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**The Metaphysics of Immorals – Naturalism,
Materialism and Atheism of Marquis de Sade**

Abstract

This paper argues that Marquis de Sade is a more original and relevant Enlightenment philosopher than it is commonly thought. We argue that de Sade is a notable author and a noteworthy naturalist thinker in contemporary times as well, concerning modern science, organized religion, (homo)sexuality, political violence and prevalent sociocultural norms. In order to demonstrate these claims, we thoroughly analyse de Sade's philosophies of naturalism and materialism, i.e., his metaphysics and his radical ethics of "immorality", based on viewing (human) Nature as a sole organizing, creative and destructive principle. Furthermore, we detail his atheist and anti-theistic arguments, which he consistently uses to reject the possibility of a God and all supernatural beings, coupled with his social and political criticism of a faith-based society. Thus, we outline the philosophical arguments that made him a controversial, infamous and denounced thinker, and which socially distanced him from the prevailing philosophical milieu. We also argue for the possibility that he deserves a more prominent place in the history of philosophy which is not congruent with the various "rehabilitative" and "revisionist" narratives regarding de Sade as an early champion of the Counter-Enlightenment, anti-science and postmodernism.

Keywords

Marquis de Sade, libertinism, metaphysics, metaphysical ethics, naturalism, materialism, atheism, antitheism

"However, I myself am a philosopher;
everyone acquainted with me will
certify that I consider philosophy my
profession and my glory."
(de Sade 1803/1965: 153)

Introductory

The basic thesis of this research is the claim that Marquis de Sade was a relatively original, relevant and revolutionary philosopher, which is why he deserves a more prominent and respected place in the history of philosophy, and not just history of literature. Although de Sade was mainly a playwright, novelist and/or a humourist inextricably linked to the Age of Enlightenment and the socio-political context of libertinism, radicalism, and the French Revolution (Turner 1985; Ferguson 1991; Cryle & O'Connell 2003; Steintrager 2004; Coward 2005; Deininger 2012), his steadfast materialism, resolute naturalism, and radical a(nti)theism, his subversive, transgressive and counterintuitive ethics, and an unusually up-to-date, pro-scientific and progressive social philosophy, are all significant for both modern times and contemporary philosophy.

A number of detailed biographies have been written about Marquis de Sade (Bloch 1899/2002; Gorer 1934; Le Brun 1986/1990; Lever 1991/1993;

Thomas 1992; du Plessix Gray 1998; Schaeffer 1999; Warman 2002; Phillips 2005) so far.¹ However, these narratives often perpetuate myths about him as a notorious sexual deviant, criminal, abuser, monster or a murderer, or propagate a myth of a “divine Marquis” as an “apostle of freedom” and a misunderstood genius (Apollinaire 1909; de Beauvoir 1953; Foucault 1976/1978; Hénaff 1978/1999; Phillips 2001). In reality, Marquis de Sade was *not* a mythologized (anti)hero and/or a debaucher from his own libertine novels, as he is commonly portrayed. This is why it is necessary to develop a more tolerant attitude towards his “violent”, “dark” and “obscene” literature, in order to appreciate and acknowledge his philosophical originality (Ryland 1951: 15).

De Sade’s work is commonly interpreted within the context of *libertinism* (Turner 1985; Cryle & O’Connell 2003). The word *libertinus* originally referred to a freed Roman slave (Komisaruk 2020), but acquired a different meaning during the religious debates of the 16th century and became a descriptor for individuals who were religious non-conformists (including the radical Protestants), free thinkers or held loose opinions about religion. Gradually, it also became a label for French and English aristocrats, thinkers and artists who freely followed their own inclinations and were not restricted by social norms. This relatively “nebulous” concept was central to a discussion of illicit sexuality in the 18th century, although with many semantic inconsistencies (Turner 1985: 75). It is thus easy to see why the term “libertine” was (mostly) used in a derogatory manner, with accusations of immorality, atheism, obscenity, eroticism, adultery, promiscuity etc., implying “hostility towards religion on rational-materialist grounds” (Komisaruk 2020: 125).

In the (posthumously published) letter to his wife from prison in 1781, de Sade did declare the following:

“I am therefore guilty only of libertinage pure and simple, such as it is practiced by all men to a greater or lesser degree.” (de Sade 1999: 188)

On the other hand, he was certainly not the first libertine author and/or philosopher, if libertinism is seen as a form of ethical indifference towards prevailing laws and sociocultural norms.² It is also without question that he was raised in a world of progressive ideas and libertine behaviour (his father and uncle maintained libertine lifestyles and had a rich library with an impressive collection of pornographic novels and dramas; Phillips 2005). This is why de Sade’s writing and philosophy are surely intertwined with the libertine ethos.

At the first glance, de Sade does seem as an “inconsistent pedant, or at most a second-rate philosopher” (Airaksinen 2001: 2). His works are relatively demanding, almost impenetrable, repetitive, fragmented, (too) long and clearly portrayed a bizarre obsession with numbers and minute details, while strangely “infused” with the philosophical stances of a “more decent” philosophical contemporaries such as La Mettrie and d’Holbach (Phillips 2005: 32–37). However, this interpretation is not adequate for many reasons. First, de Sade’s books are nowadays most commonly available in abridged versions and are designated to fiction, whereby his philosophical debates and speculations have been consistently left out. And it is mainly these “excurses” that are of paramount importance for a proper understanding of de Sade’s philosophical thought.

Secondly, de Sade became (in)famous for his scandals, personal “godlessness” and “insanity”, as well as for his republican political activity during the French Revolution and only later for his (censored) books and treatises

(Coward 2005; Phillips 2005). After being brought to court in 1768 and 1772, accused of “extreme debauchery” and “horrible impiety”, fantastic legends were spread about him in France and England. The publication of *Justine* (de Sade 1791/1965) and *Juliette* (de Sade 1797/1968) several decades later, in which he describes numerous sexual “perversions” in an exaggerated and explicit way, further confirmed and reinforced these legends or myths (Ryland 1951). For these reasons, there exists a problematic and inadequate conflation of his literature, his philosophy and his personal life.

