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“Raining bombs in the house of the Lord”

A Note on Translation and Dissent in the Work of Baron d’Holbach

Patrick Leech

Abstract:

This paper looks at translation as a strategy of dissent in the Enlightenment, focusing on the translations of Baron d’Holbach and his “coterie.” It emphasizes the centrality of translation to the concerns of the radical Enlightenment, the active and purposeful orientation of the translator, and the inbuilt cosmopolitanism of dissent.

Keywords: D’Holbach, radical enlightenment, cosmopolitanism, materialism, atheism

Recent work on the Enlightenment has emphasized a split between a moderate Enlightenment represented by figures such as Locke, Montesquieu and Voltaire, and a radical, materialist and republican strand in the work, for example, of Spinoza, Toland, Bayle, Diderot, and d’Holbach (Israel, [2001](#), [2006](#), [2011](#); Jacob, [1981](#); Ducheyne, [2017](#)). This radical approach was based on the heterodox notion, common to some religious dissenters, atheists and deists in England and elsewhere and deriving in particular from the work of Spinoza, that the world was composed of one substance (matter). This view contested the prevailing one, legitimated by the Church, of a division into matter and spirit (Israel, [2001](#), 251–52). If the Enlightenment in general was a form of dissent with regard to prevailing political and religious orthodoxies, this radical enlightenment, promoting deism or atheism in religion, republicanism in politics and materialism in philosophy (Israel [2001](#), vi), was not only dissenting but subversive. In France, a crucial moment in this dissent occurred in the late 1760s and early 1770s. It was during this time that Baron d’Holbach and a group of collaborators, translated from English a large number of works

representing these radical views.¹¹ It was, therefore, a moment when translation and dissent came together in a particularly striking manner.

Paul-Henri Thiry, known as Baron d'Holbach, the materialist philosopher and collaborator of Diderot on the project of the *Encyclopédie*, had already distinguished himself as a translator of scientific works from German into French. D'Holbach's collaborator, Jacques-André Naigeon, claimed in his obituary that:

... it is to him that we owe to a very large extent the rapid advances made by natural history and chemistry amongst us some thirty years ago; ... it is he who translated the excellent works which the Germans had published on these sciences – sciences that were then almost unknown, or at least very much neglected ... (cited in Wickwar, 49).

In the period 1766–1773, he turned his attention to the translation of a number of anticlerical or materialist works by English deists, atheists, and freethinkers of the early eighteenth century, such as John Toland, Anthony Collins, John Trenchard, and Thomas Gordon, publishing them alongside his own principal contribution to Enlightenment thought, *Système de la nature* (1770). Together they consisted in an unprecedented attack on religious and political orthodoxy, as well

¹¹ For discussions of these translations, see above all the recent work by Kozul, [2016](#), but also the following: Wickwar, 74–77; Kors, 83–83; Sandrier, 294–329; Hammersley, 125–129; Kozul, [2010](#); and Curran, [2012](#). Vercruyse ([1971](#)) remains the fullest descriptive bibliography of d'Holbach's writings.

as on hierarchical values in religion and politics. Some of the titles of these works in their French translation give a sense of their polemical, anticlerical, and anti-religious nature: *La Contagion sacrée ou Histoire naturelle de le superstition* (1768), *Les Prêtres démasqués, ou des iniquités du clergé chrétien* (1768), *De la cruauté religieuse* (1769), *L'Enfer détruit* (1769), and so on. This flurry of translations culminated in the publication in French of Thomas Hobbes' materialist work *De la nature humaine* in 1773 (originally *Elements of Law, Natural and Politic*, first published in 1640). The extent of the attack on the orthodox clerical establishment was underlined by Diderot, who wrote to his mistress, Sophie Volland, in 1768, that it was "raining bombs in the house of the Lord" and that "every day when I get up, I look out of the window to see if the great whore of Babylon is not already pacing the streets, her great cup in her hand" (cit in Furbank, 292).

