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RELIGION AMONG THE PHILOSOPHES:

A STUDY OF

VOLTAIRE'S DEISM AND DIDEROT'S ATHEISM

BY

MARGUERITE DELANEY

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ABSTRACT

RELIGION AMONG THE PHILOSOPHERS: A STUDY OF VOLTAIRE'S DEISM AND  
DIDEROT'S ATHEISM.

Voltaire adhered to the basic tenets of deism or natural religion throughout his lifetime. Belief in the existence of a vague, indefinite Supreme Being, and in man's obligation to live virtuously formed the core of his religious and moral ideas. The universe, to Voltaire, was an intricate mechanism governed by external, immutable laws; human reason, unaided by revelation, could deduce these physical and moral laws. His God was the prime mover, the external geometrician who had wound up and set in motion the Newtonian world-machine; his moral code incorporated the principles of morality common to mankind; but both his concept of God and his concept of morality lack clarity and consistency.

Voltaire opposed both the anthropomorphism of the Christians and the materialism of the atheists, even though he confessed ignorance as to the true nature and essence of God. He separated God from matter, but declared the latter to be eternal emanations of the former; he affirmed the liberty of divine will, but subjected it to immutable natural laws; he exhorted adoration of the Divinity, but denied the efficacy of prayer; he proclaimed a rewarding and avenging God, but rejected the immortality of the soul and abstained from judging divine justice. Voltaire realized that the exigencies of morality would necessitate certain inconsistencies

in his concept of God; natural religion adequately sustained the philosopher, but the common people needed a stronger incentive to virtue. The need to maintain morality, however, does not account for all his self-contradictions. After establishing the existence of God upon a mechanistic interpretation of nature, Voltaire refused to accept the logical consequences of his basic propositions; he preferred to cloak his inconsistency with a profession of ignorance.

Voltaire's moral code similarly lacks consistency. His concept of virtue, though distinct from metaphysics, was inherently attached to the existence of God. He denied innate ideas, and yet he admitted that God had fashioned all men with common concepts of justice and virtue. He recognized a universal natural law, but declared that virtue was obedience to social law. He sustained both an absolute and a relative moral code. These inconsistencies however, did not prevent Voltaire from extolling certain fundamental principles of morality which were necessary for both individual happiness and the social good. Starting from two basic axioms: God and virtue, Voltaire realized the insufficiency of the rational approach to ultimate truth, but he refused to advance towards atheism or to withdraw to pietism. Voltaire continued to defend deism and natural religion long after more profound thinkers had abandoned its basic tenets.

Diderot's ideas on religion and morality tended to change in



definite and parallel directions during his lifetime. In 1745, he was a theist, accepting conventional Christian morality; by 1746, he had become a deist, advocating a rational interpretation of nature and of morality; by 1754, he was an atheist, professing a hedonistic utilitarianism. His desire to synthesize knowledge into a rational interpretation of nature and morality, according to the fundamental precepts of his age - reason and natural law - compelled him to follow his doctrines to their logical conclusion. Diderot considered it inevitable that natural religion should give way to the religion of nature; that the mechanistic interpretation of nature should cede to the materialistic interpretation; that absolute morality should yield to relative morality.

As Diderot successively embraced the dominant creeds of his age, his concept of Divinity progressed from the anthropomorphic God of the theists, to the intelligent designer of the deists, to the God-nature of the pantheists, and finally to the eternal matter of the atheists. He elaborated a materialistic interpretation of nature in which eternal matter replaced eternal spirit, and chance accounted for the various combinations of molecules. He attributed length, depth, breadth, and potential sensibility to inert molecules, and declared the living or animal molecule to be the result of a particular kind of organization which released sensibility. He suggested the spontaneous generation of the living cell, the evolution of the various forms of animal life from a common prototype, the development of organs in response to needs, and the theory of the survival of the fittest. For Diderot, this evolution-

ary materialism gave an adequate explanation of all those activities usually attributed to a Divinity; it was the logical conclusion of the mechanistic concept of the Newtonian world-machine. Following the dictates of reason and natural law, Diderot came to the conclusion that atheism should supercede theism, deism, and pantheism.

Similarities and differences stand out in the religious and moral ideas of Voltaire and Diderot. Both trusted in reason as the omnipotent and autonomous arbiter of all things; both placed overwhelming confidence in the rational approach to knowledge and ultimate truth. Their faith in human understanding precluded belief in the miraculous, in revelation and in supernatural intervention in the affairs of men. Their faith in reason evoked violent criticism of Christianity and increased the antichristianism of the century. Both Voltaire and Diderot denounced revealed religion, formal worship, sacraments, rites, and anthropomorphic representations as contrary to reason and natural morality.

Using the same fundamental precepts of reason and natural law, however, Voltaire and Diderot reached opposing notions of God, matter, and the universe. Voltaire unquestioningly accepted the Newtonian concept of the universe as an intricate mechanism governed by immutable laws. From the basic arguments of the theists: design, and the necessity of a first cause, he rationalized his belief in the existence of a Supreme Being, who was the intelligent designer of the universe, and the source of movement and thought. God, to Voltaire, was the impartial, absentee God of the deists, who having determined the universal laws

of nature, abstained from altering their immutable courses. Diderot used the concept of the Newtonian world-machine, but only as point of departure; he progressively rejected theism, deism, and pantheism, and eventually formulated a materialistic evolutionary concept of the universe. He denied an exterior divine force and believed that movement and sensibility were inherent properties of matter. Whereas Voltaire balked and retreated whenever his doctrines approached pantheism, Diderot traversed pantheism, and arrived at atheism. Both systems, established on reason and natural law, rather than on observation and experiment, were shattered by the arguments of Hume and Kant.

The moral codes of Voltaire and Diderot had more permanent value than their concepts of God and nature. Even though they disagreed on the details of the virtuous, they agreed on the necessity of man's conformity to the established rules of society. Through his adherence to natural religion Voltaire advocated the principles of morality which he thought were common to the human race; neither extreme asceticism, false piety, nor the exaggerated pursuit of passion were suitable behaviour patterns for mankind. Voltaire extolled those virtues which were necessary for social living and maintained that man, following the rational dictates of human nature, could satisfactorily provide for his own self-interest and happiness, and for

the general good. Diderot, after denying ~~free-will~~ and the existence of God, permanently recognized the relativity of virtue. He could not decide whether man should conform to traditional Christian morality, to rational sensualism or to absolute hedonism. In the end, he became convinced that man should follow the natural dictates of passion in so far as society condoned their practice. Both Voltaire and Diderot believed in the natural goodness of man; they established morality on natural law and the rational pursuit of happiness; they formulated a kind of moral utilitarianism which allowed the maximization of individual happiness and the maximization of the collective well-being. Both exhorted man to cultivate those virtues which were respected by society, and to strive for the reconciliation of social law and natural law. As philosophes, Voltaire and Diderot extolled the primary virtues of tolerance, benevolence, and humanitarianism.

## INTRODUCTION

The Age of Reason was both an age of revolt and an age of faith: of intellectual revolt against tradition and authority, superstition and fanaticism, despotism and privilege; of faith in reason and natural law, the goodness of man and the perfectibility of the human race. If the eighteenth century was a century of universal criticism, it was also a century of unlimited hopes; if the philosophes attacked the old regime which was based on absolutism and intolerance, they defended a new order to be founded on personal liberty and natural rights; if Voltaire and Diderot demolished the Heavenly City of St. Augustine,<sup>1</sup> they designed an "Earthly" City of Nature.

Voltaire and Diderot represent the two opposite poles of positive religious belief among the philosophes: deism and atheism. They differed in their concepts of God and matter, but they were united in their faith in reason and natural law, and in their desire to establish a rational code of morality in accordance with natural law. Voltaire, a social crusader, more concerned with the eradication of injustice and superstition, and with the propagation of tolerance, benevolence and humanitarianism, than with elaboration of a consistent creed, relied on the basic tenets of deism and natural religion for the fabrication of his "Earthly" City. Diderot, a "scientific"

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1. Carl Becker, Heavenly city of the eighteenth century philosophers (New Haven, 1932), p. 31.

philosopher, more sincerely interested in formulating a rational synthesis of knowledge, than in emancipating mankind, eventually constructed his "Earthly" City upon atheism and a materialistic interpretation of nature. Both structures, erected upon the foundations of reason and natural law, bore the weaknesses of the building materials. Voltaire realized the consequences of his concept of an absentee God and his deistic and mechanistic interpretation of nature, but avoided the logical application of his ideas so that he would not undermine morality. Diderot, more consistent than Voltaire, accepted the implications of his denial of God and his deification of matter; he recognized the relativity of morality, and eventually abandoned man to the laws of nature. Voltaire and Diderot were so impregnated with the fundamental precepts of their age that they submitted everything to the test of reason, and formulated all knowledge in terms of natural law. Their "Earthly" Cities, their concepts of God, matter, and the universe, which were founded on reason and natural law, tottered and fell under the attacks of Hume and Kant.

