

Enjoyment and Tahiti

Denis Diderot

In his Encyclopédie entry for “enjoyment” (jouissance), Diderot unabashedly praises the naturalness of sexual pleasure. This was a recurring theme in his writings, as we see in the second selection below, from his Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville (1772).

ENJOYMENT, f. n. (*Gram. and Moral.*). To enjoy means to know, to experience, to feel the advantages of possession. One often possesses without *enjoyment*. Who owns these magnificent palaces? Who has planted these immense gardens? The sovereign. But who enjoys them? I do.

Let us leave these magnificent palaces that the sovereign has constructed for other people than himself, these enchanting gardens in which he never walks, and stop to contemplate pleasure that perpetuates the chain of living beings and to which we have consecrated the word *enjoyment*.

Among the objects that nature everywhere offers to our desires, you who have a soul, tell me if there is anything more worthy of your pursuit, anything that can make us happier than the possession and enjoyment of a being who thinks and feels as you do, who has the same ideas, who experiences the same sensations, the same ecstasies, who brings her affectionate and sensitive arms toward yours, who embraces you, whose caresses will be followed with the existence of a new being who will resemble one of you, who will look for you in the first movements of life to hug you, whom you will bring up by your side and love together, who will protect you in old age, who will respect you at all times, and whose happy birth has already strengthened the tie that bound you together?

Crude, insensitive, and unmoved beings who are deprived of life’s vital force and who surround us can be useful for our happiness, but without knowing or sharing it; and our sterile and destructive *enjoyment*, which affects all of these people, does not produce any real *enjoyment* in its turn.

If there is a perverse man who could take offense at the praise that I give to the most noble and universal of passions, I would evoke Nature before him, I would make it speak, and Nature would say to him: why do you blush to hear the word pleasure pronounced, when you do not blush to *indulge in its temptations* under the cover of night? Are you ignorant of its purpose and of what you owe it? Do you believe that your mother would have imperiled her life to give you yours if I had not attached an inexpressible charm to the embraces of her husband? Be

quiet, unhappy man, and consider that pleasure pulled you out of nothingness.

The propagation of beings is the greatest object of nature. It imperiously solicits both sexes as soon as they have been granted their share of strength and beauty. A vague and brooding restlessness warns them of the moment; their condition is mixed with pain and pleasure. At that time they listen to their senses and turn their considered attention to themselves. But if an individual should be presented to another individual of the same species and of a different sex, then the feeling of all other needs is suspended: the heart palpitates; the limbs tremble; voluptuous images wander through the mind; a flood of spirits runs through the nerves, excites them, and proceeds to the seat of a new sense that reveals itself and torments the body. Sight is troubled, delirium is born; reason, the slave of instinct, limits itself to serving the latter, and nature is satisfied.

This is the way things took place at the beginning of the world, and the way they still take place in the back of the savage adult's cave.

But when woman began to discriminate, when she appeared to take care in choosing between several men upon whom passion cast her glances, there was one who stopped them, who could flatter himself that he was preferred, who believed that he brought to the heart he esteemed the very esteem that he had for himself, and who considered pleasure as the recompense for some merit; then, when the veils that modesty cast over the charms of a woman allowed an inflamed imagination the power to dispose of them at will, the most delicate illusions competed with the most exquisite of senses to exaggerate the happiness of the moment; the soul was possessed with an almost divine enthusiasm; two young hearts lost in love vowed themselves to each other forever, and heaven heard the first indiscreet oaths.

Yet how many happy moments existed before the one in which the entire soul sought to spring forth and lose itself in the soul of the person loved! *Enjoyment* began the moment that hope was born.

Nevertheless confidence, time, nature, and the freedom of caresses led to the forgetfulness of self; one swore after experiencing the final ecstasy that there was no other person who could be compared to her (or to him); and this was true in these circumstances each time people had sensitive and young organs, a tender heart and an innocent soul unacquainted with either mistrust or remorse.

