempts to find in one or another of the components the organizing principle for an account of his “system.” The most influential interpretation of Rousseau, that of Jean Starobinski, sees him as engaged in an unceasing quest for transparency. An abundance of evidence supports this view: Rousseau’s earliest writings attack civilized politeness as superficially pleasing hypocrisy concealing radical vice, his *Confessions* claims to be the first honest autobiography, and his last writings are concerned with clarifying his works and intentions in the face of misinterpretation. There is, however, an opposing interpretation, associated with Lester G. Crocker, for which transparency is equally central, but in an entirely opposite sense.¹ In this view Rousseau’s proclamations of openness blind naive readers to his constant practice and praise of duplicity. Evidence is not lacking to support this account either: the political writings argue for a civil religion not believed in by the founders of the community, the educational techniques of *Émile* rely on constant deception and manipulation of the child, and similar techniques are used by Wolmar in *Julie*.

Because these interpretations diverge so sharply, it is perhaps wise to retreat, at least provisionally, from the view that either duplicity or transparency is simply the key to Rousseau’s system as a whole. Recently Ruth Grant has given us a persuasive account of his political thought that tries to do justice to both of these sides. I propose to examine Rousseau’s explicit discussions of a single related issue: the so-called *doctrine intérieure*, the internal or esoteric doctrine to which he addressed himself implicitly many times and in explicit terms in four different contexts at the beginning and end of his literary career. Taken together these discussions show the consistency of Rousseau’s understanding of the core significance of the doctrine. I would like to use these discussions first, to clarify the phenomenon Rousseau is discussing and second, to show what is distinctive in his understanding of it.

Rousseau’s earliest mention of the doctrine is also his most extensive discussion of it. It occurs in the “Observations by Jean-Jacques

Rousseau of Geneva on the Reply Made to his Discourse,” one of the responses he made to critics of his first *Discourse*. Objecting to Rousseau’s claim in the *Discourse* that philosophy undermines religion, Stanislas, the former king of Poland, had argued that “books of moral philosophy” were in fact powerful supports for Christianity (2: 32, 43; *OC* 3: 43).² Rousseau responded by asserting that philosophy was both alien and hostile to early Christianity; that subsequent Christians turned to it only out of self-defense; and, finally, that the introduction of philosophy into Christian apologetics eventually corrupted the original doctrine (2: 46; *OC* 3: 47).

In his attack on philosophy Rousseau provides a catalogue of “the pernicious maxims and impious dogmas of the various sects.” This catalogue covers theological issues such as the denial of providence, the existence of God, and the immortality of the soul and moral issues such as defenses of theft and adultery or the debunking of friendship and patriotism. Rousseau concedes that the philosophic sects of antiquity failed to agree with each other about any of these dogmas; in fact, he insists that they disagreed on virtually all substantive questions.³ Beyond claiming that each fell into “some dangerous error,” he identifies one thing they did share, saying, “[a]nd what shall we say about the distinction between the two doctrines so eagerly received by all the Philosophers, and by which they professed in secret sentiments contrary to those they taught publicly?” Whatever their differences on substantive points all philosophers have agreed in having two doctrines, a public one and a private one. The latter is the *doctrine intérieure*.

Rousseau attributes the origin of this doctrine to Pythagoras from whom it spread throughout Greece and eventually to Rome where it was held by Cicero among others. He says that the doctrine arose independently in China and says: “And to it the Chinese owe the large number of Atheists or Philosophers they have among them.” After suggesting that “[t]he History of this deadly doctrine, written by an informed and sincere man, would be a terrible blow to ancient and modern Philosophy,” he concedes that this exposé would have little effect because philosophy is founded on “human pride” which is stronger than “reason, truth, and even time.”

This account has several noteworthy features. First, Rousseau identifies the *doctrine intérieure* as a distinctively philosophic doctrine. In fact, it is the only distinctive philosophic doctrine: the only other characteristics shared by all philosophers are the possession of one or more of a variety of errors and disagreement with each other. Second, Rousseau insists that, far from being a historically contingent fact connected with the dissemination of Greek philosophy, the doctrine arises wherever philosophy appears. Finally, he accounts for this ubiquity by the fact that philosophy has its origin

in pride as opposed to concern for reason or truth. In effect Rousseau blurs any possible distinctions between philosophy and sophistry.