VOLTAIRE

General Characteristics of Voltaire's religious and moral ideas.

Voltaire adhered to the basic tenets of deism or natural religion throughout his lifetime. Belief in the existence of a vague, indefinite Supreme Being, and in man's obligation to live virtuously formed the core of his religious and moral ideas. The universe, to Voltaire, was an intricate mechanism governed by external, immutable laws; human reason, unaided by revelation, could deduce these physical and moral laws. His God was the prime mover, the external geometrician who had wound up and set in motion the Newtonian world-machine; his moral code incorporated the principles of morality common to mankind; but both his concept of God and his concept of morality lack clarity and consistency.

Voltaire opposed both the anthropomorphism of the Christians and the materialism of the atheists, even though he confessed ignorance as to the true nature and essence of God. He separated God from matter, but declared the latter to be eternal emanations of the former; he affirmed the liberty of divine will, but subjected it to immutable natural laws; he exhorted adoration of the Divinity, but denied the efficacy of prayer; he proclaimed a rewarding and avenging God, but rejected the immortality of the soul and abstained from judging divine justice. Voltaire realized that the exigencies of morality would necessitate



certain inconsistencies in his concept of God; natural religion adequately sustained the philosopher, but the common people needed a stronger incentive to virtue. The need to maintain morality, however, does not account for all his self-contradictions. After establishing the existence of God upon a mechanistic interpretation of nature, Voltaire refused to accept the logical consequences of his basic propositions; he preferred to cloak his inconsistency with a profession of ignorance.

"Philosophy gives us ample evidence to prove that there is a God, but it is powerless to teach us who he is, or what he does, or how and why he does it. It is my firm conviction that one must be God himself to know."<sup>1</sup>

Voltaire's moral code similarly lacks consistency. His concept of virtue, though distinct from metaphysics, was inherently attached to the existence of God. He denied innate ideas, and yet he admitted that God had fashioned all men with common concepts of justice and virtue. He recognized a universal natural law, but declared that virtue was obedience to social law. He sustained both an absolute and a relative moral code. These inconsistencies however, did not prevent Voltaire from extolling certain fundamental principles of morality which were

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1. Voltaire [François-Marie Arouet de], Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire (avec des avertissements et des notes par Condorcet; édition procurée par les soins de Desroix et sous la direction typographique de Letellier) (92 vols., Société Littéraire et typographique, [Kehl], 1785-89), vol. 38, p. 35; Éléments de la philosophie de Newton. Hereafter cited as Voltaire, Oeuvres. This passage is a free translation by the author. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from both the works of Voltaire and those of Diderot will be free translations by the author.



necessary for both individual happiness and the social good. Starting from two basic axioms: God and virtue, Voltaire realized the insufficiency of the rational approach to ultimate truth, but he refused to advance towards atheism or to withdraw to pietism. Voltaire continued to defend deism and natural religion long after more profound thinkers had abandoned its basic tenets.

#### Voltaire's concept of God.

Two conclusive arguments, long traditional with the theists - that of design and that of the necessity of a first cause - sustained Voltaire's belief in the existence of a Supreme Being. "There are two ways to arrive at the notion that there is a Being who presides over the universe," wrote Voltaire; his arguments reveal the positive nature of his Divinity.

When I see a watch whose hands mark the hours, I conclude that an intelligent being has arranged the springs of this mechanism so that its hands will mark the hours. Likewise, when I see the springs of the human body I conclude that an intelligent being has arranged these organs that they might be received and nourished for nine months in the womb..... The universe is beyond my comprehension; I cannot imagine that this watch exists without a watchmaker.<sup>2</sup>

The world, harmoniously and intricately ordered according to the laws of Newtonian physics, must have had an external architect for its construction. Voltaire's Supreme Being was this intelligent

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2. Voltaire, Coeuvres, vol. 20, p. 22; Traité de la métaphysique; vol. 14, p. 270; Les Cabales.

designer of the universe.

"From this argument alone [Voltaire continued], I can conclude nothing but the probability that an intelligent superior being has cleverly prepared and fashioned matter; I do not conclude that this being has created matter out of nothing; that he must be infinite in every sense."<sup>3</sup> Voltaire saw the connection in these ideas only through the metaphysical argument of the necessity of a first cause.

I exist therefore, something exists. If something exists, then something must have existed from all eternity; for whatever is, either exists through itself, or has received its being from something else. If through itself, it exists necessarily; it has always existed necessarily; it is God. If it has received its being from something else, and this second from a third, that from which the last has received its being must necessarily be God.... I am forced to admit that there is a being which exists necessarily by itself for all eternity, and which is the origin of all other things.<sup>4</sup>

Voltaire thereupon concluded that this being could not be material world: matter had no necessary, absolute existence, no movement, no intelligence.

If this material world exists by itself from absolute necessity, then it is a contradiction in terms to suppose that the least part of this universe can be other than what it is; for if it exists at this moment from absolute necessity, this word alone excludes all other manner of being. But this table on which I am writing, this pen which I am using have not always been what they are..... Then, if each part does not exist of absolute necessity, the whole cannot possibly exist by itself. I produce movement; hence, movement did not exist before and.... is not essential to matter.... Matter receives it elsewhere.... from God. Similarly, intelligence is not essential to matter: for neither a rock nor a grain of wheat think. Then, from whom

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3. Ibid., vol. 40, p. 22; Traité de la métaphysique.

4. Ibid., pp. 23, 24.

have the particles of matter which think and feel received sensation and thought? Not from themselves, since they think in spite of themselves; not from matter in general, since thought and sensations do not belong to the essence of matter; therefore, they must have received these gifts from the hand of the supreme, intelligent, infinite Being - the original cause of all things.<sup>5</sup>

From these proofs, Voltaire concluded that there must be a prime mover, an intelligent designer of the universe, a source of movement and thought; but he was unable to ascertain additional, positive attributes of his Divinity.

The problem of creation and matter confused his ideas on the nature of the Supreme Being. Voltaire could not decide whether God had created matter out of nothing, whether matter was co-eternal with God, or whether God had drawn matter from his own being, in which case the universe would form essentially part of the divine essence.<sup>6</sup> "God is not in the case of causes which we understand; he has been able to create spirit and matter without being either spirit or matter; neither the one, nor the other are derived from him, but created by him."<sup>7</sup> To escape so obvious a problem, Voltaire avoided it completely by questioning the idea of creation. "We have no adequate notion of the divinity..... Reason alone proves that a being has arranged the matter of the universe, but reason is powerless to prove that he has created this matter, that he has drawn it out of nothing."<sup>8</sup>

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5. *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 25.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

8. *Ibid.*, vol. 50, pp. 198, 199; *Dictionnaire philosophique*; article, "Dieu, dieux."

In his proofs of the existence of God, Voltaire had distinguished between the eternal creator and the created; he then realized that matter might also be external, and, in the end, preferred to recognize the eternal quality of matter, as well as that of God, rather than admit that God had created something out of nothing. To the criticism that this was Manichaeism, a recognition of two chief principles, Voltaire replied: "It is conceivable that stones exist which an architect has not yet fashioned. If he constructs an immense building with them, it does not follow that there are two architects; it merely signifies the necessary obedience of brute stone to the power of genius."<sup>9</sup> Since no certainty could be attached to either concept, Voltaire attempted to solve the difficulty by proclaiming matter to be an eternal emanation of the eternal being whose inherent characteristic was movement.

[There is an eternal geometrician.] His essence is to produce. He exists necessarily; therefore, all that exists in him is essentially necessary. A being cannot be divested of his essence; for then he would cease to be. God is active, therefore, he has always acted,..... [and] the world is an eternal emanation of himself; therefore, whoever admits a God must admit an eternal world.<sup>10</sup>

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9. Voltaire (François-Marie Arouet de), Dictionnaire philosophique, comprenant les 118 articles parus sur ce titre du vivant de Voltaire avec leurs suppléments parus dans "Les questions sur l'Encyclopédie," avec introduction, variantes, et notes par Julien Benda, texte établi par Raymond Naves (2 vols., Garnier Frères, Paris, [1936]), I: 126; article "Matière". Hereafter cited as Voltaire, Dictionnaire philosophique.

10. Voltaire (François-Marie Arouet de), Dialogues et anecdotes philosophiques, avec introduction, notes, et rapprochements par Raymond Naves (Garnier Frères, Paris, c. 1940), p. 341; L'A.B.C. Hereafter cited as Voltaire, Dialogues.