During the high point of the Enlightenment in Paris, then, when Diderot was completing the compilation of one of its defining collective works, the *Encyclopédie*, and when d'Holbach himself was hosting his bi-weekly salon of Enlightenment thinkers in the Rue Royale, later to be termed his "coterie" (Kors, [1976](#)), a major debate centered on radical and challenging works which had been translated into French from English. This highlights a somewhat neglected aspect of the Enlightenment: its reliance on translation. What we may term the 'universalist' approaches to the Enlightenment, which saw it as essentially a unitary philosophical and intellectual movement articulated in different European spaces (an approach, we may say, typified in the work of Ernst Cassirer – 1932), somewhat glides over the singular peculiarities of places, national traditions and languages and commonly makes little or no mention of translation. Attempts to bring this universalism down to earth and relocate Enlightenment thought and activity in precise national contexts, which began with Roy Porter and Michael Teich ([1981](#)),

often concentrate necessarily on autochthonous work.^[2] Although single examples of influence across national borders have now begun to proliferate,^[3] there is arguably no synthetic statement of the Enlightenment in general as a pan-European activity based on extensive individual networks and on the circulation of ideas through translation.^[4] The case of the work of d'Holbach and his collaborators, instead, puts translation at the heart of Enlightenment ferment.

Mladen Kozul (2016) has recently published an extensive and authoritative study of the translations carried out by d'Holbach and his collaborators. It fills a major gap in studies on d'Holbach himself, on the radical enlightenment, and on the Parisian milieu in which the translations were produced and read (not published – along with many other works of the French enlightenment, they had to be published abroad, in this case in Amsterdam^[5]). Any further work

^[2] See for example, Roy Porter's *Enlightenment. Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (2000).

^[3] See for example, the following edited collections: Thomson et al; Andriès et al. See also Robertson and Oz-Salzberger (1995, 2017).

^[4] For brief statements, see Oz-Salzberger (2006, 2014). Israel is intent on tracing “a sense of the European Enlightenment as a single highly integrated intellectual and cultural movement” and stresses the need to free ourselves “from the deadly compulsion to squeeze the Enlightenment... into the constricting straight-jacket of ‘national history’ (2001, v, vi). He demonstrates the validity of this approach with regard to the radical tradition he outlines in his own work (2001, 2006, 2011).

^[5] For the importance to the French Enlightenment of the clandestine trade in books printed abroad and subsequently imported into France, see the work of Robert Darnton, in particular *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (1996).

on these translations, on d'Holbach and his collaborators, as well as on the spread of radical and heterodox religious ideas and materialist philosophy in the eighteenth century will have to take into account Kozul's extensive and detailed analysis. This paper will limit itself to making some comments aiming to locate d'Holbach's translations within areas of particular interest to translation studies: the role of translation in the diffusion of enlightenment texts; the lack of the visibility of the translator; and the inbuilt, we may say, cosmopolitanism of dissent.

Kozul's work demonstrates the extent to which translation was not peripheral but instead central to Baron d'Holbach's entire work as an enlightenment intellectual. Moving beyond Alain Sandrier's exploration of d'Holbach's "style philosophique" (2004), which is somewhat unquestioning about the division of d'Holbach's work into original writings, collections, and translation,⁶ Kozul sees translation as pervading all d'Holbach's work. Between 1752 and 1771, he published 11 translations of significant scientific treatises from German into French.⁷ His first translations from English were of the long poem by his former schoolmate at Leuven, Mark Akenside, *Pleasures of the Imagination* (1759), and Jonathan Swift's *History of the Reign of Queen Anne* (1765), which introduced him to the religious and political disputes of early eighteenth-century England.⁸ His particular interest in English deist or atheistic texts followed

⁶ In this Sandrier follows the categorization of Vercruysee into original works, works written in collaboration, translations, and edited works.

⁷ The 1771 text is *Traité des sels*, which Kozul puts forward as a translation by d'Holbach or his collaborators for the first time (2016, 260). According to the attributions of Vercruysee (vi), the translation of scientific texts ended in 1760 with the translation of *Pyritologie*.

⁸ Kozul's otherwise exhaustive analyses restricts itself to translations in the fields of science, philosophical materialism, and religious polemics.

his visit to England in 1765, and between 1766 and 1773, 31 “ouvrages philosophiques ou de polémique antireligieuse” appeared, most of which were translations, adaptations or reworkings of these texts. Kozul’s analysis, in fact, includes translations tout court (as in the translation of Hobbes), but also summaries, interpolations, paratexts (notes, prefaces), rewritings, substitutions and so on, as well as “original” texts which were in effect translations published anonymously or under false or imaginary names (Kozul, [2010](#), 281; [2016](#), 261–62).