The *doctrine intérieure* can be seen as the logical consequence of its root in the following way. Their distinctive pride causes philosophers to seek to distinguish themselves from others. It makes them wish to flatter themselves for their exclusive possession of the truth. Consequently they disdain the opinions of non-philosophers and disagree with all other philosophers, in both cases without any particular regard for truth.⁴ These philosophers will buttress their self-esteem by cultivating a circle of initiates who endorse their doctrines which must remain private both to avoid the consequences of outraging public opinion and to maintain exclusivity. In sum pride leads to contempt for the many and dogmatism.

One might think that precisely the interior character of the doctrine would make it a relatively harmless, if distasteful phenomenon.⁵ Rousseau, however, calls it a “deadly doctrine.” The problem is that leaks are inevitable. Some sectarian followers of philosophy are bound to be indiscreet. Moreover, as Clifford Orwin has pointed out, the ancient sects engaged in a public relations campaign to elevate the status of philosophy (81). While this effort employed a more respectable *doctrine extérieure*, it also attracted more and more adherents for the interior doctrine. Many of these yielded to the temptation to flaunt their unorthodoxy in relatively daring public displays.⁶ A few prideful unorthodox thinkers might be harmless, but their pride ultimately leads to swarms of adherents who necessarily have a pernicious effect on society.

This rather startling history of philosophy might seem to some scholars today to be odd or even perverse. Not every element of it would have seemed so to Rousseau’s contemporary readers, however. A brief look at the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century background of the *doctrine intérieure* can help us see what is distinctive in Rousseau’s account. Some immediate antecedents of his view are quite easy to identify. Victor Gourevitch has provided useful suggestions about sources well known to Rousseau including Diderot, Barbeyrac, Locke, and the article in Bayle’s *Dictionary* on Spinoza.⁷ To these one should add Warburton, to whom Rousseau refers in the *Social Contract*, whose *Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated* contains a lengthy discussion of the “double doctrine” claiming that it was held by all moral philosophers (309–472).⁸ Finally, one could also add the French free-thinkers or so-called *libertins érudits* who regularly distinguished themselves as *déniaisés* from the vulgar and who, in the description of Joan DeJean, “transmit their message of intellectual and narrative freedom in a devious manner that serves to camouflage the message” (xii).⁹

Beyond these sources, which provide a general background, one can link some of these and other specific sources to the details of Rousseau's account. For example, in his article on Pythagoras, Bayle says, "Let us not forget to say that Pythagoras and his Successors had two manners of teaching, one for initiates, the other for strangers and for the profane." Rousseau's reference to the proliferation of philosophers, atheists, and the *doctrine intérieure* in China can be traced to the abundant literature debating the character of Chinese intellectual life beginning with the accounts of Jesuit missionaries in the seventeenth century.¹⁰ Rousseau was familiar with some of this literature as early as 1736 and read more of it in the 1740s while working for the Dupins.¹¹ Clearly discussions of the *doctrine intérieure* were abundantly available to him.¹²

In the second of the specific references Rousseau makes to the doctrine he singles out one source of information that deserves special attention. In Book IX of the *Confessions* he expresses his surprise at learning that Mme d'Épinay and Grimm adhered to the moral principal of denying any duty to other people which he refers to as "the *doctrine intérieure* about which Diderot talked to me so much, but which he never explained to me" (*CW* 5:393).¹³ Throughout the *Confessions* Grimm is shown manipulating public opinion to acquire a reputation as a man of unsurpassed sensitivity and honor. Grimm's principle implies that any concern expressed for morality would be purely exoteric, a part of his effort to present a respectable public image to put himself in a better position to satisfy his own inclinations. It could be said, then, that the *doctrine intérieure* is connected with a systematic and reflective effort to dupe public opinion for one's own advantage. Gourevitch has aptly described it as "systematic hypocrisy reduced to principle" (Gourevitch 98). Intellectuals do in a rigorous way what high society people do unreflectively.