Voltaire foresaw the logical consequences of this concept: matter coming eternally from God eternally incorporated into matter would lead to an identification of God and matter; two separate entities - the creator and the created - would, in fact, become one; God would be dissolved into the mathematical order of nature. Voltaire's efforts to clarify his concept of the Supreme Being led him to the God-Nature of Spinoza, but rather than admit pantheism, Voltaire retreated, in defeat, to his first basic propositions. "I, myself, am sure of nothing. I believe that there is an intelligent being, a formative power, a God. I grope in the dark concerning all the rest."<sup>11</sup>

In spite of the difficulties entailed in the hypothesis of a Divinity, Voltaire never accepted a materialistic interpretation of nature. Two proofs had established the existence of God; two arguments disposed of atheism. Even though Voltaire might have conceived movement to be an inherent property of matter, he could never admit that the movement of matter alone had produced the universe such as it existed.

This supposition seems prodigiously ridiculous to me for two reasons: first, there are, in this universe, intelligent beings, and you can never prove that it be possible for movement alone to produce understanding; second, there is an infinity against one to bet that an intelligent, formative cause animates the universe.<sup>12</sup>

Should matter, merely through change and self-variation, without a special gift of God, produce thought, then God would be dissolved in his own creation; the organizing intelligence would

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11. *Ibid.*, p. 343.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 339.



become indistinguishable from the organized world;<sup>13</sup> pantheism and even atheism would supplant deism. Voltaire disarmed the atheists by re-affirming God to be the source of movement and thought. His concept of the universe determined his concept of God. The world, to Voltaire, was an intricate mechanism, nature was pure art, designed by an eternal geometrician.

I have always... recognized, in nature, a supreme power, as intelligent as he is powerful, who has disposed the universe such as we see it. I have never been able to think... that chance, which is nothing, has been able to do everything. As I saw the whole of nature subject to constant laws, I have recognized a legislator; and as all the stars move according to the rules of eternal<sup>14</sup> mathematics, I have recognized... the eternal Geometrician.<sup>14</sup>

Thereupon, Voltaire faced the difficulty of reconciling his belief in an all-powerful Supreme Being with his concept of the universe governed by eternal, immutable, mathematical laws. "The mathematical laws are immutable - that is true; but it was not necessary that the earth be placed where it is; no mathematical law can act without movement; movement does not exist by itself; thus you must have recourse to a prime mover."<sup>15</sup> God according to Voltaire, was free to determine the immutable laws of the universe; thereupon, he became subject to them. "God is the slave of his own will, of his own wisdom, of the laws which he has established, of his proper nature. He cannot alter their course because he cannot be weak, fickle and inconstant."<sup>16</sup>

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13. Gustave Lanson, Voltaire (Paris, 1924), p. 65. Hereafter cited as Lanson, Voltaire.

14. Voltaire, Dialogues, p. 391; Euphronime et Adéas.

15. Voltaire, Oeuvres, vol. 40, p. 33; Traité de la métaphysique

16. Voltaire [François-Marie Arouet de], Romans et contes, texte établi sur l'édition de 1775, avec une présentation et des notes par Henri Banac, (Garnier Frères, Paris, c. 1938), p. 558; Les pailles du comte de Chesterfield. Hereafter cited as Voltaire, Romans.

Lacking absolute free will, however, Voltaire's Divinity could hardly be called a Supreme Being. This apparent contradiction, Voltaire rationalized by his concept of liberty.

Liberty is uniquely the power to act..... To act and to will are precisely the same as to be free. God himself can be free only in this sense. He has willed and he has acted according to his will. If you supposed his will to be necessarily determined, if you said: "He has necessarily done what he has done;" you would fall into as great an absurdity as if you said: "There is one God and there is no God." For if God were necessity, he would no longer be God. Liberty in God is the power to think always what he wishes, and to operate always what he wishes.<sup>17</sup>

Thus the liberty of Voltaire's Supreme Being was merely the power to execute eternally his eternal will as manifested in the immutable laws of nature.

Having reduced divine liberty to determinism, Voltaire denied the miraculous. "A miracle is the violation of mathematical, divine, immutable, eternal laws. By this exposition alone, a miracle is a contradiction in terms: a law cannot be immutable and at the same time violated."<sup>18</sup> Even God, who had established the laws of the universe, could not suspend their operation. To maintain that God would interfere in favour of man was pure anthropomorphism. "Is it not the most absurd of follies to imagine that the infinite being would invert, in favour of three or four hundred ants inhabiting this small mass of mud, the eternal play of those immense springs which move the whole universe."<sup>19</sup> Voltaire's Divinity was the impersonal,

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17. Voltaire, Oeuvres, vol. 40, pp. 65, 68, 69; Traité de la métaphysique.

18. Ibid., vol. 53, p. 435; Dictionnaire philosophique; article, "Miracles."

19. Ibid., p. 436.

impartial Supreme Being of the deists, who, having wound up the world-machine, to use his own well-worn phrase, remained aloof from his creation.

On a similar basis, Voltaire declared the inefficacy of prayer.

The Eternal has his designs for all eternity. If prayer accords with his immutable will, it is useless to ask of him what he has resolved to do. If you entreat him to do the contrary of what he has resolved, you entreat him to be weak, fickle and inconstant; then, you believe him such, you mock him. Either you ask him for a just thing, in which case he owes it and will do it without your praying for it (by entreating him, you show distrust); or the thing is unjust, and your prayers are an outrage. You are worthy or unworthy of the grace which you implore; if worthy, he does it better than you; if unworthy, you commit an additional crime by asking for what you do not merit.<sup>20</sup>

Prayer, to Voltaire, was merely another manifestation of anthropomorphism.

If the immutable will of God, ordering everything for all eternity, precluded divine intervention in human affairs, and the efficacy of prayer, Voltaire still admitted a kind of prayer in adoration of his Divinity.

God of all stars and all beings, the only prayer which might become you is submission; for what can be asked of him who has ordered everything, foreseen everything, enchained everything, since the origin of things? If, however, we might be permitted to present our needs to a father, conserve in our hearts this very submission, conserve there your pure religion, ward off all superstition.... Preserve the purity of our customs, the friendship which our brothers bear for one another, the kindness they manifest to all men, their obedience to the laws, their wisdom in their private conduct; let them live and let them die adoring but one God, the rewarder of good, the avenger of evil, a God which can neither be born nor die, nor have

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20. Ibid., vol. 54, pp. 318, 319; Dictionnaire philosophique; article, "Prières."



associates, but who has in this world too many rebellious children.<sup>21</sup>

Voltaire's prayer recognized a God, who inspired worship, and who was also the rewarder and avenger; but this was denied in any personal sense by his concept of a God without free will, as well as by his denial of the immortality of the soul. If the soul were material, if the dissolution of the organs terminated the existence of man, how and when would this God act to reward and avenge? "I do not guarantee that I have demonstrations against the spirituality and the immortality of the soul, but all probabilities are against it."<sup>22</sup> God, to Voltaire, was the source of human feeling and thought; man was but an automaton in divine hands; it was unlikely that the soul survive the body. Voltaire summarized his argument against the immortality of the soul. "..... [Man is but] the perishable instrument of an eternal power. Judge yourself if the instrument can still play when it no longer exists, if it would not be an evident contradiction. Judge..... if, in admitting a sovereign creator, you can admit beings who survive him."<sup>23</sup> Was God, then, the rewarder and avenger of individuals who perished entirely? Even though it led him to basic inconsistencies, Voltaire concluded: "For the common good of all miserable thinking beings, one must weigh the advantages of admitting a God, rewarder and avenger who serves both as a restraint and as a

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21. Voltaire, Dialogues, p. 522; Sermon des cinquantes.

22. Voltaire, Oeuvres, vol. 40, p.64; Traité de la métaphysique.

23. Voltaire, Dialogues, p. 392; Sophonime et Adélos.

consolation, or of rejecting this idea and abandoning man to hopeless calamities and remorseless crimes." <sup>24</sup> To Voltaire, there was no choice.

The belief in a God, rewarder of good actions, punisher of evil deeds, pardoner of light faults, is the most useful of beliefs for the human race; it is the only check for powerful men who insolently commit public crimes; it is the only check for men who adroitly commit secret crimes.<sup>25</sup>

The fear and love of God prevented ordinary men from turning <sup>26</sup> to crime, and facilitated government; but was this concept essential to the philosopher?

Can a nation of atheists exist? I believe that you must distinguish between a nation, properly speaking, and a society of atheists above the nation. It is only too true that, in every country, the populace need a very great restraint, and that if Bayle had had only five or six hundred peasants to govern, he would not have failed to tell them of a God who would reward the virtuous and punish the wicked. But Bayle would never have spoken of him to the Epicureans who were wealthy men, fond of repose, cultivating all social virtues, especially that of friendship, fleeing the encumbrance and danger of public affairs, and leading an innocent, comfortable life.<sup>27</sup>

Thus Voltaire implied that the philosopher could abstain from such a concept, that he had no need to adorn his deity with such attributes.

