



Universalitas & Pervasivitas

il costituirsi e diffondersi della S.J. e suoi echi (1540 - 1773)

di A. Pisani

Schede autori Sotto attacco

Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle

Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle (11 February 1657 – 9 January 1757), also called Bernard le Bouyer de Fontenelle, was a French author.

Fontenelle was born in Rouen, France (then the capital of Normandy) and died in Paris just one month before his 100th birthday. His mother was the sister of great French dramatists Pierre and Thomas Corneille. He trained in the law but gave up after one case, devoting his life to writing about philosophers and scientists, especially defending the Cartesian tradition.

A noted gourmand, he attributed his longevity to eating strawberries. At ninety-two one woman wrote that he was as lively as a man of twenty-two.[1] When, in his late nineties he met the beautiful Mme Helvétius, he reportedly told her, "Ah Madame, if only I were eighty again!"[2]



In 1935, the lunar crater Fontenelle was named after him.

Personal life

Fontenelle was born in Rouen, France (then the capital of Normandy), the son of a lawyer. His mother was the sister of great French dramatists Pierre Corneille and Thomas Corneille.

He was educated at the college of the Jesuits, the Lycée Pierre Corneille (although it did not adopt the name of his uncle (Pierre Corneille) until c.200 years later in 1873).[3] At the Lycée he showed a preference for literature and distinguished himself.

He was trained in his father's profession but he gave up law after pleading one case. He then spent the rest of his life writing about philosophers and scientists, especially defending the Cartesian tradition. [4]



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He was a noted gourmand and he attributed his longevity to the eating of strawberries. Whatever its cause, his health and vigor lasted until he died. Meeting him at ninety-two, one woman wrote that he was as lively (and as hungry) as a young man of twenty-two.[1]

Early work

He began as a poet, writing a poem in Latin at the age of 13. More than once competed for prizes of the Académie française, but never won anything. He visited Paris from time to time and became friendly with the abbé de Saint-Pierre, the abbé Vertot and the mathematician Pierre Varignon. He witnessed, in 1680, the total failure of his tragedy *Aspar*. Fontenelle afterwards acknowledged the public verdict by burning his unfortunate drama. His opera of *Thétis et Pélée* ("Thetis and Peleus"), 1689, though highly praised by Voltaire, was not much better; and it may be significant that none of his dramatic works are still performed. His *Poésies pastorales* (1688) are also mediocre.

His *Lettres galantes du chevalier d'Her ...*, published anonymously in 1685, was a collection of letters portraying worldly society of the time. It immediately made its mark. In 1686 his famous allegory of Rome and Geneva, slightly disguised as the rival princesses Mreo and Eenegu, in the *Relation de l'île de Bornéo*, gave proof of his daring in religious matters. But it was by his *Nouveaux Dialogues des morts* (1683) that Fontenelle established a genuine claim to high literary rank; and that claim was enhanced three years later by what has been summarised[5] as the most influential work on the plurality of worlds in the period, *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (1686). He wrote extensively on the nature of the universe: Behold a universe so immense that I am lost in it. I no longer know where I am. I am just nothing at all. Our world is terrifying in its insignificance. He was named Perpetual Secretary to the French Academy of Sciences for a significant amount of time and is noted for the accessibility of his work - particularly its novelistic style. This allowed non-scientists to appreciate scientific development in a time where this was unusual, and scientists to benefit from the thoughts of the greater society. If his writing is often seen as trying to popularize the astronomical theories of René Descartes, whose greatest exponent he is sometimes considered, it also appealed to the literate society of the day to become more involved in "natural philosophy," thus enriching the work of early-Enlightenment scientists.

Later work

Fontenelle had made his home in Rouen, but in 1687 he moved to Paris; and in the same year he published his *Histoire des oracles*, a book which made a considerable stir in theological and philosophical circles. It consisted of two essays, the first of which was designed to prove that oracles were not given by the supernatural agency of demons, and the second that they did not cease with the birth of Jesus. It excited the suspicion of the Church, and a Jesuit, by name Jean-François Baltus, published a ponderous refutation of it; but the peace-loving disposition of its author impelled him to leave his opponent unanswered. To the following year (1688) belongs his *Digression sur les anciens et les modernes*, in which he took the modern side in the controversy then



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raging; his *Doutes sur le système physique des causes occasionnelles* (against Nicolas Malebranche) appeared shortly afterwards.

Fontenelle was a popular figure in the educated French society of his period, holding a position of esteem comparable only to that of Voltaire. Unlike Voltaire however, Fontenelle avoided making important enemies. He balanced his penchant for universal critical thought with liberal doses of flattery and praise to the appropriate individuals in aristocratic society.