The reference to Diderot as an authority on the doctrine is intriguing. One should not be hasty in assuming that Rousseau is assimilating Diderot's position on the doctrine to Grimm's. In fact, the quarrels that occasionally marred Diderot's long friendship with Grimm indicate at least a partial agreement with Rousseau. For example, Diderot objected to Grimm's assertion that probity owed only toward friends and that one would be a dupe to behave with integrity toward others. He also found offensive Grimm's claim that it is foolish to write against the abuses of the powerful.¹⁴ Rousseau refers only to Diderot's interest in the doctrine, not to his adherence.

The complexity of Diderot's view deserves more study. Some scholars have argued that Diderot was both opposed to and constitutionally incapable of systematic dissimulation. They point out that his openness about

the double doctrine indicates that he did not practice anything that could genuinely be called esotericism. Such openness undermines any possibility of deception. Peter France, for example, cautions against exaggerating the possibility “that Diderot cultivated disorder and ambiguity as protective devices in an age of repressive censorship” (198n10). Nevertheless France himself immediately cites a statement from Diderot that says as directly as possible that this is precisely what he does. Others have been less hesitant to attribute a form of esotericism to Diderot. Following Eugène Meyer, J. Robert Loy argues that Diderot held two different moral positions: one for the people based on traditional notions of virtue and another for the wise based his radical materialism (163). Diderot frequently insists that terms such as virtue and vice are essentially meaningless and should be used only as a concession to prevailing opinions. In the letter to Landois of 29 June 1756, for example, he distinguishes between the way preachers speak about morality and the way philosophers do. The former talk about virtue and free will while the latter talk about beneficence coming from physical temperament (*Correspondance* 1: 213–14). As Gourevitch has pointed out, this is one of the modern philosophic doctrines Rousseau attacks in the first *Discourse* and therefore an example of the *doctrine intérieure*.¹⁵

Diderot would certainly have been familiar with the doctrine through his study of the major English deists from the turn of the century among whom the esoteric, or double doctrine was a common (and fairly openly acknowledged) position.¹⁶ For example Toland, whose materialism influenced Diderot, wrote a work specifically on the subject, “Clidophorus: Or of the *Exoteric and Esoteric Philosophy*,” and referred to it in other works. Among the English thinkers who discussed the systematic dissimulation of opinions, or “defensive raillery” was Shaftesbury whose *Essay on Merit and Virtue* was translated by Diderot near the beginning of his friendship with Rousseau. In his “Discours préliminaire” Diderot refers to the virtuous pagan philosophers whose professions of piety might be “either from the heart or only in appearance” (*Œuvres* 1: 12). In the same context he makes a similar profession himself, saying that the goal of the work is to demonstrate that there is no virtue without belief in God which is precisely the opposite of what Shaftesbury’s work (and Diderot’s translation) actually argues.

Diderot’s expertise on the doctrine is shown most clearly through its numerous appearances in the *Encyclopédie*, a work that announced its own practice of yielding to “national prejudices” in conspicuous articles only to undermine them in more obscure articles referred to in cross-references. As it happens, Rousseau’s first reference to the doctrine occurs only

a few months after the publication of Volume 1 and his discovery about Mme. d'Épinay was made shortly before the publication of Volume 7 in 1757. The doctrine is referred to frequently in these early volumes and, indeed, in subsequent ones. In Volume 1 explicit references occur in the articles AME, ARISTOTELISME, and ASIATIQUES, the first two written by the Abbé Yvon and the last by Diderot. Among the additional articles from the first seven volumes with explicit reference to the esoteric, double or interior doctrine are the following: CELTES, EGYPTIENS, ELÉATIQUE, ENCYCLOPÉDIE, and GRECS, all but the first of which were written by Diderot and the other by the Abbé Yvon. After the resumption of publication in 1765 the doctrine is mentioned in JAPONAIS, INDIENS, IONIQUES, JUIFS, PLATONISME, PYTHAGORISME, SAMANÉEN, and XENXUS.¹⁷ As these lists show, avid readers of the *Encyclopédie* would be well acquainted with the idea that the doctrine had been held universally since early antiquity. Given this abundance of material, what should most surprise a reader of Rousseau's first two references to the doctrine is his claim not to know much about it.