Thirdly, the greatest Western philosophers have very rarely addressed the key theme of de Sade’s work – sex, sexual lust and human sexuality in general, which is why his philosophy has necessarily been and remained on the sidelines of mainstream philosophical discourse. Fourthly, de Sade’s works have a reputation as books that are difficult, enigmatic and “uncomfortable” to read, and that aren’t really sexually arousing (at least not in a conventional way). Actually, his scandalous “pornography” largely turns sexual explicitness into a *symbolic* weapon that attacks the relationship between the private and the public (Ferguson 1991: 1).

The essence of such “philosophical pornography” is much less in its sexual explicitness and far more in the struggle among conflicting narratives concerning health and abnormality, the private and the public, one’s social obligations and the defence of personal freedoms (Ferguson 1991: 3). After all, the very word “pornography” came into popular use in France only during the 1830s and in England in the 1850s. During the Enlightenment, “pornography” was never at the forefront of any literary work and served only as means of defying political or religious authority, never falling into a separate literary category (Darnton 1982; Hunt 1993).³

In other words, de Sade’s literary oeuvre is not as “pornographic” as it is commonly thought, although it does include several “scandalous” works, coupled with numerous and relatively incoherent philosophical tracts. This will initially appeal to the curious reader, but will eventually fill them with horror and disgust, perhaps as a torture device that de Sade (consciously?) aimed at the reader (Airaksinen 2001: 13). In this manner, he is “quite distinct from other writers”, which is the added reason for the “inconceivable outrage” concerning de Sade (Le Brun 1986/1990: 9).

Finally, his books are “tainted” with simple, humorous and profane vocabulary, as well as the obscenity of the situations he describes, further complicating de

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Although it was not until the mid-20th century that his early and previously unpublished manuscripts and texts were published: one travelogue, thirteen plays, two novels and, above all, over 250 very important letters from prison (Ryland 1951; de Sade 1999).

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Some of his best-known predecessors and contemporaries (more or less) associated with libertinism were: George Etherege (c. 1636–1692), John Wilmot (Earl of Rochester, 1647–1680), Claude Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon (1707–1777), Giacomo Girolamo Casanova (1725–1798), Pierre Choderlos de Laclos (1741–1803). Also, “the fair triumvirate of

wit”: Delarivier Manley (c. 1663–1724), Aphra Behn (1640–1689) and Eliza Haywood (c. 1693–1756) (Webster 2006).

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The earliest example of pornography in modern Europe was Pietro Aretino, during the 1530s. Yet, when it comes to libertine novels, the most important is the publication of *Pamela* by Samuel Richardson (1740), which was extremely popular. The culmination of this type of “pornography”, which appeared during the 1740s, were actually de Sade’s works, combining “pornography” with philosophical topics and discussions.

Sade's acknowledgement as a mainstream, "serious" or a "true" philosopher. These are the works that *are* "obscene", in the sense of motifs and language used, but which are not *pornographic* in the sense that their primary intention is to sexually arouse the reader (Gorer 1934: 12). Simply put, "Sade deals with shit and fucking, but if the reader cannot handle this, he is lost" (Airaksinen 2001: 3).

Therefore, de Sade's fiction and style mainly *serve counter-ethical and meta-physical aims*, which is why it is probably correct to interpret him as a "disguised philosopher" (Airaksinen 2001: 5). On the other hand, he saw and publicly presented himself as "the man of letters" (Phillips 2005: 12), with the explicit proclamation "I am a philosopher.", as evidenced by the epigraph of this paper. Although de Sade's project truly is an amalgam of literature and philosophy, his extended and unusually frequent philosophical excursions (or "dissertations") are actually the most valuable and original elements of his bibliography and heritage as a philosophical author.

After a more careful and detailed reading of de Sade's work, he should be perceived as a writer who certainly has much to offer in the fields of cultural history and literary criticism, but also in the fields of metaphysics, ethics and social philosophy. For all these reasons, we claim that Marquis de Sade is not merely a "second-class" philosopher (Collins 1998), since he has been the subject of an inappropriate mythologisation, stigmatisation and fictionalisation. Besides numerous legends, myths and untruths (Carpenter 1991; du Plessix Gray 1998; Coward 1992; 2005; Phillips 2001; Phillips 2005), a clearer and more accurate picture of this man and his ideas gradually emerges, and over time it was recognised that de Sade occupies a rather important place in literature *and* philosophy of the 18th century (Ryland 1951: 15).

Today we can discern at least four stages in the "rehabilitation" of Marquis de Sade as a writer or an author (Shattuck 1996). This undertaking was launched and supported by prominent intellectual figures such as Iwan Bloch (Bloch 1899/2002), Guillaume Apollinaire (Apollinaire 1909), Geoffrey Gorer (Gorer 1934), Simone de Beauvoir (de Beauvoir 1953), Georges Bataille (Bataille 1957/2012), Roland Barthes (Barthes 1971/1989), Michel Foucault (Foucault 1966/2002; 1976/1978) and others. De Sade finally gained his rightful place among the famous and classical French writers only in 1989, with the publication of *A New History of French Literature* (Hollier 1989).

However, de Sade has not yet been fully rehabilitated as a *philosopher* as well, standing close to the foremost philosophers of the Enlightenment. In fact, his radical philosophical heritage is most often conceptualised as associated to the Counter-Enlightenment and commonly viewed as anti-rational, anti-scientific, anti-modern or even postmodern and posthumanist. In other words, he is mistakenly interpreted as an icon of the postmodern rejection of all absolute truths and narratives of modernity, and even as a destroyer of philosophy itself (Lyotard 1995; Lacan 1963/1989; Moore 2010; James 2018).

In this regard, for example, Horkheimer and Adorno in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* condemn de Sade for developing arguments which supposedly led to Nazism and the Holocaust (Horkheimer, Adorno 1947/2002), while Foucault argued that "sadism" is a cultural fact which enables the world to *transcend* reason (Foucault 1966/2002). It is our view that these interpretations are profoundly inadequate. In order to demonstrate or prove this argument, we shall turn to the detailed analysis of de Sade's original, (proto) scientific and revolutionary metaphysical ethics, that is, his unambiguous

naturalism and materialism and finally de Sade's unwavering a(nti)theism as a distinct philosophy of life.