Member of the French Academy

In 1691 he was received into the French Academy in spite of the determined efforts of the partisans of the "ancients", especially Racine and Boileau, who on four previous occasions had ensured his rejection. He was thus a member both of the Academy of Inscriptions and of the Academy of Sciences; and in 1697 he became perpetual secretary to the latter, an office he held for forty-two years; and it was in this official capacity that he wrote the *Histoire du renouvellement de l'Académie des Sciences* (Paris, 3 vols., 1708, 1717, 1722) containing extracts and analyses of the proceedings, and also the *éloges* of the members, written with great simplicity and delicacy. Perhaps the best known of his *éloges*, of which there are sixty-nine in all, is that of his uncle Pierre Corneille. This was first printed in the *Nouvelles de la république des lettres* (January 1685) and, as *Vie de Corneille*, was included in all the editions of Fontenelle's *Œuvres*. The other important works of Fontenelle are his *Éléments de la géométrie de l'infini* (1727) and his *Théorie des tourbillons* (1752).

Legacy

Fontenelle forms a link between two very widely different periods of French literature, that of Corneille, Racine and Boileau on the one hand, and that of Voltaire, D'Alembert and Diderot on the other. It is not in virtue of his great age alone that this can be said of him; he actually had much in common with the *beaux esprits* of the 17th century, as well as with the *philosophes* of the 18th. But it is to the latter rather than to the former period that he properly belongs. According to Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, he deserves a place "dans la classe des esprits infiniment distingués"—distinguished, however, it ought to be added by intelligence rather than by intellect, and less by the power of saying much than by the power of saying a little well. There have been several collected editions of Fontenelle's works, the first being printed in 3 vols. at the Hague in 1728-1729. The best is that of Paris, in 8 vols. 8vo, 1790. Some of his separate works have been frequently reprinted and also translated. The *Pluralité des mondes* was translated into modern Greek in 1794. Sainte-Beuve has an interesting essay on Fontenelle, with several useful references, in the *Causeries du lundi*, vol. iii. See also Villemain, *Tableau de la littérature française au XVIIIe siècle*; the abbé Trublet, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de la vie et des ouvrages de M. de Fontenelle* (1759); A Laborde-Milàà, *Fontenelle* (1905), in the "Grands écrivains français" series; and L. Maigrion, *Fontenelle, l'homme, l'œuvre, l'influence* (Paris, 1906).



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Cfr: Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia - This page was last modified on 6 March 2011 at 14:43 - Text is available under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bernard_le_Bovier_de_Fontenelle

“In un gran parco solitario, due personaggi: una bella ed elegante marchesa e un uomo di mondo, suo amico, forse suo amante, il quale, scesa la notte, discorre a lungo con lei. Di che cosa? Di astronomia: ‘Fatemi conoscere le vostre stelle...’ Sono galanti, ‘preziosi’, raffinati: il Fontenelle li raffigura così, non solo perché tale è la sua natura, ma perché li vuole attraenti. Egli vuole espressamente che il suo libro non annoi nessuno e piaccia a tutti, specialmente a coloro che non sanno niente; e che seduca anzitutto con la sua avvenenza, e poi con la sua deliziosa leggerezza. Per poco non gli ha tolto la sua grandezza la quale, nondimeno, si manifesta, sovrana, sin attraverso le eleganze della forma. Il mondano e la marchesa. Il mondano e la marchesa, avvolti nella notte, rinnovano il gesto degli antichi pastori della Caldea, interroganti le costellazioni; come i primi abitanti della terra, si meravigliano delle stelle, dopo essersi stupiti del sole: coppia umana che osa scrutare con i suoi miserabili occhi il cielo. La marchesa non sa niente, ma il Fontenelle sa e, in poche sere, le insegna il corso degli astri, apparentemente così misterioso. Basta con gli errori! Troppo a lungo ci si è ingannati circa i moti dei corpi celesti! Troppo a lungo s’è creduto che il sole giri intorno alla terra: errore iniziale, che ne ha tirato dietro molti altri. Ma, alla fine, l’errore s’è dissipato. ‘E’ saltato fuori un tedesco, di nome Copernico, il quale ha fatto man bassa di tutti quei circoli differenti e quei cieli solidi, immaginati dagli Antichi. Ha distrutto gli uni e messo a pezzi gli altri. Preso da un nobile furore astronomico, ha afferrato la terra e l’ha spinta molto lontano da quel centro dell’universo in cui era stata collocata e in quel centro ha messo il sole, a cui tale onore era meglio dovuto...’ Ancora una volta, l’antichità si è ingannata, gli uomini sono caduti in errore



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perché l'hanno seguita. Ma ora si inizia un periodo nuovo. La ragione e l'osservazione sperimentale hanno palesato gli errori secolari. La scienza parla, bisogna crederle: la terra e il cielo sono mutati.”

Cfr.: Paul Hazard *La crisi della coscienza europea* Torino, Einaudi, 1946, p. 331-332.