Given the multiple authorship of the *Encyclopédie* it is not surprising that there are variations in the treatment of the doctrine even though the articles are largely drawn from Brucker's *Historia Critica Philosophiae* or from Warburton. The most extensive and, possibly the most typical discussion is also the most conspicuous. Formey's article, EXOTÉRIQUE & ESOTÉRIQUE from Volume 6 begins, "The ancient philosophers had a double doctrine; one external, public, or *exoteric*; the other internal, secret, or *esoteric*." Formey is at pains to deny that this doctrine could have arisen out of "pettiness of mind." Following Warburton, he repeatedly claims that philosophers made use of this double doctrine only for the public good, although he concedes that it later might have degenerated. Furthermore, he finds it in Egypt, Persia, India, and ancient Gaul. He associates it with both Greek philosophic sects and with political and religious leaders.

Clearly Rousseau's claim about the all-pervasiveness of the doctrine is the least distinctive part of his discussion. More distinctive is his limited attribution of the doctrine to philosophers or intellectuals and omission of religious and political leaders. By labeling it as a philosophic doctrine Rousseau distinguishes it from a statesmanlike support of civil religion or a hypocritical or priestly abuse of religious authority. Most distinctive is his insistence on the pernicious character of the doctrine and its source in pride. While Rousseau calls it a "deadly doctrine," the *Encyclopédie* descriptions are mostly descriptive or rather positive. They claim that dissimulation arose from the public-spiritedness of philosophers who wanted to support salutary beliefs or, at worst, that it was a necessity imposed by intolerance. Significantly the only unambiguously negative

discussion of the doctrine in the *Encyclopédie* occurs in the article CELTES by the Abbé Yvon which attributes it only to religious leaders. In other articles the Abbé praises the philosophic, as opposed to religious use of the doctrine. There is a tension in such treatment of the doctrine that illustrates a part of Rousseau's criticism: praise of the doctrine gives publicity to something it admits should be kept private. For example, in the article ARISTOTÉLISME the Abbé Yvon calls Aristotle indiscreet for acknowledging the existence of an interior doctrine and, even more, for openly and dogmatically rejecting the immortality of the soul.¹⁸ Rousseau would not have to look far for illustrations of the trouble supporters of the doctrine have keeping their mouths shut about it.

Although he sometimes follows the view outlined by Formey, Diderot himself largely avoids this tension, expressing reservations which are particularly interesting because they are directly opposed to those stated by Rousseau. One of his clearest statements occurs in GRECS. Diderot says, "If a discovery is essential to the good of society, to deprive it of it is to be a bad citizen; if it is of pure curiosity, it is worth neither the trouble of making nor that of being hid: useful or not, to keep it secret is to understand poorly the interest of one's reputation." Unlike Rousseau, Diderot chides the adherents of the *doctrine intérieure* for being insufficiently interested in distinction in the form of fame. Moreover he ignores the possibility that the doctrines kept secret might be worse than useless to society. In the article ENCYCLOPÉDIE Diderot stresses the goal of complete clarity. He laments that this goal has not been met by past thinkers and will not be met in the *Encyclopédie* because of such factors as intolerance and "the failing of the double doctrine." In AIUS-LOCUTIUS he proposes that censors protect the public by censoring only works written in the vernacular and leave complete freedom to works written in scholarly languages. This would not do away with the *doctrine intérieure*, but it would allow it to come out of doors. In sum, Diderot's position is an example of what Paul Bagley has called conditional esotericism: out of a concern for safety he concealed certain opinions but ultimately aimed at the abolition of the necessity for dissimulation (245–47).¹⁹

Rousseau's last two discussions of the *doctrine intérieure* are concerned with precisely this sort of conditional esotericism characteristic of contemporary writers as distinguished from ancient philosophers. One occurs in the *Dialogues* and the other in the *Reveries*. With their focus on writing and publication they add a new element to Rousseau's description. The passage from the *Reveries* applies what Rousseau had earlier said about the doctrine to contemporary writers. He divides the morality of his opponents into a "rootless and fruitless morality which they pompously display

in books or in some striking scene on the stage without any of it ever penetrating the heart or the reason” and “this other secret and cruel morality, the *doctrine intérieure* of all their initiates, for which the other only serves as a mask, which is the only one they follow in their conduct [...]. This purely offensive morality is of no use for defense and is good only for aggression” (38; *OC* 1: 1022). The reference to hypocritically moralistic plays written by philosophers is certainly directed against Diderot and possibly Voltaire. Rousseau deprives those who follow the *doctrine intérieure* of the justifications of public-spiritedness and self-defense. The morality expounded in their exterior doctrine is empty in spite of its high sounding rhetoric and the morality taught in private is used only for the aggressive pursuit of selfish goals.