By suggesting that God was the avenger of vice and the rewarder of virtue, however, Voltaire admitted the presence of evil in the universe. Did this imply lack of power in the Supreme Being? Voltaire posed the same questions as Epicurus:

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24. Voltaire, Dictionnaire philosophique, I: 399; article "Dieu, section V."

25. Voltaire, Romans, p. 547; Histoire de Jenni.

26. Voltaire, Dictionnaire philosophique, I: 401; article "Dieu, Section V."

27. Ibid., I: 339; article, "Athée, section I."

Either God wants to prevent evil in this world and cannot do it, or he can do it and will not, or he neither wishes to nor can do it, or he both wishes to and can do it. If he has the desire without the power, he is impotent, which is contrary to the nature of God; if he has the power and not the desire, he is malicious; this is no less contrary to his nature; if he has neither the power nor the desire, he is both impotent and evil, and is consequently not God; if he has the desire, and the power, from whence then comes the evil?<sup>28</sup>

Both anti-Pascal and anti-Leibnitz, Voltaire steered a middle <sup>29</sup> course between jansenism and optimism. This was not the best possible of worlds; nor was man in a miserable state of depravity; everything tended towards the best. If everything was not good, everything was passable. <sup>30</sup> Evil was neither a quality of matter nor an inherent quality of God. From the existence of evil it did not follow that God, the perfect and universal being, lacked the ability to create a perfectly ordered universe. <sup>31</sup> "His will can have nothing to do with choosing indifferently between good and evil, since there is neither good nor evil for him. If he did not do good necessarily by a will necessarily determined, he would do it without reason, without cause, which would be absurd." <sup>32</sup> Voltaire concluded that God acted in a way which ordinary man called arbitrary, but which in reality accorded with predetermined reasons which the finite human mind would forever fail to comprehend. <sup>33</sup> Evil, in fact,

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28. *Ibid.*, I: 77, 78; article, "Tout est bien."

29. Voltaire, *Dialogues*, p. 514; notes of L'A.B.C.

30. Voltaire, *Romans*, p. 80; *Le monde comme il va*.

31. Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique*, I: 80-82; article "Tout est bien."

32. Voltaire, *Dialogues*, p. 394; *Sophonime et Adélos*.

33. Voltaire, *Oeuvres*, vol. 38, pp. 43, 45; *Eléments de la philosophie de Newton*.

did not exist, but was merely a word used by men who had failed to understand divine will.

With regard to the reproaches of injustice and cruelty which are heaped upon God, I reply that supposing there is moral evil (which appears chimerical to me), this moral evil is also as impossible to explain in the system of matter as in the idea of God. I reply that we have no other idea of justice than that which we ourselves have formed of all action useful to society and in conformity to laws established by us for the common good; and this idea, being only the idea of relations of man to man, can have no analogy to God. It is as absurd to say of God, in this sense, that God is just or unjust, as to say that God is blue or square. It is therefore foolish to reproach God for the fact that flies are eaten by spiders, that men live only eighty years, that men abuse their liberty to destroy one another... To affirm that a thing is bad, we must conceive something better. We can not judge that a machine is imperfect by the idea of perfection which it lacks; we cannot, for example, judge that the three sides of a triangle are unequal if we have no idea of an equilateral triangle....<sup>34</sup>

How then, could man judge divine wisdom?

Voltaire's concept of God remained vague and confused; each attempt at clarification led to further contradiction and inconsistency. Although he believed the idea of God to be just as essential to mankind as a physical body, Voltaire was unable to define precisely the nature and attributes of his deity. "Is it possible that the knowledge of God, our creator, our preserver, our everything, is less necessary to man than a nose and five fingers? All men are born with a nose and five fingers, yet none is born with the knowledge of God."<sup>35</sup> Unfortunately, the idea of God was not inseparable from human intelligence and had to be reached, the same as every other idea of science, through a more or less laborious effort of

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34. *Ibid.*, vol. 40, p. 35; *Traité de la métaphysique*.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

reasoning. Even when achieved, no certainty could be attached to the idea of God. Multiple variations inevitably resulted.<sup>36</sup> Voltaire's God was the great unknown, the supreme intelligence, the eternal geometrician who governed the universe in accordance with eternal, immutable laws. His God was the primordial and final cause of everything, distinct from matter, yet eternally active in matter; divine providence never extended to individuals; man must adore not entreat the Divinity. His God was the avenger and rewarder of individuals who perished entirely; divine purpose was incomprehensible to man; his Supreme Being was the God of philosophy and reason. To Voltaire, it was useless to speculate beyond these basic principles on the nature of the Divinity. It mattered little whether God was in one particular place, beyond space or everywhere; it mattered little whether God saw the future as future or present, whether matter was eternal, whether God was corporal or spiritual. If these discussions did not create better husbands, fathers, masters, and citizens, what good did they do? How much more essential it was to cultivate virtue, to act kindly, to combat superstition and fanaticism, to propagate tolerance.<sup>37</sup>

Voltaire, through the medium of Dondindae, a simple Scythian, renewed his profession of ignorance. In reply to the endless questioning of Sogomachas, a learned theologian of

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36. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

37. Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique*, I: 235, 236; article, "Dieu".

Constantinople, Dondindae said:

I will tell you what happened to me one day. I had just finished building an arbor at the end of my garden, when I heard a mole arguing with a bumble-bee. "There is a beautiful construction," said the mole; "a very powerful mole must have erected that edifice." "You are mistaken," cried the bumble-bee; "the architect of this building is certainly a bumble-bee of great genius." Since that day I have abstained from vain discussion.<sup>38</sup>

Voltaire reached the conclusion that the deepest searchings of a disinterested mind could define the Supreme Being in terms no more exalted than those of man himself. God, to Voltaire, was a social necessity, the fundamental basis of his moral code.

#### Voltaire's concept of morality.

From his basic axioms: the existence of a vague, indefinite Supreme Being, and man's obligation to virtuous living, Voltaire deduced a moral code. Just as there was confusion and contradiction in his concept of God, so there were inconsistencies in his concept of morality. Voltaire accepted the Supreme Being as a base but not as a sanction for his moral code.<sup>39</sup> Even though he detached morality from metaphysics, he attached the concept of virtue to a belief in God. His denial of innate ideas did not exclude a common concept of justice and injustice, of good and evil, which was based on conscience. Although he recognized a universal, natural law, distinct from convention

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38. Ibid., p. 237.

39. Lanson, Voltaire, p. 178.



and arbitrary usages, he also declared that virtue was obedience to social law. He elaborated two moral codes: one absolute, one relative. In spite of his self-contradictions, however, Voltaire extolled certain fundamental principles of morality, which were the basis of society, as consistently as he maintained the existence of God.

Morality, to Voltaire, though theoretically independent of metaphysics, was, in fact, ineffably attached to his belief in God, whose existence he accepted through metaphysical argument.

Happily, whatever system we embrace, none harms morality; for what difference does it make if matter is created or merely arranged? God is equally our absolute master. We should be equally virtuous living on a chaos which has disentangled itself as on a chaos which has been drawn from nothing; almost none of these metaphysical questions influences the conduct of life.<sup>40</sup>

However, Voltaire's concept of virtue, the core of his moral code, took different forms.

Voltaire, at times, seemed to recognize a natural law, independent of all human conventions, a universal criterion of good and evil, of virtue and vice, of justice and injustice, which was inspired by God.

In truth, God has not said to man: "Here are the laws which I give you from my mouth, by which I want you to govern yourselves;" but he has created in man what he has created in other animals. He has given man certain feelings from which he can never detach himself. We are born for example, with the desire for the well-being of our species, and we always act in accordance with this instinct unless our own particular good comes into conflict with

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<sup>40</sup>. Voltaire, Dictionnaire philosophique, I: 126; article, "Matière".

the general good, in which case self-interest predominates. Thus, man tends to help his fellow when it does not cost him anything.<sup>41</sup>

God, according to Voltaire, had not sanctioned any particular moral code, but had created each individual with the faculty for receiving and applying the basic principles of natural law.

"Show me a country where it is honest to steal from me the fruit of my labour, to violate my promise, to lie in order to harm, to slander, to assassinate, to poison, to be ungrateful towards my benefactor, to beat my mother and father when they offer me nourishment."<sup>42</sup>

The maxims of Confucius were an expression of this law: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you; forget the injuries done to you, but remember the kind deeds."<sup>43</sup>

In fact, Voltaire concluded that the ideas of justice and injustice were as clear and as universal as the ideas of health and sickness, of truth and falsity, of convenience and inconvenience.<sup>44</sup>

God, according to Voltaire, inspired in man the idea of justice; God was the source of morality. "Who has given us the feeling of the just and the unjust? God, who has given us a brain and a heart... Morality is one, it comes from God."<sup>45</sup>

Having recognized a natural law of morality as imparted

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41. Voltaire, Oeuvres, vol. 40, p. 85; Traité de la métaphysique.