Other work by d’Holbach, although considered original, was also, it might be argued, based on translation in the broad sense of work in one language heavily dependent on texts originally published in another. His collaboration with Diderot on the *Encyclopédie* consisted of the contribution of a large number of articles on mineralogy and geology, many of which were heavily based on his knowledge of German texts, and which dovetail with his published translations in this area (Kozul, [2016](#), 59–77). Even his best-known work, *Système de la nature*, on which his reputation as a philosopher rests, was closely reliant on John Toland’s *Letters to Serena*, originally published in English in 1704 and which appeared in d’Holbach’s translation in 1768. The fourth chapter of *Système de la nature* puts forward the notion of matter as inherently self-moving (and thus not dependent on an external divine ‘prime mover’) articulated also in Toland’s fifth letter, “Motion is essential to matter”⁹

Translation was an important part of the work of other Enlightenment figures as well. It is worth noting that the entire project of the *Encyclopédie* has its roots in a proposal by Diderot’s

⁹ The fourth chapter of d’Holbach’s work is entitled “Des lois du mouvement communes à tous les êtres de la nature”; Toland’s fifth letter bears the title “Motion is essential to matter; in answer to some remarks by a noble friend on the confutation of Spinoza”.

publisher Le Breton, to translate Chambers' *Cyclopaedia, or an universal dictionary of the arts and sciences* (1768) into French, a proposal that was shelved in favor of an autochthonous French venture (Furbank, 34–36).^[10] Diderot himself had begun his career as a translator from English, first of Temple Stanyan's *Grecian History* (1707) and subsequently of the English philosopher, Lord Shaftesbury's *Inquiry Concerning Virtue and Merit* (1699), for many years a key text in English Whig philosophy and aesthetics, published in French in 1745 (Furbank, 18, 25; Israel [2006](#), 785; Robb). A number of members of d'Holbach's unofficial "coterie", seen by some as the heart of Parisian intellectual activity at the time, also distinguished themselves as translators. Nicolas La Grange, tutor to d'Holbach's children, translated the important materialist work by Lucretius, *De rerum natura* (1768) as well as the works of Seneca (Kozul, [2016](#), 20; Furbank, 404). In 1766, The Abbé Morellet published the first translation into French of Cesare Beccaria's *Dei delitti e delle pene* which had first appeared in Leghorn in 1764 (Loretelli; Kors, 44–46). Friedrich Melchior Grimm translated works by Goldoni (Furbank, 183). John Wilkes, the English radical who spent five years in exile in France from 1763 to 1768 during which he frequented Baron d'Holbach's salon, translated into English Nicholas Boulanger's *Recherches sur l'origine du despotisme oriental* (1761) which had been published posthumously by d'Holbach on the basis of Boulanger's manuscripts, after first publishing it in French on his own press in England. Wilkes was also instrumental in commissioning and publishing the first translation of Beccaria's work into English in 1767 (Loretelli [2017](#), 13–18). Both Jean-Baptiste

^[10] Diderot argued that to translate Chambers' *Cyclopaedia* would "excite the indignation of scholars and protests from the public, who would be receiving, under a new and pretentious title, riches that had already been in their possession for many years past" (cit in Furbank, 36).

Suard and Augustin Roux, younger members of d'Holbach's "coterie", were prolific translators: Suard was chosen by David Hume as his translator and was unsuccessfully solicited by Edward Gibbon to translate his *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776), whereas Roux collaborated with d'Holbach on his scientific translations (Hunter, 113–4; Kors, 175–93). If, as Kozul puts forward, translation was at the heart of d'Holbach's work, it played a considerable and somewhat neglected role in the work of all the members of the "coterie" as well as in that of Diderot (Kozul, [2016](#), 1).