The passage in the *Dialogues* suggests an even more aggressive distinctively modern version of esotericism. Rousseau insists that bold statements occasionally found in his own books are much less dangerous than the superficially innocuous contents of other contemporary books. He says, “Our philosophers have what they call their *doctrine intérieure*, but they teach it to the public only while concealing themselves, and to their friends only in secret. By always taking everything literally, one would perhaps actually find less to reproach in more dangerous books than in those we are talking about here” (1: 28; *OC* 1: 695). This discussion repeats the charge of duplicity against the adherents of the *doctrine intérieure*, but it also adds something curious. While Rousseau’s other discussions claim that the *doctrine intérieure* (here said to be taught in secret to friends) is accompanied by an exterior doctrine that pompously (but uselessly) proclaims its adherence to conventional morality, this one asserts that the public is also taught the *interior* doctrine in books in which it is hard to find anything to reproach. How can a pernicious morality be taught in books in which it is hard to find anything offensive? Also, how can a doctrine that is taught to the public be considered a *doctrine intérieure*?

Rousseau seems to claim that the adherents of the *doctrine intérieure* write two sorts of books, one which they publish using their own names and another which they publish anonymously. In the first sort they do not directly present any shocking doctrines; rather, they pay an empty lip service to conventional teachings. In the second, they appear to do the same thing, but in fact undermine the positions they praise by giving feeble defenses for them (what Toland called, “the bouncing compliment”) or alternatively by what David Hume called “secret insinuation” of unorthodox opinions.²⁰ This suggestion is confirmed by what Rousseau says later in the *Dialogues* referring to the “brilliant Authors of this Century” who preach “the love of virtues and the hatred of vice” but who also teach “that there is

neither vice nor virtue in the heart of man, since there is neither freedom in his will nor morality in his actions” (1: 140; *OC* 1: 841–42).

The attempt to insinuate into the public doctrines normally reserved for the initiated represents an innovation in the *doctrine intérieure*. This form of modern esotericism is very different in its consequences from the practice Rousseau described in his earlier discussions. In the ancient version, the adherents had only a relatively unintentional effect on society as a whole. In the new version they aim at its radical transformation and are aided by the invention of the printing press.²¹ The usual name for this phenomenon is enlightenment, not esotericism, but Rousseau suggests that, rather than enlightening, the new adherents of the doctrine are inculcating a new prejudice. They are more interested in imposing their own reason on the public than in making the public reasonable.²² Their pride aims not merely at distinguishing their own opinions from those of the vulgar, but also ruling the vulgar. Thus in its modern form the *doctrine intérieure* characterizes a group of intellectuals who are attempting to satisfy their own vanity by making themselves into a privileged elite (or insiders) who control public opinion (1: 178, 238; *OC* 1: 889, 966–67). Rousseau develops this picture of modern intellectuals in great detail at the end of the *Dialogues*. There he attributes to them the complex strategy of teaching doctrines most likely to gain supporters while simultaneously working secretly to undermine traditional morality. Their goal is to make themselves into absolute authorities by being the “supreme interpreters” of what is natural (1: 238–39; *OC* 1: 966–68).

From these four passages one can deduce a coherent account of Rousseau’s view of the *doctrine intérieure*. First, he presents esotericism in the strict sense as a practice engaged in by philosophers and other intellectuals. It bears many resemblances to the hypocrisy pervading modern societies but differs from this hypocrisy by being a reflective doctrine. It must be distinguished from other forms of concealment, such as the civil religion, which can be more benign. Second, rather than being a defense of salutary public opinions, an educational device introducing students to the truth after lengthy preparation, or a defensive strategy against persecution, the *doctrine intérieure* is essentially a manifestation of the prideful desire for distinction. Finally, in modernity it is no longer a strictly private doctrine. It is part of a covert attempt to control public opinion.

