

Fatalism of Jacques the Valet: Diderot's provocation to the reader

Mayank Anand

Abstract

*This paper strives to bring forth the dilemma of Diderot in his work **Jacques the fatalist and his master**, which appears in the form of a perpetual quest wherein we see Diderot oscillate between the idea of free will and that of fatalism. The question he asks himself is whether man is the master of his destiny or is it destiny which directs his life and actions. This work can be seen as a paradox resulting from the conflict between the materialist approach and the persistence of the deistic ideology. The great book or scroll in the image of God is opposed to the idea advocated by atheistic materialism. In the novel, in several episodes, Jacques incessantly repeats what his captain, a disciple of Spinoza, said and very frequently, he affirms his total faith in the author of the great scroll. It is certain that everything is written up there, that everything is predestined. Despite his attitude, he also demonstrates the importance of free will, himself acting in total freedom. Moreover, there is too much importance given to chance in the novel. The ideas of the master who believes in human freedom are belied by his weakness. So, on the one side, the novel inspires us to reflect philosophically and on the other, it invites us not to be totally attached to a system of thought.*

The work of Denis Diderot, *Jacques the fatalist and his master*, as the name suggests, professes the philosophy of fatalism according to which all events are predetermined and therefore inevitable.

The title demarcates affinity to a philosophical system of thought. The term « *fatalistic* » is ambiguous, qualifying on the one hand, an approach to life without necessarily having the consciousness or the will to adopt it and on the other hand, it refers to a character defending and implementing a philosophical doctrine.¹ But what kind of doctrine is it? It is obvious as the name suggests that man does nothing by himself and whatsoever he accomplishes during the course of his life is ordained by fate, by a force beyond. André Laland in his dictionary « *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie* » defines fatalism as a doctrine according to which man has no power to change the course of events in his life despite whatsoever he does. In another sense, he refers to it as the synonym of “*determinism*”, i.e., the doctrine according to which all that happens in the universe, particularly the human actions, are linked to each other in a way that for each of the past and future moments, there is a single state that is compatible with the first.²

But in Diderot's case, fatalism apart from being a philosophy is also an incessant quest which raises a large number of questions, complex enough to not let us reach any decisive and concrete conclusion. So it is not fatalism rather the way Diderot deals with it which makes him a militant thinker whose activism resides in the fact of engaging himself and others in a debate without arriving at a conclusion. What is militant about Diderot is that first he raises a question, entices his readers and at the end, the discussion remains open and unfinished. In fact, his motive is to ignite a debate and provoke people to join it without reaching a final goal. His motto is to make people think in order to think thereby transforming them into profound and bold thinkers.

Assistant Professor in French, Department of Foreign Languages, Punjabi University Patiala

*Diderot likes the controversy, the conversation as it is practiced, in his day, in Parisian salons, as evidenced by his philosophical writings, which stage, very often two or more people (real or fictional) debating serious subjects. His way of philosophizing thus has something spontaneously romantic, in its form at least.*³

So, it is his keen love for controversial discussion that each of Diderot's works presents itself as a debate of ideas and his manner of dealing with issues carries a fictional element that almost all his works such as *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, *Le neveu de Rameau*, *Lettre sur les aveugles à l'usage de ceux qui voient*, etc. can be included in the category of fiction. And then all his works appear to us as the battlefield of diverse and contradictory ideas. And so it is with *Jacques the fatalist and his master*.

*And this is especially true for Jacques the fatalist. It must be said that the structure of the work seems to call the debate of ideas. The multiplication of digressions, incidents, stories, during the journey of Jacques and his master, gives them the opportunity to exchange their points of view on very varied topics of reflection.*⁴

With regard to the debate in *Jacques the fatalist and his master*, Diderot makes us ponder on the questions on fatalism, the freedom granted to man, notions of good and evil, truth, wisdom, madness, happiness, misfortune, will, experience of pain, etc.

According to Mauna Zaghdene, Diderot in *Jacques the fatalist and his master* does not seek to produce the pleasure of reading. By using argument as an essential tool in the dialogical form of the narrative, Diderot only wants to persuade his readers to think. In course of his story, he challenges the reader several times exposing him to a point of view and then creates an impression of reality. The author thus simulates a real conversation in order to strengthen his power of persuasion since the truth lies in exchange with the other. The master and his valet speak as philosophers do. The chaotic and disorganised form of the dialogue between the two protagonists, despite the variety of subjects discussed and debated, doesn't seek to establish or reach a certain truth. However, we notice an immaterial voice that doesn't belong to any of the characters and deals with the philosophical content of the discourse. It is an inner voice that fits into the narrative of the discourse in order to justify and modulate it. In fact, all the antagonisms pronounced by Jacques and his master and the enunciator seek to test the ideas and nowhere is the goal to establish stable, unshakable, universal truths. Diderot by providing counter examples tirelessly strives to drive the appetite of readers for reflection.⁵

Let us return to the question of fatalism as philosophy which Jacques talks about in *Jacques the fatalist and his master*.