The relative neglect of the issue of translation in studies of Enlightenment thought may be to some extent due to the fact that much work was published clandestinely, sometimes under false names, and often did not mention the translator. This brings us to our second point: the lack of visibility of the translator. In the case of d'Holbach's translations, the explanation, "traduit de l'anglais," which appeared on the title page was the only mention of the fact that they were translated texts (Kozul [2010](#), 280–81). The translator's invisibility, of course, has been focused on in translation studies for some time (Venuti [1991](#)). In the case of radical or heterodox works such as those of d'Holbach, this invisibility clearly responds to the specific need of both authors and translators to avoid persecution by the authorities. In the case of, not only the translator but the author too was often obliged to remain invisible and anonymous. In some cases, this anonymity was substantially pro-forma. It was well known, for example, that the Abbé Raynal was the principal author of the *Histoire philosophique des deux indes* (1779), but the authorities only moved against the author of this forbidden work when, in 1780, a Geneva edition made this explicit, publishing it with the portrait of the Abbé himself (Kors, 228). Kozul argues that Voltaire's anonymity, too, was more tactical than real ([2016](#), 248). D'Holbach, on the other hand, retained his invisibility as an author as well as a translator, right up until his death.

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Vercruyse's annotated bibliography dedicates a whole chapter to the history of the attribution of work to d'Holbach (15–30), and Kozul's recent work has argued for some new attributions ([2016](#), 71–75). His *Système de la nature* (1770) on which his reputation as a major enlightenment figure rests, purported to be a posthumous publication of a work by Jean-Baptiste Mirabaud, former secretary of the Académie Française, and the real authorship, that of d'Holbach, was only disclosed after his death in 1789 (Vercruyse, 16).

The anonymity of the translator, however, does not mean there were not important interventions in terms of editing, cutting, adding, summarizing, pasting together, and so on. If the translators themselves (if we accept that this was the work of a real 'atelier' – Kozul, [2016](#), 25) were invisible, their interventions in the text were substantial. Kozul argues that these interventions functioned as a means of constructing or re-constructing authorial voices based sometimes loosely, sometimes more closely, on the original English authors (Kozul, [2010](#), 283–294). Here, the invisibility of the translator, the different uses of anonymity and pseudonyms, along with the use of the names of authors long dead (either Jean-Baptiste Mirabaud or English deists of a previous period) was geared not only to the avoidance of arrest but also to the promotion of a perception of a sort of general consensus regarding the radical materialist and anticlerical ideas that were flooding the market. Kozul argues that their function was to promote a sort of "lumières imaginaires", a shared space in which radical and anticlerical ideas could be perceived as widely accepted on a European scale ([2016](#), 4; 12). Authorship, or in this case the visibility and recognition of the translator, takes second place to the need or desire to promote ideas as part of a wide consensus.

In this reading, the movement of dissent promotes itself as a generalized counter-consensus, and not simply the work of individuals. The visibility of the author or translator gives

way to the polemical and purposeful nature of dissent and protest. The overriding importance is the work itself, the translation or the utterance, and its effects; the focus is on the act and the reader (what in pragmatics would be called the perlocutionary aspect) and not the author or translator. D'Holbach's intent, we may assume, was to inundate France (and thus Europe) with a series of pamphlets and publications which, taken together, were to form a concentrated attack on the philosophical underpinnings of the clerical and authoritarian regime, not to secure the individual a position in a posthumous Enlightenment canon. Mona Baker (2015, 2) has found a similar urgency and sense of purpose, and a similar notion of translation as a collective, rather than individual, activity in the protests of the Egyptian revolution and the need to describe these protests to the outside world. The translator's voice and visibility or invisibility, in short, can be a function of the specific communicative and political context in which translation takes place.

This dissent through translation brings up the question of cosmopolitanism. It is surely significant that the major atheistic impulse of the French Enlightenment was heavily reliant on translation. The anonymous assault on theistic orthodoxy was articulated through translations of texts which originally appeared in a foreign language. This publication of English radical texts was to a large extent new. With the exception of John Toland and Thomas Hobbes, most of the writers translated by d'Holbach were relatively unknown. Their translations appeared, moreover, at a moment when great attention was being paid to all things English, a pervasive "anglophilia" in France.^[1] The indication "traduit de l'anglais", Kozul argues, was a crucial legitimating

^[1] The cultural hegemony of France in the Enlightenment should not blind us to the fact that at least two key earlier figures and texts of the French Enlightenment, Voltaire's *Lettres philosophiques* (1734) and Montesquieu's *L'esprit des lois* (1748) were directly influenced by English thought, and both writers benefitted from periods spent in England

signature (2016, 4). In short, there was, with these translations, a deliberate attempt to indicate the foreign, English origins of the texts and the ideas that were expressed in them,^[12] an attempt to promote, in France, a radical enlightenment which had significant proponents in the more liberal Anglican and latitudinarian context of Protestant England (Wickwar, 73).