“Il Fontenelle, nipote di Corneille, era nato a Rouen nel 1657... ed aveva frequentato il collegio dei gesuiti di quella città. Nella sua qualità di segretario perpetuo dell'Académie des Sciences, dal 1699, ...egli avrebbe rappresentato anche all'estero, nella maniera più paradigmatica e ufficiale, la cultura francese della prima metà del Settecento... Di formazione cartesiana, soprattutto nel campo della fisica... egli portò alle estreme conseguenze la esaltazione della ragione come una dimensione umana dalle eccezionali possibilità pantocratiche... Precursore dell'Illuminismo... Fontenelle fu fundamentalmente figlio del secolo XVII e uomo di cultura del Seicento... Ma se il libertinismo si era mosso non soltanto in una prospettiva scettica, bensì anche nella direzione di una concezione materialistica e atea, quale per esempio si era esplicitata in *Cyrano de Bergerac*... il Fontenelle aveva fatto di più, poiché negli *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* aveva teso a prender l'abbrivio dall'originario atteggiamento scettico, per muoversi anche al di là della stessa prospettiva cyraniana, per adeguare con la sua concezione meccanicistica una visione materialistica già precorritrice di Diderot, e comunque di quel materialismo francese che avrebbe avuto, con Diderot, in La Mettrie, Helvétius, d'**Holbach** i suoi principali rappresentanti. Ma la posizione filosofica di Fontenelle... costituiva anche un superamento della prospettiva cartesiana... proprio in direzione preilluministica e illuministica, come teorizzazione di una filosofia nuova, avente alla base, quale pietra angolare, il lume di una raison protesa alla penetrazione e intellesione di un universo plurimo, come sede di una pluralità di mondi, o addirittura, brunianamente, di una serie infinita di mondi, poiché Fontenelle, alfiere del pensiero meccanicistico, aveva concepito... l'universo come universo-macchina, e cioè come una grande struttura meccanica fondata su rigorose leggi fisiche che si esprimevano secondo rapporti ed equazioni matematiche... Proprio questa serie di implicazioni libertine, con i connessi rischi di perturbare le coscienze di quei settori della società del tempo ancora legati ad una concezione tradizionale della religione e del cristianesimo, aveva favorito la decisione, da parte delle autorità costituite, della messa all'Indice degli *Entretiens* l'anno successivo alla loro pubblicazione, e cioè nel 1687.

...Fontenelle non era stato soltanto un pioniere dello studio comparato delle credenze e dei miti delle culture europee ed extraeuropee, ma addirittura l'antesignano e il fondatore della scienza e della storia comparata delle religioni...”

Cfr.: Sergio Zoli *Dall'Europa libertina all'Europa illuminista* Firenze, Nardini, 1997 p. 428-432.



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“Fontenelle made a career out of popularizing natural philosophy for an elite urban audience that frequented the salons rather than the court, and it is possible that his metaphysical shift from marvelous to uniform nature paralleled a shift in cultural values from princely magnificence to bourgeois domesticity. Given the prominent role of women in the new intellectual sociability of the salons, it was perhaps strategic that Fontenelle’s interlocutor in his dialogue on the plurality of worlds was a charming and quick-witted Marquise – especially since the women in his posthumous literary utopia were not even taught to read and write.”

Cfr.: Lorraine Daston – Katharine Park *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150 – 1750* New York, Zone Books, 2001, p. 354.

“Vairasse’s novel [*Histoire des Sévarambes* (1677), nda] was reprinted several times, mostly in the Netherlands, and became one of the most widely known of the clandestine novels of the late seventeenth century. It was also clearly a prime source of inspiration for a still more daring text, apparently written in the years 1680-2, entitled *L’Histoire des Ajaiiens*. This strange name is a parody of **Huet**’s construing the term ‘Jao’, in his *Demonstratio Evangelica*, as an abbreviation for ‘Jehovah’. ‘Ajaiiens’ therefore signifies non-believers in Jehovah. Philosophically, the most audacious of the French Spinozist novels of the Early Enlightenment, the Ajaiiens remained unpublished until it was clandestinely printed in Holland in 1768, and apparently never circulated in manuscript form. But if it was infinitely less influential during the Early Enlightenment than the *Histoire des Sévarambes*, it is nevertheless of considerable interest, reflecting as it does the early and forceful emergence of radical ideas in France during the 1680s. When finally published in the late eighteenth century, the novel, renamed *La République des philosophes, ou l’Histoire des Ajaiiens*, was attributed by its editors to Fontenelle, and while this attribution was not wholly certain, it has ever since been generally regarded as at least highly probable. [...] Trusting more in reason than Europeans, Ajaiiens know the notion of creation out of nothing is absurd and have not thought to invent any mythical epoch in which the first creatures were created by nothing, by an ‘Être incompréhensible’ and ‘invisible’. Indeed, remarkably, their God is identical to Nature... they regard this ‘Nature’ as a kind of universal mother... Consequently, the Ajaiiens are blessed with no priests, altars, cult, temples, or public religious ceremonies, and firmly believe not in the immortality but the mortality of the soul. [...] Unpublished and unknown, *L’Histoire des Ajaiiens* had no impact during the Early Enlightenment. Aside from the probably semi-fictional philosophical *Voyages of the Baron de Lahontan*, of 1702, there was evidently no further French attempt to develop the fictional innovation introduced by Foigny and Vairasse, despite the continuing notoriety internationally of the *Histoire des Sévarambes*. However, the genre was spectacularly revived some three decades after the writing of *L’Histoire des Ajaiiens* in the Netherlands, by Tissot de Patot, in part in conscious emulation of Vairasse and, possibly, Smeeks.”



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Cfr.: Jonathan I. Israel *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650 – 1750* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 592.