*But what is this fatalism? The doctrine of the "great scroll", "the register from above", "the great book" which, before any favourable or fatal event, affirms that "it was written". The doctrine of destiny, which has an answer to everything, claims that every bullet has its target and that one falls in love as one falls into battle, on the date always fixed.*⁶

And then it makes us ask the question: Is it destiny that controls human life or is it man who leads it? In other words, is destiny the master of man or is it man the architect of his destiny? The same point was raised during a speech at the symposium "*Diderot, Philosophie et Matérialisme*" Université Paris-I, Sorbonne, March 6, 1998: *We believe to drive destiny; but it is always destiny that drives us like an uncomfortable horse.*⁷

This question is endowed with the power to plunge the reader into a confused state where he doesn't know what to choose as a principle to act in life. And this indeterminism is aggravated all the more by the fact that sometimes the author himself at certain places in the narrative seems to make fun of this philosophy of fatalism pronounced by Jacques from time to time incessantly. He might have done so to justify his bold move.

The opposition that lies between the philosophy of fatalism and that concerning the free will of man continues to engage philosophers during the eighteenth century and this problem is presented in the form of various questions that seems like a never ending debate. Every philosopher who speaks about it shows himself attached to his own ideas and is not ready to detach himself from what he believes or professes. But Diderot appears to us as the only one who questioned all the possible answers to this quest before defining his own position which seems as if he left it to us to decide and choose which path to follow. In fact, he keeps the debate open so that there are new questions, new answers which continue to engage us thereby enriching the debate which will remain without result. These are the questions that haunt the philosophers of that time and those today.

Is God all-knowing? Did he want evil? Does heaven determine the fate of every individual? What part of freedom does heaven give to man?⁸

In *Jacques the fatalist and his master*, Diderot asks himself the same questions by referring to Spinoza of whom his captain speaks from time to time and of Leibniz, who he recognizes as machine for reflection.

Jacques, a philosopher in love with Spinoza and Zeno

On several occasions, Jacques replies by attributing his maxims to his captain who knew Spinoza by heart. It was his captain who had hammered into his brain words that sum up the entire system he professes throughout the story of *Jacques the Fatalist and his master*.

[...] I always come back to something my captain used to say: 'Everything good or bad that happens to us here below is written up there.' Sir, do you know of some way of rubbing out what's written up there? Can I stop being me, or failing that, can I behave as though I were not me? Can I both be me and somebody else? And has there been a single instant since the time I came into the world when this was not the case? You can go on about it as much as you like and your arguments may be perfectly sound, but if it is written in me or up there that I shan't agree with them, there's not much I can do about it.⁹

Hence the conclusion that his captain was a Spinozist, and then Jacques can be described as a disciple of Spinoza. It is possible because Diderot himself was favourable to modern Spinozists in The Encyclopaedia. But at the same time we cannot be sure because simply knowing the Spinoza's system does not ensure the practice. This same issue is questioned by Dominique Lecourt.

He had drawn his opinions from his Spinoza, which he knew by heart. Is that enough to say that Jacques is Spinozist, or even Diderot himself on the pretext that he has elsewhere declared himself favourable to "modern Spinozists" in the Encyclopaedia? Should we get rid of the big words of determinism, materialism, pantheism as do so many commentators? It is not Jacques, however, who is presented as Spinozist, but his captain. What should I say? Knowing Spinoza by heart is certainly not a guarantee of Spinozism. The account given to us of the life of this famous captain does not really give the idea that he has acceded to the intellectual love of God.¹⁰

It is at the end of the text in the last lines that Diderot reveals this system as the mixture of the systems professed first by Zeno and then by Spinoza. So he writes,

Within a few days, the aged chateau concierge died, Jacques was given his job and married Denise, with whom he set about raising disciples of Zeno and Spinoza, loved by Desglands, cherished by his Master, and adored by his wife, for so it was written.¹¹

This is attested also by Dominique Lecourt in his book "*DIDEROT, Passions, Sexe, Reason*" from the same lines of the end of the text of this novel.

It is Zeno - Zeno of Cittium - who is quoted first. Fatalist, Jacques is first Stoic, and it is from the

sources of ancient stoicism that he draws the essentials of his philosophy. The essence of his argument on fate plays with the famous argument of "domineering" (kurieuon logos), which could also be translated as "master". Improbable, you will say, so precisely that Jacques is a Jacques. However, refer to the article "Stoicism" written by Diderot for The Encyclopaedia (at the entry "Stoicism, or Stoic sect, or Zenonism") The end of the general presentation carries this judgment: "Stoicism is a matter of temperament, for all men, a rule that suits only him, it is too strong for the weak: Christian morality is a mixed zenonism, and consequently of a more general use, however the number of those who comply with this system with rigor is not great.