The overlapping, transnational nature of the Enlightenment provides, then, the overall context for these translations. But how can this episode be conceptualized in terms of cosmopolitanism understood as openness to the experience of the foreign, to use Antoine Berman's term (1992). Lawrence Venuti (1995, 19–20) and Esperança Bielsa (2016, 9–12) follow Berman in focusing on textual strategies of “domestication” or “foreignization”, examining translations for “traces” of the foreign which can be used to gauge the extent to which a translation is open to the voice of the other and is truly cosmopolitan. But as Mona Baker has pointed out (2007: 152), reliance on a single, generalized methodology such as this may flatten out the specific contexts and conditions under which translators operate. The translations of d'Holbach and his collaborators fall squarely within the category of texts translated in accordance with a “domesticating” rather than “foreignizing” strategy. Little trace of the English-language originals can be found in the published translations (Kozul, 2016, 37–40).^[13]

in the 1720s (Israel 2006, 356–58). Margaret Jacob (1981, 2017), stresses the particular importance of English texts for the radical enlightenment.

^[12] The foreign origin of the texts and the ideas expressed in the *Système de la nature* constituted, for the state censor, Antoine Lois Séguier, a principal motive for their prohibition – the “fureur impie de nos propres écrivains” being reinforced by a “commerce de poison avec l'étranger” (cited in Kozul, 2016, 13).

^[13] Kozul uses the term “annexant” rather than domestication (2016, 37–40).

Moreover, as Kozul argues, the translations had another domesticating function, in some cases at least, which was that of adapting the deism and free-thinking approach of, say, Anthony Collins, to the polemical context of French anticlericalism: “le Collins holbachique est un philosophe français qui parle le langage (et la langue) et porte les idées d’un philosophe français” (2010, 287). But the overall framing of these works as originating in English free-thinking culture argues against the texts as being closed to the experience of the foreign. Rather, they appear to link French Enlightenment thought closely to another, foreign context.

The general cosmopolitan outlook of the d’Holbach circle should also be noted.

D’Holbach’s salon saw the participation of many foreign luminaries, from John Wilkes, David Hume, Edward Gibbon, David Garrick from England, to Cesare Beccaria and Alessandro Verri from Italy, and to others from Germany, Switzerland, and America (Kors, 105). Abbé Morellet termed the d’Holbach salon “Europe’s coffee house” (Wickwar, 36). D’Holbach himself was a cosmopolitan figure – born in Edesheim in the Palatinate, his mother tongue was German but he was schooled in Leuven alongside Dutch and English pupils before settling in Paris (Wickwar, 18). Grimm, editor for many years of the *Correspondance Littéraire* which documented the literary life of Paris throughout the middle years of the eighteenth century, spent the greater part of his life in Paris. But he also resided for some time at the court of Catherine the Great and, after 1789, went into exile in Germany (Furbank, 377, 400; Kors, 289). Voltaire, as is well known, fled to England for a formative period of his youth, from 1726 to 1729, and spent several years in Berlin at the court of Frederick the Great. D’Holbach, as we have seen, visited England in 1765. Diderot himself, although professing his predilection for Paris, spent six months in St Petersburg in 1773–74 (Furbank, 369–95).

The social and intellectual milieu surrounding d’Holbach, then, was decisively cosmopolitan. The easy movement between countries and sense of a common belonging enhances the notion of an overarching cosmopolitan sphere in which language competences were well developed. D’Holbach knew English, French, Latin, and Italian, as well as his native German (Curran [2012](#), 24); his article on “Pronunciation” in the *Encyclopédie* included examples also from Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, and Russian (Wickwar, 48). According to Kozul ([2016](#), 194–196), although many translations were the result of collaboration, there is nothing to suggest that this was the result of any lack in linguistic competence. In this overall frame, the specific differences of languages and cultures could be smoothed over. Translation, in this context, and certainly as it was perceived by many of the translators themselves, was not governed by notions of attention to, or neglect of, national cultures but rather the need to spread shared ideas to as many readers as possible, a desire to construct a cosmopolitan enlightenment (Schlereth, [1977](#)).^[14] It was an example of the sort of transnational conversation to be interpreted within the