42. Voltaire, Dialogues, p. 281; L'A.B.C.

43. Ibid., p. 306.

44. Voltaire, Oeuvres, vol. 40 p. 163; La philosophe ignorant.

45. Ibid., vol. 52, pp. 439, 441; Dictionnaire philosophique; article, "Du juste et de l'injuste."



to man, through God, Voltaire was forced to reconcile this concept with his rejection of innate ideas.

I agree with Locke [he wrote] that there are no innate ideas, no innate principles of truth; for children are not born with the idea of God; otherwise, all would have the same idea. We are not born with developed principles of morality; otherwise, all nations would have the same principles, since they would be engraved on the heart of each individual.<sup>46</sup>

Realizing the consequences of this declaration in destroying social unity, Voltaire restated his views in a way which asserted that all men were constitutionally created to reach the same ideas of morality even though the ideas were not planted full-blown in their minds.

Locke was an avowed theist [Voltaire wrote]. I have been surprised to find in the chapter on innate ideas of the great philosopher that all men have different ideas of justice. If that were so, morality would no longer be imparted to man; there would be no longer a natural religion..... There is no innate knowledge for the same reason that there is no tree which bears leaves and fruit when it first grows out of the earth. Nothing is what people call innate; that is, born developed; but..... God causes us to be born with organs which, as they grow, make us feel all things that ~~our~~ species must feel for the conservation of the species..... It is merely a question of using our reason to distinguish the shades of honesty and dishonesty. Good and evil often border; our passions confuse them. Who will enlighten our concepts? Ourselves, when we are calm. Whoever has written on our duties has well written, in all the countries of the world, if he has written only with his reason.<sup>47</sup>

Voltaire believed that God planted in each mind the seeds of potential moral knowledge, seed which, when grown into plants,

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46. Ibid., vol. 40, p. 167; Le philosophe ignorant.  
47. Ibid., vol. 48, p. 318; Dictionnaire philosophique; article, "Athee"; vol. 52, pp. 439, 440; article "Du juste et de l'injuste".

produced universally in all minds the identical concepts of good and evil; reason, in such a process, consisted neither in systematic thought, nor in empirical investigation, but in moral introspection. Voltaire concluded that man's conscience - human instinct guided by reason - could ascertain natural law. His denial of innate ideas did not exclude conscience.

Having formulated an absolute moral code, inspired by God and based on natural law, on common notions of justice, virtue, and good, Voltaire rationalized a second, a relative code. Natural law, according to Voltaire, was also self-interest and reason;<sup>48</sup> man guided by reason in pursuit of his own particular good. Each individual would, henceforth, decide in terms of his personal well-being, the criterion of good and evil, of virtue and vice.

Good actions are but the actions from which we draw an advantage; .... crimes, the actions which are contrary to us.... There is no good in itself, independent of man; there is not good in itself, independent of the physical. Our physical good and bad have existence only in connection with us; why should our moral, good and bad, be otherwise?.... If a sheep should say to a wolf: "You lack moral good and God will punish you," the wolf would reply: "I am fulfilling my physical good, and apparently God does not care too much whether I eat you or not." The wisest conduct on the part of the sheep would be to remain close to the guardian shepherd and to the protecting hound.<sup>49</sup>

This relative concept of morality, Voltaire translated into terms of society, of the general good. "Virtue and vice, moral good and evil are in every country that which is useful or harmful

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48. Voltaire, Dialogues, p. 272; L'A.B.C.

49. Voltaire, Oeuvres, vol. 40, pp. 84, 88; Traité de la métaphysique.

to the society.... Virtue is the habit of doing those things which please men, and vice, the habit of doing those things which displease them. Virtue in one climate may be vice in another."<sup>50</sup> Theft, dishonesty, incest, adultery, fratricide - all were condoned or discredited according to the particular and the general good.<sup>51</sup> Voltaire concluded that every reasonable man would see that it was to his interest to be an honest man in accordance with the laws and conventions of his society. If, however, individual interpretation of personal well-being determined the criterion of morality, if moral good and evil had no existence apart from man, an individual might seek his own well-being in upsetting society, in killing, in stealing and slandering when such conduct was not sanctioned by society. Voltaire realized the consequences of his relative concept of morality, but could merely reply: "I have nothing to say to those men but that they will probably be hung..... It is precisely for them that laws are made."<sup>52</sup> If, however, the fear of physical punishment did not restrain crime, a kind of innate pride, which caused man to suffer if hated and despised, would guarantee virtuous conduct.

There is certainly a punishment more true, more inevitable for criminals in this world [than physical punishment] . What is it? Remorse which never fails, and human vengeance, which rarely

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50. Ibid., pp. 84, 85.  
51. Ibid., pp. 86, 87.  
52. Ibid., p. 89.

fails. I have known men, very evil and very atrocious; I have never seen one of them happy.... If crime is thus punished, virtue is recompensed, not by the Elysian fields, where the body walks insipidly about, after it ceases to exist; but during life, by the inner peace of having done one's duty, by tranquility of heart, by the applause of nations, and the friendship of honest men.<sup>53</sup>

Through this logic, Voltaire elaborated his second code of morality, a relative system based on a particular social group. Both the foundation on the Supreme Being and the universal element were absent, and virtue had lost its traditional meaning.

In spite of this denial of an absolute moral code, Voltaire continually maintained that there was a universal concept of morality inherent in the basic elements of human nature. "God has accorded.... [man] self-love which is useful to him; benevolence which is useful to his fellow; anger which is dangerous, compassion which disarms it; sympathy for several of his companions, antipathy towards others. Many needs, much industry, instinct, reason, passion - that is man."<sup>54</sup> Voltaire believed that man's natural inclinations, the gift of God, would guide him along the true path of good, of justice, of virtue. Human instincts were so favorably balanced that man would invariably seek both his own particular good and the collective well-being. Conventions and arbitrary usages, laws and dogmas, might differ - they were human; but certain fundamental principles of morality, essential to social living, never varied - they were divine. Man according to Voltaire, had only to believe in a pure, rational

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53. Voltaire, Dialogues, pp. 393, 394; Sophromine et Adélos.

54. Ibid., p. 280; L'A.B.C.

Supreme Being in order to be virtuous. "Atheism and fanaticism are the two poles of a universe of confusion and horror. The narrow zone of virtue is between these two poles. Walk with a firm step down this path; believe in a bountiful God, and be good. That is all that the great legislators..... ask of their people."<sup>55</sup> Voltaire summarized his views on religion and morality in his advice to mankind:

Continue to cultivate virtue, to be benevolent, to regard all superstition with horror or pity;.....adore with me the design which is manifested throughout the whole of nature, and consequently the author of this design, the primordial and final cause of everything; hope with me that our monad which reasons on the great eternal Being may be happy by the grace of this Great Being himself.<sup>56</sup>

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55. Voltaire, Romans, p. 547; Histoire de Jenni.

56. Voltaire, Dictionnaire philosophique, I: 400; article "Dieu, section V."

## DIDEROT

### General characteristics of Diderot's religious and moral ideas.

Diderot's ideas on religion and morality tended to change in definite and parallel directions during his lifetime. In 1745, he was a theist, accepting conventional Christian morality; by 1746, he had become a deist, advocating a rational sensualism; by 1754, he was an atheist, professing a hedonistic utilitarianism. His desire to synthesize knowledge into a rational interpretation of nature and of morality, according to the fundamental precepts of his age - reason and natural law - compelled him to follow his doctrines to their logical conclusions. Diderot considered it inevitable that natural religion should give way to the religion of nature; that the mechanistic interpretation of nature should cede to the materialistic interpretation;<sup>1</sup> that absolute morality should yield to relative morality.

### Development of Diderot's thought from deism to atheism and his materialistic interpretation of nature.

As Diderot successively embraced the dominant creeds of his age, his concept of Divinity progressed from the anthropomorphic God of the theists, to the intelligent designer of the deists, to the God-nature of the pantheists, and finally to the eternal matter of the atheists. This transition from deism to atheism

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1. Louis Ducros, Diderot, l'homme et l'écrivain (Paris, 1894) p. 312. Hereafter cited as Ducros, Diderot.

(for theism and pantheism were momentary creeds) can be traced in his works from his first philosophic treatise, Essai sur le mérite et la vertu, in 1745, to his Rensées sur l'interprétation de la nature, in 1754, and his Rêve de d'Alembert, in 1769, and can be studied most systematically in the same chronological order.