Jacques, a French peasant, brought up in the strictest Christian morality, "neither believes nor disbelieves in the life to come." He does not think about it. He prays at random. Stoic beliefs are what remain of Christianity in Jacques. It is, moreover, a question of mere stoicism that Diderot speaks of "fatalism". To his stoicism, he conjoins what is accessible to him from the doctrine of his captain. He retains all that rejects as illusory the idea of a freedom of will. To the master who objects to him "but it seems to me that I feel within myself that I am free, as I feel that I think," Jacques answers, fading behind the words of his captain: "My captain used to say: " Yes, now that you do not want anything, but please rush your horse ... " "The discussion ignites, to conclude with these sentences on which Jacques and his master seem to have agreed.

Jacques: "But if you are, and if you have always been, the master of will, what do you want now to like a monkey? And how did you stop loving Agathe whenever you wanted? My Master, we spend three quarters of our life wanting, without doing. "

The master: "It's true. "

Jacques: "And doing without wanting. "

And the author then gives his hero a formula that sounds Spinozist: "He believed that a man making his way to glory or ignominy is like a ball, aware of itself, following the slope of a mountain. "

But what he especially received from his captain was the idea that it was convenient for the use of life to have a "system". Jacques reasons and acts on every occasion according to himself when it comes to adjusting the pace of his horse. This system combines stoicism and spinozism.¹²

In this philosophical book, on the one side there is Jacques who professes the philosophy of fatalism and on the other, there is his master, the partisan of free will. The dialogue between the two seems to be apparently a debate that brings us nowhere. Or say, it's a conversation that never ends. At the same time, the two interlocutors in their own context seem very logical and reasonable, and it seems that both appear very convinced and they even succeed in convincing us if the two thought systems are considered separate and distinct from one another. But as these two currents of thought never cease to coexist, it is very interesting to reflect on the point where Diderot intends to bring us. That's what constitutes the problematic dealt by this philosophical work which consists in looking for the converging point of these two ways of acting on the life. It seems to us that Diderot, through these debated discussions, undertakes to push us to a very fine point which lies somewhere in the middle of these two lines of thought in order to bring about a kind of equilibrium. It is therefore necessary that no external force be expected to carry out projects or enterprises considered as manageable by man and that for the rest, let the Providence play her role.

Thus, writes Dominique Lecourt, pointing out what Jacques's fatalistic philosophy is meant for.

Is it the pure verbal jugglery of someone who takes delight in talking? Many a time the author reflects on it. In this talkative spirit, argument starts on its own like the movements of an automaton. "It's a refrain he takes recourse to. But we cannot just make fun of this philosophy, because this refrain provides relief after an accident."¹³

At the same time, he refers to the article "Malebranchism" of Encyclopaedia where Diderot

expresses his apprehension in the face of such a philosophy that is only of metaphysical nature.

*This step seems to me very bold, not to say worse; I cannot conceive how one dares to make the conduct of men dependant on a metaphysical system.*¹⁴

From where Dominique Lecourt draws the conclusion:

*This judgment is undoubtedly a key to interpret Jacques the fatalist and his master.*¹⁵

So he continues,

By this remark, we have just left Jacques and his philosophy to Diderot himself, through the opinions interstitially expressed in the text addressed to the reader.

*The philosophy of Jacques the Fatalist and his master could not without serious misunderstanding identify with the system of Jacques thus composed. If one wants to have access to it, one must first have regard for the character of the master. There is no Jacques without his master; it is Jacques himself who says: "One does not go without the other." It is written up there that as long as Jacques lives, so long does his Master; and even after they are both dead, they will say Jacques and his Master.*¹⁶

Although, the two currents of thought appear as opposites but they are complementary to each other. Do we not hear "God helps those who help themselves"? But by this, we cannot say that Diderot is diverting from his atheistic thought; here, he seems to be simply interested in the way that must shape the conduct of a human being, his way of interpreting the facts of existence and the world he lives in.

End Notes

1. M. (n.d.). Qu'est-ce que fatalisme? disait le lecteur. Retrieved November 23, 2017, from <http://www.maremurex.net/fatalisme.html>
2. Lalande, A. (2013). Fatalisme. In *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
3. Bardet, G., & Caron, D. (2006). *Jacques le fataliste, Denis Diderot*. Paris: Ellipses. P.130.
4. Ibid.
5. Zaghdene, M. (n.d.). Les configurations dialogiques dans Jacques le fataliste de Diderot. Retrieved November 22, 2017, from <http://revuepostures.com/fr/zaghdene-22>
6. Lecourt, D. (2013). *Diderot: passions, sexe, raison*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France. P.51.
7. Ibid.
8. Bardet, G., & Caron, D. op.cit. P- 131.
9. Diderot, D., & Coward, D. (2008). *Jacques the fatalist and his master*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. P.7.
10. Lecourt, D. op.cit. P.52.
11. Diderot, D., & Coward, D. op.cit. P-240.
12. Lecourt, D. op.cit. P.54-55.
13. Ibid. 55.
14. Ibid. 56.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.