015

In the sharing of Bougainville's crew among the Tahitians, the almoner was allotted to Orou; they were about the same age, thirty-five to thirty-six. Orou had then only his wife and three daughters, called Asto, Palli, and Thia. They undressed the almoner, bathed his face, hands, and feet, and served him a wholesome and frugal meal. When he was about to go to bed, Orou, who had been absent with his family, reappeared, and presenting to him his wife and three daughters, all naked, said: "You have eaten, you are young and in good health; if you sleep alone you will sleep badly, for man needs a companion beside

him at night. There is my wife, there are my daughters; choose the one who pleases you best. But if you wish to oblige me you will give preference to the youngest of my daughters, who has not yet had any children.” The mother added: “Alas! But it’s no good complaining about it; poor Thia! it is not her fault.”

The almoner answered that his religion, his office, good morals and decency would not allow him to accept these offers.

Orou replied: “I do not know what this thing is that you call ‘religion’; but I can only think ill of it, since it prevents you from tasting an innocent pleasure to which nature, the sovereign mistress, invites us all; prevents you from giving existence to one of your own kind, from doing a service which a father, mother and children all ask of you, from doing something for a host who has received you well, and from enriching a nation, by giving it one more citizen. I do not know what this thing is which you call your ‘office,’ but your first duty is to be a man and to be grateful. I do not suggest that you should introduce into your country the ways of Orou, but Orou, your host and friend, begs you to lend yourself to the ways of Tahiti. Whether the ways of Tahiti are better or worse than yours is an easy question to decide. Has the land of your birth more people than it can feed? If so, your ways are neither worse nor better than ours. But can it feed more than it has? Our ways are better than yours. As to the sense of decency which you offer as objection, I understand you; I agree that I was wrong, and I ask your pardon. I do not want you to injure your health; if you are tired, you must have rest; but I hope that you will not continue to sadden us. See the care you have made appear on all these faces; they fear lest you should have found blemishes on them which merit your disdain. But when it is only the pleasure of doing honor to one of my daughters, amidst her companions and sisters, and of doing a good action, won’t that suffice you? Be generous!”

The Almoner: It’s not that: they are all equally beautiful; but my religion! my office!

Orou: They are mine and I offer them to you; they are their own and they give themselves to you. Whatever may be the purity of conscience which the thing “religion” and the thing “office” prescribe, you can accept them without scruple. I am not abusing my authority at all; be sure that I know and respect the rights of the individual.

Here the truthful almoner agrees that Providence had never exposed him to such violent temptation. He was young, he became agitated and tormented; he turned his eyes away from the lovely suppliants, and then regarded them again; he raised his hands and eyes to the sky. Thia, the youngest, clasped his knees and said: “Stranger, do not distress my father and mother, do not afflict me. Honor me in the hut, among my own people; raise me to the rank of my sisters, who mock me. Asto, the eldest, already has three children; the second, Palli, has two; but Thia has none at all. Stranger, honest stranger, do not repulse me; make me a mother, make me a child that I can one day lead by the hand, by my side, here in Tahiti; who may be seen held at my breast in nine months’ time;

one of whom I shall be so proud and who will be part of my dowry when I go from my parents' hut to another's. I shall perhaps be more lucky with you than with our young Tahitians. If you will grant me this favor I shall never forget you; I shall bless you all my life. I shall write your name on my arm and on your son's; we shall pronounce it always with joy. And when you leave these shores, my good wishes will go with you on the seas till you reach your own land."

The candid almoner said that she clasped his knees, and gazed into his eyes so expressively and so touchingly; that she wept; that her father, mother and sisters withdrew; that he remained alone with her, and that, still saying "my religion, my office," he found himself the next morning lying beside the young girl, who overwhelmed him with caresses, and who invited her parents and sisters, when they came to their bed in the morning, to join their gratitude to hers. Asto and Palli, who had withdrawn, returned bringing food, fruits and drink. They kissed their sister and made vows over her: They all ate together.

Then Orou, left alone with the almoner, said to him: "I see that my daughter is well satisfied with you and I thank you. But would you teach me what is meant by this word 'religion' which you have repeated so many times and so sorrowfully?"

The almoner, after having mused a moment, answered: "Who made your hut and the things which furnish it?"

016

017

018

019

020

021