When Diderot published Essai sur le mérite et la vertu, in 1745, a translation of Shaftesbury's essay of the same title, his ideas had not yet begun to take decisive form. Diderot adhered faithfully to the English original in the body of his text, but, because he was still influenced by Catholicism, he carefully annotated passages on God and Christian morality which might have been interpreted as favoring deism.<sup>2</sup> His defense of Shaftesbury as a theist, whose belief in God admitted revelation, rather than a deist, whose belief denied revelation,<sup>3</sup> indicated Diderot's preference for theism. Both Diderot, at this time, and Shaftesbury considered theism to be the root of all religions.<sup>4</sup> Their purposes fused in their desire to show that virtue was almost indivisibly attached to the knowledge of God and that the temporal happiness of man was inseparable from virtue.<sup>5</sup> "No virtue without a belief in God; no happiness without virtue."<sup>6</sup> Their common adversaries were the atheists, "who

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2. Ibid., p. 311.

3. Denis Diderot, Oeuvres complètes de Denis Diderot (6 vols., Paris, 1818-1819), I: 8. Hereafter cited as Diderot, Oeuvres.

4. Ibid., I:7

5. Ibid., I:6

6. Ibid.



are particularly proud of their probity, and men without probity who extol their happiness."<sup>7</sup>

For Diderot, at this time, as for the deists and the theists, the marvels of nature proved the existence of a Supreme Being. He attributed atheism to either the lack of reflection or the lack of intelligence. His footnotes expanded Shaftesbury's original text.

The miracles of nature are exposed to our eyes long before we possess reason enough to be enlightened about them. If we came into this world with that reason which we possess when we enter the Opera for the first time, if the curtain suddenly rose, struck by the grandeur, the magnificence, and the variety of the scenery, we would not have the strength to deny consciousness of the eternal workman who has prepared the spectacle; but who dares to marvel at what one has seen for fifty years? Some, occupied with their needs, have hardly had the time to devote to metaphysical speculations. The rising of the sun would call them to work; the most beautiful night.... would be dumb for them, or would merely call them to rest. Others, less occupied, have neither had the occasion to question nature nor the intelligence to understand her reply.

Diderot's Divinity, however, was more than the intelligent designer of the universe; God was the source of virtue and happiness, the rewarder and avenger of mankind.<sup>9</sup> Diderot's notes on this point, also, were more explicit than the text and explained the consequences of associating God and morality. "Atheism leaves probity without a support. It does worse, it tends indirectly to depravity."<sup>10</sup> How Hobbes, who did not believe in God, remained a worthy citizen, a benevolent father,

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7. Ibid.
  8. Ibid., I: 40.
  9. Ibid., I: 25.
  10. Ibid., I: 48.



and a faithful friend, throughout his lifetime, Diderot could not explain adequately. "Men are not consistent; they offend a God whose existence they admit; they deny the existence of a God from whom they merit good; ... if one were to be astonished, it would not be because an atheist lives well, but because a Christian lives badly."<sup>11</sup> Diderot even ventured to praise Christianity on the grounds of its morality.

The purity of the [Christian] moral code permits one to presume the veracity of the cult; for if the moral code is corrupt, the cult which sanctions this degradation is proved false. What an advantage this simple reflection gives to Christianity above all other religions! What moral code is comparable to that of Jesus Christ!<sup>12</sup>

To doubt the sincerity of these passages would be to misunderstand Diderot's character. Ardent, passionate, enthusiastic, Diderot insisted on writing the whole truth as he saw it. In fact, even though the fate of his greatest accomplishment, the Encyclopedie lay in the balance, Diderot burned with anger because his ideas had been distorted secretly by the publisher who feared censorship.<sup>13</sup> Essai sur le mérite et la vertu proves that, in 1745, Diderot believed in God, the source of virtue and happiness; that he accepted the arguments of the deists (which were the same as those of the theists) proving the existence of God; and that he refrained from a rejection of revelation. His attitude seems to have been a fusion of theism

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11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., I: 3

13. Joseph Reinach, Diderot (Paris, 1894), p. 70. Hereafter cited as Reinach, Diderot.

and deism.

Rensées philosophiques, published in 1746, marks the beginning of Diderot's digressions from his first semi-theistic propositions, the second step in his incessant gropings after truth in accordance with the dictates of reason and natural law. This essay is a curious conglomeration of reflexions on deism and atheism, and of attacks on miracles and revelation, which indicate the still indecisive state of his thought. It is difficult to determine whether the contemplation of the probity and virtue of atheists in contrast with the dishonesty and immorality of Christians, or the recognition of the weaknesses of Shaftesbury's reasoning altered Diderot's thought. Reinach attributes the change to the latter cause: as the engineer is the first to perceive the imperfections of his structure, so the translator (Diderot) soon saw the defects of Shaftesbury's  
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essay.

"I write of God"<sup>15</sup> declared Diderot in his dedicatorial preface to Rensées philosophiques; he faithfully adhered to the belief in God. While failing to clarify his own concept of the Divinity, he repudiated the severe, vengeful God of the Christians. "The habitual portrayal of the Supreme Being with his inclination to wrath and his vindictive inclemency tempts the purest soul to wish that.... [such a God] did not exist."<sup>16</sup> This concept of the Divinity engendered fear, superstition and fanaticism which

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14. Ibid., p. 164.

15. Diderot, Oeuvres, I: 105.

16. Ibid., I: 106.

were more harmful to God than atheism.<sup>17</sup> Nor could infinite mercy be attributed to God. "One must not imagine God either too good or too wicked."<sup>18</sup> Though Diderot ventured little beyond this negative aspect, he maintained his fundamental belief; as yet, he could not envisage atheism. He detested those who falsely denied God; he pitied those who sincerely could not believe because they had lost all consolation.<sup>19</sup> Diderot believed that the deist, not the Christian nor the metaphysicist, could most convincingly persuade the atheist of his error.<sup>20</sup> A profound knowledge of natural phenomena formed the secure foundations for deist arguments<sup>21</sup> and the intelligent functioning of his mind confirmed his conclusions. Far from rejecting the methodical doubt, Diderot considered scepticism the first step towards truth, the veritable touch-stone; what had never been questioned had never been proved.<sup>22</sup> Doubt, according to Diderot, enabled the exercise of the faculty of reasoning, a divine gift whose sacrifice God did not exact; if reason were renounced, the mind would have no guide and would have to adopt a secondary principle, relegating all in question to the hypothetical.<sup>23</sup> Diderot relied on reason, not faith, to establish his belief and proof of God.

This same reason caused him to reject divine revelation

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- 17. Ibid., I: 107.
- 18. Ibid.
- 19. Ibid., II: 112.
- 20. Ibid., I: 107.
- 21. Ibid., I: 109.
- 22. Ibid., I: 114.
- 23. Ibid., I: 126.

and miracles, and to attack Christianity. He mocked the divine origin of the Scriptures: just as certain paintings, attributed to the hand of angels, violated all the rules of art, which the heavenly host must certainly know, and thereby proved the tradition to be false, so the Scriptures failed to match the works of profane authors, and could not be divinely inspired. In a similar way, Diderot dismissed miracles: though an entire nation bore witness to the miracles of Jesus Christ, he would more confidently rely on the authority of one profane author. The testimony of one honest man announcing an overwhelming victory by the king seemed more credible to him than that of the whole of Paris affirming the resurrection of a dead man at Passy. Diderot believed that the epoch of revelations, of prodigies and extraordinary missions had long since passed away; this superstructure of Christianity was no longer needed by religion. "It is not by miracles that one must judge the mission of a man but by the conformity of his doctrine with that of the people to whom he claims to be sent, especially when the doctrine of that people is proven true." This attack on the validity of Christianity, accompanied by the accusation that the religion of Jesus Christ converted the modern man to incredulity brought official condemnation of the work. Diderot

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24. *Ibid.*, I: 118. As sever a judgement was accorded the New Testament. "To prove the Gospels by a miracle is to prove an absurdity by a thing contrary to nature." (I: 127).

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*, I: 118.

27. *Ibid.*, I: 116.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*, I: 128.

30. Edmond Scherer, *Diderot, étude* (Paris, 1880), p. 74. Hereafter cited as Scherer, *Diderot*.

was so bold as to deny the Holy Trinity<sup>31</sup> and to mock the unity of divine will. According to the Roman Church: "God the father judges men worthy of his eternal vengeance; God the Son judges them worthy of his infinite mercy; the Holy Spirit remains neutral. How does this Catholic verbiage accord with the unity of divine will."<sup>32</sup> Thereupon, he reconsidered the possibility of truth in the teachings of the Church and pondered: "What will God do to those who have never heard of his son? Will he punish the deaf for not having heard?"<sup>33</sup> Into the category of those who had never heard of Jesus, he fitted all men whose conscience opposed a belief in Christ; within a few years, he would expand it to include those who denied God himself.