Metaphysics against Morals: De Sade's Naturalism and Materialism

Four distinctive techniques characterise de Sade's overall philosophy, as well as his dialectical and enigmatic mode of argument (Airaksinen 2001). First, *inversion*, in which he rhetorically "twists" the topic he discusses (e.g., the nature of the cosmos, human nature, religion, morals, etc.) "upside down". Second, *transgression*, that is, the deliberate overcoming and breaking of conventional boundaries of philosophical and literary inquiry. Third, *subversion* (and/or *perversion*), in terms of the libertine rebellion against existing social rules and moral principles, mainly in the name of personal pleasure. And, fourth, *transcendence*, as the final epilogue or a dialectical climax of these removed constraints. It is for these reasons that de Sade's philosophical heroes enjoy the pain and the disgusting, the decadent, the subversive and the transgressive, while at the same time passionately worshipping everything that does not deserve respect in the dominant narratives of the existing socio-political order. These heroes undoubtedly strive for (bodily) pleasure, but through what is conventionally regarded as suffering, sin and pain – directed toward oneself and/or towards others (Airaksinen 2001: 2).

In his metaphysics, Marquis de Sade is a radical and unwavering *naturalist*. For him, the only and absolute governing principle in the universe is "Nature", which is the reason why his libertine heroes justify their own self-interested behaviour as simply being "natural". Human nature is therefore in a constant state of flux between what is socio-culturally considered as virtue or vice, with the unequivocal favoring of vice instead of virtue (de Sade 1791/1965; de Sade 1795/1965; de Sade 1797/1968). In the *120 Days of Sodom*, he claims that vice and crime "have a character of grandeur and sublimity" as opposed to "monotonous" virtue, with "vice being just as necessary to Nature as virtue" (de Sade 1785/1966: 197). In this regard, he "pedagogically" (Greteman 2016) states:

"Ah, Eugénie, have done with virtues! Among the sacrifices that can be made to those counterfeit divinities, is there one worth an instant of the pleasures one tastes in outraging them? Come, my sweet, virtue is but a chimera whose worship consists exclusively in perpetual immolations, in unnumbered rebellions against the temperament's inspirations. Can such impulses be natural? Does Nature recommend what offends her?" (de Sade 1795/1965: 208)

For de Sade, there are no socio-political differences among individuals in Nature, which is why the stronger always oppress the weaker and survive almost in a Darwinian manner, thus seen as a (supposedly) universal natural law that ensures the health, well-being and survival of humans and the mankind (Škorić & Kišjuhas 2012). In this sense, even the social laws that protect the weaker undermine disinterested Nature's "plans" (or natural laws) and should be dismissed as dangerous and inappropriate. De Sade's distinctive philosophical naturalism is perhaps most evident in this fragment from a *Dialogue between a Priest and a Dying Man*:

"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 I conform entirely to her laws [...]. 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 me.” (de Sade 1782/1992: 149–150)

In this skilful and elegant philosophical treatise, actually written in the prison of the Bastille in 1782, de Sade insists on the inadequacy of the religious description of the Universe as well as the untruthfulness of religious miracles, precisely because they are in direct contradiction to natural laws. In this regard, he explicitly states the following:

“The cause of what you do not comprehend may be the simplest thing there is. *Study physics and you will understand Nature better*; learn to think clearly, cast out your preconceived ideas and you will have no need of this God of yours.” (de Sade 1782/1992: 151) [emphasis added]

Furthermore, de Sade wants to “prove” that it is even possible that:

“... everything is simply what it is and what you see it to be, without its being the effect of some cause which was reasonable and wisely directed; that natural effects must have natural causes without there being any need to suppose that they had a non-natural origin such as your God who, as I have already observed, would require a good deal of explaining but would not of Himself explain anything.” (de Sade 1782/1992: 153)

Stating this, de Sade can also be seen as an unambiguous follower of the ideas by La Mettrie, who believed that man was only an animal and/or a machine, and which actually offered the theoretical basis upon which modern sciences of medicine, biology and psychology rested (La Mettrie 1747/2003). La Mettrie also considered people to be “corrupted” by nature and prone to “evil” deeds, which is an “immoralism” that significantly influenced de Sade (Thomson 2008). Likewise, de Sade designated the dualisms of Descartes, Malebranche or Leibniz as unfounded since they were – scientifically unverifiable (Damasio 1994).

According to de Sade, humans are firstly and foremostly defined and limited by Nature, which is simultaneously treated both as an enemy and as an ally, being magnificent and invincible. He accepts the atomistic model of the universe according to which the world is just a huge swirl of atoms, while boldly and creatively adding an image of human bodies filled with “energy” and/or lust. From this Enlightenment-infused naturalism also arises his specific and counter-intuitive ethics, according to which the main laws of Nature prescribe *destruction* in the form of violent collisions of matter. That is why the orgasmic experiences which lead to nothingness (including violence and murder) are actually in accordance with the stated natural law. Nature proceeds by *entropic* destruction and corruption (Pinker 2018: 15–28), implying that humans are in no way responsible for their preferences and sexual or sociopolitical urges (Gorer 1934: 127; Phillips 2005: 39). To a large extent, man is “a prisoner within the theater of his body” (Le Brun 1986/1990: XVII), which is why he cannot, nor should, change his tastes (de Sade 1785/1966).

De Sade’s “metaphysics of immorality” thus insists that Nature, as an absolute moral arbiter, must also be seen as the primordial principle of death and destruction, and of the survival of the “best adapted”, as stated by the later vocabulary of evolutionists (Škorić, Kišjuhas 2012). At the same time, he also exposes the truly (proto)evolutionary idea of a natural unity and the permanent change and variation in the living world:

“I say to myself: all men, all animals, all plants growing, feeding, destroying and reproducing themselves by the same means, never undergoing a real death, but a simple variation in what modifies them; all, I say, appearing today in one form and several years or hours later in another.” (de Sade 1791/1965: 519)

Similar to Hobbes (Hobbes 1651/1904), de Sade states that man is (and remains) a beast by nature and in a state of universal conflict and violence:

“Are we not all born solitary, isolated? [...] Do we not come into the world all enemies, the one of the other, all in a state of perpetual and reciprocal warfare?” (de Sade 1795/1965: 283)

This claim is undoubtedly the product of his decades-long confinement in prisons and asylums as total institutions (Goffman 1961), in which he was directly the subject of an Durkheimian (Durkheim 1897/2002) experience of anomie and fatalism (Lyman, Scott 1989: 192–193).