^[14] The cosmopolitanism and de facto internationalism of the enlightenment is highlighted also by those working on the book trade and publishing, such as Darnton ([1996](#)). Mark Curran’s further work on the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel, first studied by Darnton, has focused specifically on networks of trade and translation. That Patrick Brydone’s *A Tour through Sicily and Malta* ([1773](#)) was widely read in Russia in its French translation leads him to comment as follows: “That the Muscovite public were devouring a Swiss printing of the work of a Scotsman travelling in the Mediterranean says much about the international nature of the eighteenth-century francophone book trade” ([2010](#): 261–62). For an analysis of the cosmopolitan and international network of scholars in an earlier period, see Goldgar.

framework of a Republic of Letters (Goldgar; Kozul, [2016](#), 193), a transnational conversation which Kwame Anthony Appiah ([2006](#): 151) sees at the heart of cosmopolitanism, a “universality plus difference.”

Jonathan Israel sees the early 1770s in Paris as the moment at which the radical Enlightenment of Spinoza, Bayle, Toland and Diderot (whom Frederick of Prussia referred to as the “spinosiste de Langres” – Israel [2011](#), 654) finally broke through and overtook the mainstream moderate Enlightenment of Newton, Voltaire, Montesquieu, and others, and, moreover, as the moment at which radical dissent began to pave the way for the revolutionary dissent of the American and French Revolutions ([2011](#), 648–83; 937–43). This dissent was fundamentally international and cosmopolitan. Israel has given new life to the view put forward in the 1950s by Robert Palmer ([1959/64](#)) of an “Atlantic Revolution”, a period of transnational constitutional and political upheaval resulting from a radical movement of ideas. The “General Revolution”, for Israel, was not only a “transatlantic phenomenon” but could also be found in the “Swiss and Dutch democratic movements of the 1780s and 1790s and a growing critique of the existing social and institutional order in Britain” ([2011](#), 937). It is mistaken, says Israel, to link these revolutions too closely to nationalism. The radical Enlightenment’s attacks on the superstructures of church and monarchy gave it a strongly rights-based and universalist thrust:

Nothing could be more mistaken than to suppose the ‘human rights’ of 1789 were deeply bound up with ‘state and nation’. The Radical Enlightenment’s Human Rights constituted, rather, an unqualified moral universalism. ([2011](#): 937)

This cosmopolitan moment of revolution can be strongly linked to the cosmopolitan movement of dissenting ideas that preceded it. This paper has focused attention on the import of ideas from England to France by d’Holbach and his collaborators in the late 1760s and early 1770s. But this moment too had its roots in a fertile exchange of radical ideas on a European level going back at least as far as the “Republic of Letters” of the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century (Goldgar; Israel, [2001](#); Jacob, 183–97).

This exchange of ideas was, in an age when Latin no longer constituted a European lingua franca, necessarily linked to translation, in particular but not exclusively translation into French. To focus on translation in this period is thus to focus on the dynamic heart of an international movement of ideas. This perspective also leaves us with a view of translators and their activity which may be somewhat at odds with the ways in which they are sometimes characterized. Rather than skilled specialists maintaining a neutral stance between equivalencies, both cultural and textual, they emerge as active, conscious proponents themselves of ideas, albeit anonymously as “invisible” translators of authoritative works written in other languages. They emerge as writers acting out of particular motivations, and using the act of translation as part of a specific project of which translation is just one part. Translation was for them a conscious goal-oriented activity; they were themselves protagonists and not mere “gate-keepers” minding the frontiers between discrete national cultures (Milton and Bandia, 10; Tymoczko [2007](#)). For Diderot, d’Holbach, Wilkes, Morellet and others, translation was something fully respondent to their overall political and cultural strategy of promoting a dissenting, radical Enlightenment.

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Commentato [A3]: AQ: Please note that the reference "Andries, Ogée, Jhon and Sanfey 2013" is given in the list, but not cited in the text. Please check.

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