After having undermined the fundamental doctrines of Christianity, Diderot attempted to repair the damage in a way which merely aggravated it. Supposedly recognizing the superiority of Christianity to atheism, deism, Judaism, and Islam, he heaped ridicule on Christian apologetics: weight, according to Diderot, not truth tilted the balance in favour of the Christians.<sup>34</sup> Even his profession of faith mocked orthodox belief.

I was born in the Roman Catholic Apostolic Church, and I submit my being to its decisions. I want to die in the religion of my fathers and I believe it good to the extent that it is possible for one who has never had any immediate contact with the divinity and who has never been a witness to any miracle.<sup>35</sup>

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31. Diderot, *Oeuvres*, I: 124

32. *Ibid.*, I: 129.

33. *Ibid.*, I: 127.

34. *Ibid.*, I: 125.

35. *Ibid.*, I: 124.

The condemnation of Christian dogma was complete.

If reliance on revelation and miracles occasioned Diderot's censure, the rejection of superfluous trimmings evoked his praise; Diderot did not stilt his eulogy of natural religion, the most reasonable of creeds. In complete harmony with divine kindness and justice, natural religion taught the knowledge of essential truths and the practice of important duties.<sup>36</sup> Natural religion was based on human intelligence treating men as reasonable beings, since it proposed no concept beyond reason or contradictory to reason.<sup>37</sup> Mohammedan, Jew, Chinese and Christian, while maintaining the primacy of his own cult, agreed on naturalism as his second choice. "Hence," concluded Diderot "that to which is accorded second place by unanimous consent, and which cedes first place to none, incontestably merits first place."<sup>38</sup>

By this time Diderot had completely shaken off all traces of theism and had accepted deism and natural religion unconditionally. His mechanistic interpretation of nature facilitated a materialistic interpretation; because, in Diderot's concept, the activity of the Supreme Being was reduced to the minimum, God was easily suppressed. Even in 1746, while sincerely deploring the indifference of man towards God, his desire to vivify the concept of Divinity led to a fusion in his mind of God with nature, to pantheism.

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36. Ibid., I: 132, 134.

37. Ibid., I: 135.

38. Ibid.



Men have banished the Divinity from among themselves; they have relegated him to a sanctuary; the walls of a temple limit his view; he does not exist beyond. O foolish man! Destroy these barriers which narrow your ideas; enlarge God; see him everywhere he exists, or say that he is non-existent.<sup>39</sup>

Already the foundations were laid in his mind for materialistic atheism.

Diderot concealed his first denial of God behind the words of Saunderson, the imaginary English mathematician, of his Lettres sur les aveugles à l'usage de ceux qui voient. In this essay, published in 1749, he hesitated at the thought of openly avowing his atheism, preferring to agree with Voltaire in the latter's rejection of Saunderson's opinions.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps Diderot's conscience still hesitated, but his pen more frequently sustained than attacked the arguments which Saunderson addressed against the hypothesis of a Divinity. To the proof of God based on the marvels of nature, for example, Diderot's learned blind man replied:

Put aside the whole of this beautiful spectacle which has never been made for me! I have been condemned to pass my life in darkness; and you cite prodigies which I do not understand, which prove only for you and for those who see like you. If you want me to believe in God, you must have me touch him.<sup>41</sup>

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39. Ibid., I : 113.

40. Denis Diderot, Oeuvres choisies de Diderot précédées de sa vie par M.F. Génin (2 vols., Paris, n.d.), I : XIV, XV; vie de Diderot. Hereafter cited as Diderot, Oeuvres choisies.

41. Diderot, Oeuvres, I : 318.

The argument was weak; following such reasoning a man with normal sight could demand to see God.<sup>42</sup> Realizing the mediocrity of both the proof and the objection, Diderot boldly asserted the scientific inutility of supernatural intervention.<sup>43</sup>

If in our opinion a phenomena is beyond man, we immediately say, "It is the work of God;" our vanity is not contented with less. Can we not put into our speech less pride and more philosophy? If nature offers us a knot difficult to untie, let us leave it for what it is; and in order to cut it, let us not employ the hand of a being who then becomes a new knot more indissoluble for us than the first. Ask an Indian why the world rests suspended in the atmosphere; he will reply that it is carried on the back of an elephant; and on what does the elephant rest? On a tortoise; and what sustains the tortoise? .... This Indian moves you to pity. .... But one could say to you as to him.... My friend, before all, confess your own ignorance....<sup>44</sup>

God to Diderot, had become an irrational hypothesis, a word created merely to explain the universe.

Already, in Lettres sur les aveugles, Diderot envisaged a materialistic interpretation of nature. The strongest objection to atheism before this time had been the order and harmony of the actual system of things, which presupposed a prime mover, an eternal designer. This proof Diderot now considered inadequate. "If we were to go back to the beginning of matter and perceive the self-extraction of chaos, we should find a multitude of formless beings in proportion to a few well-organized beings."<sup>45</sup> To recognize order in the present was not to preclude disorder in

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42. Reinach, Diderot, p. 169.

43. Ibid.

44. Diderot, Oeuvres, I: 319.

45. Ibid., I: 320.

the past. Even now, monstrosities disrupted the perfection of the universe. Saunderson voiced Diderot's complaint, "You can well see that I have no eyes, what have you and I done to God, you to possess this organ, I to be deprived of it?"<sup>46</sup> The hypothesis of a Divinity offered no adequate explanation; a materialistic interpretation of nature was more comprehensive, more rational. Diderot suggested that eternal matter endowed with eternal movement had disentangled itself from chaos in a series of attempts and endeavours. "How many misshapen and imperfect worlds have been washed away, reformed, and are again being destroyed, perhaps at every instant, in remote space.... where movement continues and will continue to combine masses from matter, until they have obtained that arrangement in which they can persevere?"<sup>47</sup> Beings had likewise worked out a durable form. "The abortions were successively annihilated,....all the faulty combinations of matter have disappeared,.... only those have survived whose mechanism implied no important contradictions, and who could subsist by themselves and perpetuate their species."<sup>48</sup> Thus, Diderot arrived at a materialistic interpretation of nature in which theories of evolution and the survival of the fittest were vaguely outlined. His rational approach to nature and natural law had effected his transition from theism to deism, to momentary pantheism, and finally to positive materialism and atheism.

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46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

By 1754, Diderot had sufficiently developed his concept of matter to write his Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature. He no longer sought arguments to deny the obsolete hypothesis of a Divinity, but summarily disposed of the idea of God. "The supposition of any being whatsoever placed outside the material universe is impossible. You must never make such suppositions because you can never infer anything from them."<sup>49</sup> Eternal matter endowed with the properties of movement and force adequately explained the universe.

Each molecule, according to Diderot at this stage in the development of his ideas, possessed peculiar qualities which in combination produced varied results.

The molecule endowed with a quality proper to its nature by itself is an active force.... Every molecule must be considered as actually animated by three kinds of actions: The action of weight or gravitation; the action of its intimate force peculiar to its nature as water, fire, air, sulphur; the action of all the other molecules on it; and it may happen that these three actions be convergent or divergent.<sup>50</sup>

Hence, Diderot recognized the inner-action and the inter-action of molecules - the concept of internal and external movement or force - which enabled him to explain the diversity of reactions and results, and the difference between rest and movement.

Absolute rest he dismissed as an abstract concept non-existent in nature; movement was as real a quality as length, breadth or depth; weight was not a tendency to rest but a tendency to local

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49. Ibid., I : 463.

50. Ibid., I : 460, 461.

movement.<sup>51</sup> Molecules whose intimate force tended to local movement when combined with similar molecules would produce a mass apparently inert; while the organization of active molecules would produce active mass.

Having formulated this concept of the molecule, Diderot believed that no essential conflict existed between living matter and dead matter; it was merely a question of organization, of actual or apparent spontaneity of movement.<sup>52</sup> "The only difference which I conceive between life and death is that, at present, you live in mass and that, in twenty years, dissolved and scattered in molecules, you will live in detail."<sup>53</sup> To Diderot, the transition from marble into flesh and back into marble presented no difficulties: pulverized stone, mixed with humus, would in time become indistinguishable from humus; vegetable matter would draw nourishment from soil, and animal matter would feed on plants.<sup>54</sup> Sensibility, an active force in the animal or living molecule, accounted for its peculiar properties; sensibility was but a potential force in the inert or dead molecule. The key to the liberation of sensibility was organization.<sup>55</sup>

This organization Diderot explained symbolically.

Have you ever observed a swarm of bees flying away from their hive?

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51. Ibid., I: 460.