Violations of civil laws or violent sexuality are thus presented as subversive and/or transgressive acts in accordance with human nature. De Sade therefore clearly opposes the Rousseauian social contract (Rousseau 1762/1923) and any social arrangement resting on the divine right as a justification for *ancien régime*, but also for any organised democracy and the sovereignty of its citizens, as the proclaimed goals of revolutionary actors in his time. Instead, his (sexual) utopia is governed solely by the laws of nature seen as social lawlessness, underlined by the “law of the strongest”. Regarding Barthes (Barthes 1971/1989), it is also noteworthy that de Sade’s fiction and “pornotopias” primarily deal with the French aristocracy and the clergy as its main protagonists who are commonly seen as the key bearers of moral depravity. This libertine subversion and/or transgression can be interpreted as a symbolic (Ferguson 1991), but also a direct weapon turned towards the *ancien régime*.

For de Sade, the absence of power following the end of the monarchy did seem like an opportunity to “overcome old mentalities and to create a new society, free of all old prejudices and judgements” (Deiningner 2012: 157). In such an arrangement, power is highly decentralised and individualised, opposing *both* the *ancien régime* and the revolutionaries (Carpenter 1991: 526). It can also be said that de Sade’s “violence” is, above all, solely violence against the symbolic body of any established social order (Hénaff 1978/1999).

In metaphysical terms, Nature, according to de Sade, is not static or external to humans, but rather a dynamic principle resembling a living being, which (as if) has its own will (Airaksinen 2001: 46). He is a materialist claiming that Nature is eternal and indestructible, and with an open opposition to any teleological interpretation of nature and to any essentialism whatsoever. There are no normative principles in de Sade’s Nature and everything that an individual “naturally” desires is both rightful and good, since humans are only contingent products of natural causes that one cannot change and control. Nature has no plans or limitations for humans, nor does it in any way bind them from the outside, since human beings are exclusively *natural beings*. That is the reason why individuals are only left with violence, murder and non-procreative sexual intercourses.

In the context of this unwavering naturalism, (a heterosexual) de Sade presents a bold and contemporary-sounding defence of (at the time criminalised) homosexuality or “sodomy”, as being profoundly “bodily” or “natural” as well:

“Let us abide in our unshakable assurance that it is as easy to enjoy a woman in one manner as in another, that it makes absolutely no difference whether one enjoys a girl or a boy, and as soon as it is clearly understood that no inclinations or tastes can exist in us, save the ones we have from Nature, which is too wise and too consistent to have given us any that could ever offend her.” (de Sade 1795/1965: 326)

He also points out that inclinations toward “sodomy” stem from a human (natural) bodily structure, with additional and detailed sociocultural analysis of homosexuality throughout history from the ancient Greece and Rome, through the Persians, to the “Indians” in North America etc. (de Sade 1795/1965). Finally, these narratives are accompanied by a transgressive, relatively blasphemous and inspiring defences of (an equally criminalised) heterosexual anal sex in *Justine*:

“Although this [the anus] is the most secret temple, it is howbeit the most voluptuous; what is necessary to happiness is found nowhere else, and that easy vastness native to the adjacent aperture [the vagina] falls far short of having the piquant charms of a locale into which one does not enter without effort, where one takes up one’s abode only at the price of some trouble.” (de Sade 1791/1965: 488)

De Sade’s philosophical naturalism relies on his *materialism*, whereby this stance is also a reflection of the materialism by La Mettrie (La Mettrie 1747/2003) and d’Holbach (d’Holbach 1770/1889). During his prolonged captivity, de Sade somehow managed to obtain *The System of Nature* and used long sections of its text for his protagonists, mainly when speaking against the existence of soul or any deity (du Plessix Gray 1998). He also reconceptualised these borrowings, using them to formulate his own original theory of *sensationalist materialism* (Warman 2002).

There are no souls or spirits for de Sade and the (few) Enlightenment materialists, while everything in the universe is physical matter that can be discovered solely by *scientific* observation. In other words, “man is just a machine” and the random result of the laws of mechanical motion, which is the key reason why de Sade’s literary characters are so devoted to the conspicuous practice of this philosophical doctrine: their physical death and the transformation of their atoms into some other *material* form. To him, humans are merely the pitiful and insignificant bits of “raw matter” on the path to destruction, with no advantage neither for those who “madly” extol virtue, nor for those who indulge in “the most shameful depravity” (de Sade 1791/1965). Humans are simply *matter*, “as the oak, as grain, as minerals to be found in the Earth’s entrails, who are bound only to reproduce” (de Sade 1795/1965: 21).

For de Sade, all motion is also a characteristic of matter and nothing more (Gorer 1934: 107), which produces significant ethical and social consequences in terms of virtue and vice. In this sense, there is neither free will nor sense of guilt, but only personal interest, in a specific and unusually original version of philosophical utilitarianism and/or social Darwinism devoted solely to personal pleasure. After all, de Sade clearly states that his overall philosophy is based on d’Holbach’s *The System of Nature*, a book that he would “recommend to the Pope himself”, “a book that ought to be in every library”, “in the heads of everyone” and for which he was prepared to even die, as testified in a letter to his wife in 1783:

“The *System [of Nature]* is verily and indubitably *the basis of my philosophy*, and I am and shall remain a faithful disciple of that philosophy even at the cost of my life, if it came to that.” (de Sade 1999: 336) [emphasis added]

However, despite the obvious plagiarism of sections from d’Holbach’s book, de Sade also adds many original elements and autonomous motifs to such a radical(ly) materialistic philosophy. Among them are, for example, the ideas of the so-called *isolism*, according to which every human being is truly lonely in the universe and without a real need for significant others. Mother Nature

is a man's "ally", since it justifies his behaviour and crimes, but at the same time it is an indifferent "stepmother" who does not feel compassion and empathy for humans, which is why man is chiefly alone in the world (Phillips 2005: 37).