Rousseau’s account of the *doctrine intérieure*, its origin in pride, and its pernicious consequences raises the question of whether there might be a cure for philosophic pride. Such a cure would also free philosophy from both its contempt for non-philosophers and of its dogmatism. Rousseau sketches out such a position in his so-called “Fiction, ou Morceau

allégorique.” Whatever his views about this possibility, his insistence that pride is more powerful than either reason or truth requires that such a newly founded philosophy would have to be particularly attentive to the dangers posed by those who are attracted to philosophy for the wrong reason. Consequently it would have to be less concerned with its own propagation than traditional philosophy has been. Rousseau is more confident than ancient philosophers were that genuinely great thinkers do not need of much assistance from their predecessors and more insistent that the dangers to mankind in the propagation of philosophy outweigh the benefits. This leads to the paradox that can summarize his view of the *doctrine intérieure*: in its traditional form the doctrine has not been interior enough. The implications of this for Rousseau’s willingness to withhold parts of his own understanding from the public view, i.e. to his own interior doctrine, must be the subject for another occasion.

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Notes

¹Crocker has developed this interpretation in a number of works over the past forty years. Most significant is *Rousseau’s “Social Contract”*: an interpretive essay and the most recent is “Rousseau’s *soi-disant* liberty.”

²References to Rousseau will give the pagination first in the *Complete Works*, followed by that in the *Œuvres complètes*.

³Rousseau repeats this point in the second *Discourse* saying that the ancient philosophers, “seem to have tried their best to contradict each other on the most fundamental questions” (3:13; *OC* 3: 124).

⁴See Rousseau, preface to *Narcisse* (2:191; *OC* 2: 965–66).

⁵See, for example, the claim in the first *Discourse*, “The impious writings of Leucippus and Diagoras died with them” (2: 20; *OC* 3: 27).

⁶For an interesting account of one episode involving the adherents of the traditional version of the doctrine and their more radical opponents see Anderson.

⁷*The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings* 335.

⁸For Rousseau’s reference to Warburton see Rousseau 4: 157; *OC* 3: 384.

⁹DeJean indicates that she believes that Rousseau was unfamiliar with these writers (197), but he refers explicitly to Cyrano (*Œuvres complètes* 3: 1111) and knew their arguments from Nicholas Fréret’s *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe* which he read in manuscript years before its publication in 1768. See Pinot 344; Spink 9 and (in connection with Rousseau) 309; and Pintard 86, 176.

¹⁰See Mungello, Guy and especially Pinot.

¹¹See *Confessions* (5: 201, 474; *OC* 1: 240, 567). He refers to this literature approvingly in the second *Discourse* (3: 85; *OC* 2: 213).

¹²For useful discussion of the “twofold philosophy,” “double doctrine,” “interior doctrine,” or esotericism in the eighteenth century France, see Manuel 65–69, 225–26, and Payne 65–70. For philosophic and religious uses of the doctrine in the immediately preceding centuries see Perez Zagorin.

¹³A letter from Rousseau to Tronchin from February of 1757 about Mme d’Epinay shows that Rousseau is not simply inventing this characterization of Grimm’s morality for the purposes of the *Confessions* (Leigh 5: 162).

¹⁴On these points see Furbank 211, 419.

¹⁵See Victor Gourevitch, ed., *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, 331. This point was made earlier by Jean Fabre.

¹⁶For useful accounts see Bagley, Berman, and Sullivan 173.

¹⁷Of these INDIENS, PLATONISME, PYTHAGORISME were also by Diderot.

¹⁸Yvon makes the same claim in virtually identical language in *AME*. In both cases he is simply paraphrasing Warburton.

¹⁹This seems to be Loy’s position on Diderot (181). See also Topazio 104. A generation later Condorcet gave an account of the “secret doctrine” that is a systematic version of one of the strands to be found in the *Encyclopédie*: first the doctrine was used by priests to establish their power over the people, then it was used by philosophers to protect themselves from the power of the priests, finally it has come into the open.

²⁰On these and other techniques of the art of theological lying see Berman.

²¹For a development of this point, see Orwin.

²²See *Lettre à D’Alembert* (*OC* 5: 11–12).

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