Cabanis, Pierre-Jean (1757-1808)

Cabanis believed in the possibility of a 'science of man', having its basis in medicine. He tried to show how a materialist conception of the human organism can throw light on our mental and moral life. The properties of living matter were derived from physical laws, but had their own peculiarities. In particular, the property of sensibility (being able to have sensations) and the property of motility (involving the experience of effort and of resistance to it) were the keys to understanding human nature.

Though the thrust of Cabanis' thought is materialistic, his emphasis on medical science distinguishes him both from the mechanistic tradition as represented by La Mettrie, and from the intellectualist tradition represented by Condillac, in which sensations are taken as given mental items, from which the rest of our mental life is constructed by operations of reasoning or association.

Life and works

Cabanis was born in Cosnac in the Limousin. He was registered as a medical doctor in Reims in 1784, after seven years' study in Paris (during which he had already become a protégé of Mme d'Helvétius, encountering Condillac, Condorcet, Benjamin Franklin, Mirabeau and Theodore Roosevelt in her circle). His radical ideas about the reform of medical practice and education would perhaps have made it difficult for him to be accepted by the medical establishment in Paris at the time. However, he did not make his profession as a doctor (though he treated Mirabeau, and published an account of Mirabeau's illness and death in 1791). Instead, he put his medical knowledge to political and philosophical use. In 1790, he wrote his Observations sur les hôpitaux (Observations on Hospitals) which led to public office, including membership of the Commission on Hospitals, under the revolutionary régime. He also took an active interest in educational reform.

Like many members of the salon of Mme d'Helvétius at Auteuil, he withdrew from the public scene during the Reign of Terror, for fear of Robespierre. When he re-emerged, it was to stand for the ideals of reason, the perfectibility of the human species, and freedom. He was made Professor of Hygiene, and Professor of Clinical Medicine at the École de Médecine in Paris, and was elected to the Conseil des Cinq-Cents. On the creation of the Institut de France, he became a member of the short-lived 'Class of Moral and Political Sciences', where he delivered the series of memoirs which formed his major work, published in 1802: the Rapports du physique et du moral de l'homme (Relations between the Physical and the Mental in Man). He became a senator in 1797, having supported Bonaparte's coup d'état of 18 Brumaire. However, he overtly opposed Bonaparte's growing authoritarianism. He belonged to a group of thinkers devoted to idéologie (the 'science of ideas'). The word was coined by Destutt de Tracy, a leader of that group, which included figures like Condorcet, Laplace and Lavoisier. But Napoleon soon adopted a repressive approach, and the appellation idéologue came to connote intellectual, social and political subversiveness. In about 1807, Cabanis seems to have composed a letter to Fauriel on first