This is a self-conscious *inversion* and a pioneering critique of Rousseau's belief in human innate sociality (Rousseau 1762/1923) or Smith's liberal belief in the moral feelings (or sympathy) in humans (Smith 1759/2007). De Sade also conveys La Mettrie's mechanistic conception of man, resolutely rejecting the metaphysical notion of the soul. For it he asserts that (if it exists at all), the soul can exist only through *physical* senses and sensations (Gorer 1934: 107), although it is primarily a belief representing "the last stage in madness and vanity" (de Sade 1797/1968: 46).⁴

Modern science contains many materialistic assumptions. Albeit one of the first modern protagonists of scientific materialism, Marquis de Sade, is often forgotten in the history of science (Gorer 1934: 105). Put simply, for de Sade, man is only the "mass of flesh" that constitutes the "two-legged creature" today (de Sade 1791/1965). That is why, according to some interpretations, de Sade's heroes would be "logical positivists" if only they had lived in the 20th century, with a typical "de Sadean" remark that it was precisely the natural sciences that transformed traditional ethics into a set of largely unreasonable demands and "rhetorical tricks" (Airaksinen 2001: 45). In this regard, and openly referring to Isaac Newton, he also categorically rejects the existence of free will:

"Now, does man have or does he not have this faculty of decision [free will]? I am prepared to state that he *does not* and *could not* possibly have it. All our ideas owe their origin to *physical* and *material causes* which operate upon us independently of our will." (de Sade 1797/1968: 677) [emphasis added]

Thus, de Sade unambiguously accepted and advocated the materialistic conception of man and the universe, further elaborating on Republican stances that the *pursuit of happiness*, coupled with the urge to survive, were the main subject of all human activities and existence (Banning 1986). He emphasised that Nature is *not* subjected to any supreme or even social force, except for its own mechanistic laws, which are completely arbitrary and random with respect to human destiny (Phillips 2005). For these reasons, de Sade is also a "sociologist of the absurd" concerning his detailed analysis of individual sense and implying that "one's established social worlds are hopelessly alien from one's conception of the good, the expected, and 'the normal'" (Lyman, Scott 1989: 192).

That is exactly why pleasure is a kind of a "Nature's revenge", that is, a continuous and mechanistic circulation of the sensory, cerebral and orgiastic stages (Airaksinen 2001: 45). Since he desperately strives to be a mechanistic and naturalistic philosopher, de Sade deals in great detail with actions and reactions or stages of mechanical stimulus and "discharges" (in the symbolic but also a realistic form of an orgasm). The destructive character of Nature is the one that provides a framework for human social action and for all the causal

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His main difference compared to La Mettrie was also a matter of character: while La Mettrie was a relatively happy and contented man interested in the abstract truth, de Sade

was a "fanatic" and a "martyr" who spent his life in prison for his subversive and transgressive ideas (Gorer 1934: 111).

consequences of these actions, which ultimately leads to de Sade's pedagogy (Greteman 2016), ethics and aesthetics. Seeing that the principles of Nature are based on entropy and chaos, there is no room in the world for any common, lasting or eternal social norms, which is why he is a deeply radical and subversive philosopher even today.

De Sade's most original contribution to philosophical materialism is that he comes to his logical (and relatively extreme) ethical conclusions based on a philosophy which elevates the *human body* to the extent of being an exclusive source of all that is human (Phillips 2005), although a man still remains an absurd prisoner or the slave of his own body and its logic (Le Brun 1986/1990). Bodily satisfaction, including practices such as violence, pain, murder, coprophilia or necrophilia, is therefore a response that is both natural and *nature-oriented*. The relationship between nature and ethics is the same as the relationship between philosophy and orgiastic pleasure – de Sade's heroes philosophically lust for truth in the best scientific tradition, while they “discharge” or “empty themselves” through crime, anger, passion and madness (Airaksinen 2001).

In a sense, de Sade uses “physical” or corporeal to attack prevailing ethics as well as metaphysics (Ferguson 1991). Yet metaphysics remains an extremely important part of his philosophy and literature since it interprets de Sade's psychology of pleasure and the ontology of lust, consequently leading the reader to the very “heart of darkness” or to the evil itself. However, he did not feel particular discomfort with this, stating that “philosophy is not the art of consoling fools: its only aim is to teach the truth and destroy prejudices” (Gorer 1934: 111). His naturalistic position also leads to the brutally counter-intuitive, inversive and grossly subversive ethical stances for which he became famous or notorious – that vice is a virtue and virtue is a vice, with the accompanying rejection of all dominant social norms and values, except for violent pleasure (de Sade 1791/1965; de Sade 1797/1968). Violation of all social norms is then also associated with the individual's freedom and creativity, while the prevailing social values are mere obstacles to achieving orgiastic, physical or bodily pleasures.

A Martyr against Faith: De Sade's Atheism and Antitheism

Perhaps the most typical of de Sade's philosophical position is his militant atheism, that is, his antitheism. The radical and uncompromising nature of this a(nti)theism must not be underestimated, especially since anti-religious sentiments and activities were criminalised in the period when he lived and created.⁵ Regarding this, many of his Enlightenment contemporaries and like-minded individuals were much more careful or cautious. Voltaire (with some uneasiness) emphasised deism, La Mettrie and Helvetius avoided direct reference to atheism, although they undoubtedly accepted it in secret, just like Diderot and d'Alembert, who even felt the “need” to condemn atheism publicly (Škorić 2016). On the other hand, Marquis de Sade was among the few authors of his time who openly lived, spoke and wrote in accordance with his profoundly atheistic beliefs, which is why it is appropriate to present him as a kind of a “martyr of atheism” (Phillips 2005) or as an atheist philosopher who was being “punished not for what he had done, but for what he [symbolically] represented” (Coward 2005: XVII).

It is commonly thought that the period of the Renaissance was accompanied by secularisation, although the 16th and 17th centuries actually experienced a renewal of religiosity (Febvre 1937/1982). However, there is no society without minority (anti)religious beliefs, where at least some individuals criticise the understandings of the pious majority, despite the fact that – except for de Sade – few of the thinkers of the time can truly be considered atheists in the present-day sense of the word. It can be said that crypto-atheist books existed, such as the one by Hobbes (Zagorin 1990), that open and explicit (though still secret) denial of God appears with Jean Meslier (Škorić 2016), while the well-known atheist texts of d’Holbach in France (d’Holbach 1770/1889) and probably Matthew Turner in England (Turner 1782; Berman 1988/2013) only appeared at the end of the 18th century. De Sade was much more explicit, radical and unambiguous in this sense, which is exactly why he spent most of his life behind bars as a “martyr”. Namely, in an unusually personal narrative, one of de Sade’s literary characters explicitly states:

“If atheism wants martyrs, let it say so, and my blood is ready.” (de Sade 1791/1965; Phillips 2005)

De Sade was “obsessed” with God throughout his life and, for those who want to defame him, it is more appropriate to pronounce him an antireligious (rather than a sexual) maniac (Gorer 1934: 118). Even today, his attack on God and the Roman Catholic Church is one of the most radical in terms of length, content and depth. However, he delivers this libertine attack first and foremost in the name of reason (Komisaruk 2020), from a very thoroughly reasoned philosophical, political, economic, social and pragmatic standpoint. It is further important to emphasise that de Sade not only rejects (Christian) religious dogmas, but also all social and moral prohibitions that result from these. He was not a religious reformist, but a religious revolutionary who indeed sought to militantly undermine all the values of a pious “decent life” and religious salvation, believing that religious piety binds humans to “an idiotic, insufficient, atrocious, and contemptible Creator” (de Sade 1795/1965: 22). There are simply *no* religious truths for him, while social life directed and dictated by religion represents the real Inferno. The dominant theme of all de Sade’s works is the philosophical campaign against religion, with bitterness that (also) seems personal in its intensity.

According to de Sade, religion is an extremely dangerous base which morality can be built on, which necessitates the brutally and politically incorrect disclosure of the “lies” underlying religion (Gorer 1934, 122). In this regard, he stated that Jesus of Nazareth appeared “upon a Jewish whore’s breast” and “in a proper pigsty” (de Sade 1795/1965: 212), and that he was “a cheat”, “a bandit”, “a charlatan”, and “the most detestable of all creatures” (de Sade 1791/1965; de Sade 1795/1965; de Sade 1797/1968). In many of his protagonists’ long excursions, de Sade thoroughly and critically analyses the Old and New Testament, the origins of the papacy, religious superstition, trade or “racketeering” the fear of death by priests, relativizing good and evil, presenting the Christian God as cruel, frantic and impotent, while radically and consistently rejecting the very idea of any belief in a God or metaphysical beings. De Sade is an unwavering and militant atheist whose enemy is

of practical, social, but also metaphysical and intuitive character, which is why his method of rebuttal is both indirect and persuasive (Airaksinen 2001). Such narratives and claims thus approximate the contemporary views of the so-called New Atheism movement which was initiated by several natural scientists (Kišjuhas, Lungulov 2017).

De Sade's philosophical and political pamphlet "Frenchmen, yet another effort if you want to be Republicans" (de Sade 1795/1965) stands out for its paradigmatic a(nti)theistic stance, which is both "physical" and metaphysical at the same time (Ferguson 1991). This original treatise, read out aloud by his protagonists, can also be understood as an ironic or satirical attack on Robespierre's "Republic of virtue", which was undoubtedly based on repression and murder (Phillips 2005: 51). Nevertheless, the essence of this philosophical pamphlet was probably in critical reaction to Robespierre's "moderate" proclamation of France as a deist republic on 7 May 1794.⁶

Subversively and transgressively, de Sade considered the monarchy and the church to be inseparable, claiming that history teaches us that religion has always served the interests of tyrants. This is precisely why militant atheism is the "yet another effort" necessary to make France a truly civic and democratic republic.⁷ Otherwise, a counter-revolution will break out and "out of the reconstituted theocracy, the aristocracy will be reborn in a trice" and the efforts of the revolutionaries will be futile. This is the reason why de Sade passionately adds:

"I cannot repeat it to you too often: no more gods, Frenchmen, no more gods, lest under their fatal influence you wish to be plunged back into all the horrors of despotism." (de Sade 1795/1965: 309)

According to his views, the new French Republic must be rooted in both sexual and personal freedoms that are inseparable. Namely, in order to ensure the personal freedom of the individual, there must be *fewer*, not more laws, norms and rules in both society and the state, while *no* sexual activity must be criminalised. However, de Sade brings this freedom to a logical extreme, including even the freedom of rape and murder. This bond or unity of *sex and politics* in relation to individual and personal freedoms is probably one of the most unique and original features of de Sade's metaphysics and social philosophy. Also, the arguments of the dying man in the *Dialogue* (de Sade 1782/1992) represent the most important elements of his atheistic philosophy in short form. For example, he describes the "miracles" of Jesus of Nazareth as vulgar "gimmicks" intended for the gullible and he refers to Moses, Muhammad and Confucius in a similar way (de Sade 1795/1965: 300).

What is an adequate interpretation of such a brutal and consciously offensive antitheism? Religion was the dominant source of most social taboos in the 18th century and de Sade was personally arrested and imprisoned precisely on charges for "blasphemy" (by proposing masturbation to a communion bread as the body of Christ to a sex worker). In this sense, he advocates not only (banal) "sin" in the context of faith in God, but also the complete transgression of all the permissible limits in a given society and culture. This was not only a negative or passive reaction, but an *active* resistance to *all* political and social constraints, including the monarchy, the Terror and Bonaparte alike. Finally, it was about the freedom that is not only political and moral, but also intellectual and philosophical. De Sade is the only atheist philosopher of his age who had a naturalist awareness of an infinity that is not spiritual but physical and

material in its nature, which is why he is, if not the very first, then certainly “one of the first philosophers of the modern age” (Phillips 2005: 43).

At the same time, one should not overstate the claim that de Sade was an a(nti)theist only in a certain socio-political and “combative” or “rebellious” terms, while not in the theoretical, academic or philosophical ones as well. De Sade’s arguments against God are exhaustive, detailed, logically grounded, consistently philosophical and stem from his decisive metaphysical naturalism and materialism, as analysed. His materialistic metaphysics and ethics, in which nature is treated as a dynamic force with completely random causal consequences, may not have a modern scientific basis, but it provides the crucial philosophical basis of such atheism (Airaksinen 2001).

Although de Sade’s libertines are almost obsessively devoted to blasphemy, which also gives them great sexual pleasure, in his argumentative attack on Christianity he outlines the principles of nature that are an unambiguous philosophical negation of everything Christian and theistic. Theism for him cannot withstand the scrutiny of *scientific* evidence, since nature works by itself, i.e., independently of humans, without any primary cause or essentialist notions. Furthermore, de Sade’s atheism results in a specific cultural relativism. As Nietzsche proclaimed more than a century later (Nietzsche 1882/1974) – if God is dead, there can be no universal moral values. The naturalist de Sade also argues that, in the absence of God, the only governing force in the universe is Nature, and that is why conventional and religious morality makes no sense whatsoever. Since there is no God, there are neither the absolute values of good and evil, nor universal moral laws, but only individual traditions and values that vary from century to century and from culture to culture (Phillips 2005).

Based on all of the above, it can be argued that Marquis de Sade, in the first place, strives to be a philosophical naturalist, materialist and an atheist philosopher. The libertine heroes of his novels freely express long metaphysical speculations and he himself is a consistent philosophical determinist for whom human beings are largely the helpless and innocent objects of “irresistible” and irrefutable natural laws. Hence, there are no crimes in the philosophical sense, while all human behaviour is a product of nature, including human sexual urges, but also violence and murder. Still, we must not conflate his own life and his philosophy, since in a letter to his wife in 1781 (and first

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De Sade began writing *Philosophy in the Bedroom* in prison in 1794, after being arrested for “moderation” (!) and alleged sympathy for the monarchy during the Reign of Terror. From his cell, he had a clear view of the guillotine being moved to the site due to complaints from citizens about the ubiquitous smell of blood. De Sade watched these executions on a daily basis and in private correspondence pointed out how much this affected him personally (Phillips 2005: 51–53).

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For these reasons, de Sade as a social philosopher will advise his compatriots and the ruling regime the next lines: “Let us cease to entertain doubts as to the effect of atheism

in the country” (de Sade 1795/1965: 301). “Let us not lose sight of the fact this puerile religion was among our tyrants’ best weapons” (Ibid.: 299). “Let the total extermination of cults and denominations therefore enter into the principles we broadcast throughout all Europe. Let us not be content with breaking scepters; we will pulverize the idols forever” (Ibid.: 300). “Frenchmen, I repeat it to you: Europe awaits her deliverance from *scepter* and *censer* alike” (Ibid.: 298). Finally, “O you who have axes ready to hand, deal with the final blow to the tree of superstition; be not content to prune its branches” (Ibid.: 297) since “atheism is the doctrine of all those prone to reason” (Ibid.: 300).

published in 1999) he “admits” that he truly “is a libertine” and that he had “dreamed of” various libertine practices, but *did not* commit or *would not* commit any of them because he is “neither a criminal nor a murderer” (de Sade 1999: 188).

These are all the counter-ethical arguments that made him infamous and “dangerous” in one decidedly specific and revolutionary historical period, commonly named the Age of Enlightenment. In this respect, an interesting comparison can be made between de Sade and Kant, implying that Kant’s *Metaphysics of Morals* (Kant 1797/1991) and de Sade’s “metaphysics of immorals” (or philosophy “in the bedroom”; de Sade 1795/1965) represent “two sides of the same coin” in the formulation of one general and totalizing ethics after the “death of the subject” (Martyn 2003; Lacan 1963/1989; James 2018). However, de Sade’s metaphysics, ethics and philosophy of nature are at the same time highly coherent, original and compelling if read as a whole and without paying too much attention to detail in the form of relatively frequent and amoral instances of (fictionalized) pain, cruelty and crime.

On the one hand, it can be argued that Marquis de Sade was not a “first-class” conceptual philosopher, but merely a *philosophe*, that is, an (a)typical Enlightenment intellectual and “pornographic” author in a specific historical epoch. An individual who was simply and passionately committed to applying the scientific discoveries and philosophical doctrines of others to a progressive and transgressive social policy that was consistent with his own sexual preferences (Coward 2005: XXI). In this regard, it was de Beauvoir who emphasised that he had created an original ethic based on his own sexuality (Beauvoir 1953; Singleton 2011).

On the other hand, it is a fact that even the most liberal and progressive philosophers of his time did *not* show such a commitment to a highly consistent naturalism and materialism, militant atheism, to personal and (homo)sexual liberties and to human freedom in general, which is arguably why he represents a unique and a significant figure in the history of philosophy, philosophy of science and perhaps in the history of social sciences as well. Creatively intertwining power, pleasure, sex, politics and metaphysics, de Sade “deftly juxtaposes Revolutionary rhetoric with libertine philosophy”, arguing for “yet more freedom” as a “yet another effort” in any given society (Deiningner 2012: 157).

This is exactly why “The world is shit.” for Marquis de Sade (Airaksinen 2001: 51). It was an unusually original glimmer of logical honesty and a (meta)physical consistency in the history of philosophy, which was also created under the heavy burden of one’s personal biography (or a long life behind bars). For him, Nature was largely a random, violent and indifferent reality that exists completely independently of human goals and intentions. But at the same time, human nature is also the key determining and organising principle of all human desires, intentions, reasons, feelings, passions and lustful social behaviours in a materialistic or physical context of the otherwise uneasy (and even absurd) existence of the human animal (Lyman, Scott 1989: 192–197).

The materialistic human nature advocated by de Sade is also claimed as the essence of all human society, culture and politics. Even today, this represents an unusually brave, original and controversial philosophical idea, especially concerning the (post)modern denial of human nature in the social sciences (see Pinker 2002; 2018). It is precisely the sole and inspirational credo of de Sade’s philosophy, his personal libertinism and even the basic tenet of his

impenetrable literary style. In other words, de Sade's idiosyncratic and notorious *metaphysics of immorality*, which logically follows from his resolute and (proto)scientific naturalism, materialism and antitheism, therefore represents a relatively unique case in the Western philosophical tradition. For all these reasons and beyond the common conflation of his life, myth and fiction, de Sade's bold and revolutionary metaphysics, (anti)ethics and philosophy in general undoubtedly deserve greater attention from both historians of philosophy and contemporary philosophers alike.

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Aleksej Kišjuhas, Marko Škorić

**Metafizika imoralnosti – naturalizam,
materijalizam i ateizam Marquisa de Sadea**

Sažetak

U ovom se članku argumentira da je Marquis de Sade izvorniji i važniji filozof Prosvjetiteljstva no što se inače smatra. Tvrdimo da je de Sade i za suvremeno vrijeme važan autor i naturalistički mislitelj vrijedan pozornosti s obzirom na suvremenu znanost, religiju, (homo)seksualnost, političko nasilje i prevladavajuće sociokulturne norme. Da bismo dokazali ove tvrdnje, iscrpno analiziramo de Sadeove filozofije naturalizma i materijalizma, tj. njegovu metafiziku i radikalnu etiku »imoralnosti«, temeljenu na viđenju (ljudske) Prirode kao jedinog organizirajućeg, stvaralačkog i uništavačkog principa. Nadalje, opisujemo njegove ateističke i antiteističke argumente koje dosljedno koristi da bi odbacio mogućnost Boga i svih natprirodnih bića, povezane s njegovim društvenim i političkim kriticismom društva temeljenog na vjeri. Stoga, ocrtavamo filozofijske argumente koje su ga učinile kontroverznim, nečasnim i odbačenim misliteljem i koji su ga društveno otklonili od prevladavajućeg filozofijskog miljea. Također argumentiramo u korist mogućnosti da zaslužuje istaknutije mjesto u povijesti filozofije koje nije kongruentno s različitim »rehabilitativnim« i »revizionističkim« narativima vezanim uz de Sadea kao ranog prvaka Protuprosvietiteljstva, protuznanosti i postmodernizma.

Ključne riječi

Marquis de Sade, libertinizam, metafizika, metafizička etika, naturalizam, materijalizam, ateizam, antiteizam

Aleksej Kišjuhas, Marko Škorić

**Die Metaphysik der Immoralität – Naturalismus,
Materialismus und Atheismus des Marquis de Sade**

Zusammenfassung

Dieses Paper argumentiert, dass Marquis de Sade ein ursprünglicherer und relevanterer Philosoph der Aufklärung ist, als allgemein angenommen wird. Wir vertreten die Ansicht, dass er auch heutzutage einen angesehenen Autor und einen bemerkenswerten naturalistischen Denker hinsichtlich der zeitgenössischen Wissenschaft, organisierten Religion, (Homo)sexualität, politischen Gewalt und der vorherrschenden soziokulturellen Normen darstellt. Um diese Behauptungen zu belegen, analysieren wir eingehend de Sades Philosophien des Naturalismus und Materialismus, d. h. seine Metaphysik und seine radikale Ethik der „Immoralität“.

aufbauend auf der Betrachtung der (menschlichen) Natur als des einzigen organisierenden, schöpferischen und zerstörerischen Prinzips. Darüber hinaus führen wir en détail seine atheistischen und antitheistischen Argumente auf, die er konsequent vorbringt, um die Möglichkeit eines Gottes und aller übernatürlichen Wesen zu verwerfen, gepaart mit seiner sozialen und politischen Kritik an einer Glaubensgesellschaft. So umreißen wir die philosophischen Argumente, die ihn zu einem umstrittenen, anrühigen und denunzierten Denker machten und ihn sozial vom prägenden philosophischen Milieu distanzieren. Wir treten auch für die Option ein, dass er einen prominenteren Platz in der Geschichte der Philosophie verdient, der nicht kongruent ist mit diversen „rehabilitativen“ und „revisionistischen“ Narrativen in Bezug auf de Sade als einen frühen Verfechter der Gegenaufklärung, Antiwissenschaft und Postmodernismus.

Schlüsselwörter

Marquis de Sade, Libertinismus, Metaphysik, metaphysische Ethik, Naturalismus, Materialismus, Atheismus, Antitheismus

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**La métaphysique de l'immoralité – naturalisme,
matérialisme et athéisme du Marquis de Sade**

Résumé

Cet article affirme que le Marquis de Sade est un philosophe des Lumières bien plus original et important que ce qui est habituellement pensé. Nous affirmons que Sade est un auteur et penseur naturaliste également important pour l'époque contemporaine qui mérite de retenir notre attention au regard de la science moderne, la religion, l'(homo)sexualité, la violence politique et les normes sociales dominantes. Afin de démontrer ces affirmations, nous analysons soigneusement les philosophies du naturalisme et matérialisme de Sade, à savoir sa métaphysique et son éthique radicale de « l'immoralité », fondée sur sa vision de la Nature (humaine) en tant qu'unique principe organisateur, créateur et destructeur. Par ailleurs, nous décrivons les arguments athéistes et antithéistes dont il se sert de manière cohérente pour rejeter la possibilité de l'existence de Dieu et de tous les êtres supranaturels, couplés à son criticisme sociale et politique d'une société fondée sur la religion. Ainsi, nous dépeignons les arguments philosophiques qui font de lui un penseur controversé, infâme, rejeté, et qui l'ont éloigné socialement du milieu philosophique dominant. Nous argumentons également en faveur de la possibilité qu'il mériterait une place plus importante dans l'histoire de la philosophie qui ne s'accorde pas avec les discours de « réhabilitation » et « révisionniste » attribués à Sade en tant que champion anti-Lumière, antisciences et postmoderniste.

Mots-clés

Marquis de Sade, libertinisme, métaphysique, éthique métaphysique, naturalisme, matérialisme, athéisme, antithéisme