52. Ibid., I: 457.

53. Diderot, Quyves, requoted from Reinach, Diderot, p. 193.

54. Ibid., pp. 189, 190.

55. Scherer, Diderot, p. 96.

The world or the general mass of matter is the hive. Have you seen them go off to form, at the extremity of the branch of a tree, a long cluster of small winged creatures, each clinging to the other by its feet? ....This cluster is a being, an individual, an animal.... If one of these bees decides to pinch in some manner the bee to which it is clinging, that bee will pinch the following; the whole cluster will be excited by as many sensations as there are small animals; the whole will be agitated, stirred, altered in situation and form; a noise, a number of cries will ring out, and a man who has never seen such a cluster arrange itself would be tempted to take it for an animal with five or six heads, and a thousand or twelve hundred wings.... If he took this cluster for an animal, he would be mistaken; but would you expect him to judge more soundly? Would you then like to transform this cluster of bees into a single animal? Well, suppress the feet by means of which they cling together; transform their former contiguous state into a continuous one. Between this new state and the preceding, there is certainly a marked difference; and what can this difference be if not that at present it is a whole, one animal, whereas formerly it was merely an assemblage of animals....All our organs are similarly distinct animals which the law of continuity retains in a sympathy, a unity, a general identity.<sup>56</sup>

Each organ, according to Diderot, was a particular entity; the combination of organs produced the varied forms of animal life.<sup>57</sup>

To bridge the gap between the element and the organized molecule, Diderot employed chance. He suggested that a fortuitous union of elements had produced the living animal cell. "Since eternity, animal life has possessed its peculiar elements, scattered and confused in the mass of matter;...these elements happened to unite because it was possible for them to

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56. Diderot, Rêve de d'Alembert, requoted from Reinach, Diderot, pp. 197, 198.

57. Diderot later developed his theory of the evolution of organs and organisms, expressing it almost in the words of Darwin. "Organization determines functions and needs; sometimes the needs work back on organization. This influence can sometimes go so far as to produce organs, but always so far as to transform them." (Reinach, Diderot, p. 199).



unite."<sup>58</sup> Thereupon, the embryo underwent successive changes until it acquired all its present qualities. According to Diderot, it was quite probable that:

"The embryo formed from these elements has passed through infinite organizations and developments; that in succession it has acquired movement, sensation, ideas, thought, reflexion, conscience, feeling, passion, signs, gesticulations, sounds, articulated sounds, languages, laws, science, and art; that between each one of these developments millions of years have elapsed; that perhaps it must undergo still other developments which are unknown to us; that it has had or will have a stationary state; that it will approach or withdraw from this state through an eternal withering away during which its faculties will leave it as they entered; that it will disappear for ever from nature, or rather that it will continue to exist but in another form with faculties entirely different from those which can be noticed during the present instant of its duration."<sup>59</sup>

Thus Diderot outlined the evolution of living creatures from the single organism to the most complicated forms of life.

Observation of the animal kingdom alone offered him ample proof of this development from a single prototype.

When you consider the animal kingdom and perceive that among the quadrupeds there is not one which does not have functions and parts, especially exterior, entirely like another quadrupede; can you not willingly believe that there has never been but one first animal, prototype of all the animals, whose organs nature has merely lengthened, shortened, multiplied, or obliterated? Imagine the fingers of the hand joined together and the nail material so abundant that by expanding and thickening, it envelopes and covers the whole; in place of the hand of a man, you would have the hoof of a horse. When you notice the successive metamorphoses of the outer covering of the prototype, whatever it may be, approach one kingdom from another kingdom by sensible degrees and people the confines of the two kingdoms (if it is permissible to use the term confines where there is no real division) and people, I say,

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58. Diderot, Oeuvres, I: 456.

59. Ibid.

the confines of the two kingdoms with uncertain ambiguous beings, stripped largely of the forms, qualities and functions of the one, and clothed with the forms, qualities and functions of the other, who would not be led to believe that there has never been but one first being, prototype of all beings?<sup>60</sup>

Diderot elaborated a materialistic interpretation of nature in which eternal matter replaced eternal spirit, and chance accounted for the various combinations of molecules. He attributed length, depth, breadth, and potential sensibility to inert molecules, and declared the living or animal molecule to be the result of a particular kind of organization which released sensibility. He suggested the spontaneous generation of the living cell, the evolution of the various forms of animal life from a common prototype, the development of organs in response to needs, and the theory of the survival of the fittest. For Diderot, this evolutionary materialism gave an adequate explanation of all those activities usually attributed to a Divinity; it was the logical conclusion of the mechanistic concept of the Newtonian world-machine. Following the dictates of reason and natural law, Diderot came to the conclusion that atheism should supercede theism, deism, and pantheism.

#### Diderot's concept of morality.

Just as Diderot founded his materialistic interpretation of nature on reason and natural law, so he sought a similar

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60. Ibid., I : 424.

justification for his moral code; but the duality of his temperament, his aspiration towards the ideal conflicting with his sanction of sensuality, prevented him from establishing a consistent pattern of morality. In 1745, while still a theist, Diderot admitted a traditional concept of virtue based on Christian morality. When, in 1746, he had become a deist, he no longer saw the need for the conventional, artificial restraint of natural desires and advocated the free-play of human instinct, guided, of course, by reason. Thereupon, vice and virtue, passion and restraint alternately received his approbation, until he finally recognized the significance of his materialism. His denial of liberty and evil forced him to conclude with Rameau that morality was relative, varying according to time, place, and individual.

"When I say vicious, it is uniquely to speak your language; for if we come to explain ourselves, it could be that what you call vice I call virtue."<sup>61</sup> Still, the fate of good and evil troubled him. His natural kindness, generosity, and honesty led him to extol virtuous<sup>62</sup> conduct, while his exuberance, ardour, and sensuality led him to condone obscene acts. He wanted to prescribe a moral code, but felt unequal to the task.

In my opinion, it would be a most interesting and important work, one which would accord me the greatest satisfaction in my dying moments. I have meditated the question over a hundred times with all my powers of concentration; although I considered myself endowed with the necessary gifts, I have never dared to take up my pen and write even the first line. I kept saying to myself;

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61. Diderot, Oeuvres choisies, II : 43; Le neveu de Rameau.  
62. Scherer, Diderot, p. 114.

"If I do not come out of this attempt victorious, I become the apologist of wickedness; I will have betrayed the case of virtue and encouraged man to vice. No, I do not feel equal to this sublime work; to it I would uselessly consecrate my whole life."<sup>63</sup>

Though he pretended renouement in the name of virtue, his real reason was his inability to solve his own dilemma; but whether he yielded to the sensual or to the spiritual, he always evoked reason and natural law to vindicate his code.

When Diderot wrote his Essai sur le mérite et la vertu, the balance was unquestionably tilted in favour of traditional virtue. The hypothesis of a Divinity, securely established by deistic rationalism, entailed obedience to natural law and acceptance of natural religion. While still a deist, Diderot believed that God exacted righteous living on the part of man in preparation for a future life; virtue, stemming solely from God, was the only source of happiness.<sup>64</sup> On the other hand, neither cowardly fears of punishment nor selfish hopes of reward should guide man's conduct. "Man is honest or virtuous, when, without any base or servile motive such as the hope of a reward, or the fear of a punishment, he forces all his passions to conspire to the general good of his species: a heroic effort which, however, is never contrary to his particular interests."<sup>65</sup> Passion - resentment, anger, the spirit of vengeance, voluptuousness, intemperance, avarice - alienates the affections of others; vice inflicts its own punishment -

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63. Diderot, Réputation d'Helvétius, requoted from Scherer, Diderot, pp. 114, 115.

64. Diderot, Oeuvres, I : 6

65. Ibid.

unhappiness.<sup>66</sup> Thus, Diderot rationally established virtue as the basis of his first moral code.

The dilemma between traditional virtue and rational sensualism was first stated in his defense of passion in Pensées philosophiques.

People rant endlessly against passion; they impute to passion all the hardships of mankind; and they forget that it is also the source of all pleasure. Passion is an element in their constitution about which they can speak neither too well nor too badly. But what annoys me is the fact that they always regard its bad side. They believe that they are insulting reason by saying a word in favour of its rival.... Sober passions make men common.... Deadened passions degrade extraordinary men. ....Only great passions can raise the soul to great things.<sup>67</sup>

Passionate appreciation of nature, passionate love, passionate enjoyment of life:<sup>68</sup> Diderot's new code of morality was the direct antithesis of his former renunciation of sensual satisfaction.<sup>69</sup> Reason, once the preceptor of virtue, now guided passion in man's pursuit of happiness. Diderot believed that strong passions acting in unison and perfect harmony would never result in disorder. "If hope is balanced by fear, questions of honour by love of life, tendency to pleasure by interests of health, you will see neither free-thinkers, rakes, nor cowards."<sup>70</sup> As Diderot progressed from theism to deism, the artificial restraints of Christian morality seemed to him all the more contrary

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66. Ibid., I : 85 - 95.

67. Ibid., I : 105.

68. Ibid.

69. Ibid., I : 88, 89.

70. Ibid., I : 105.

to reason. Conformity to God's will demanded not extreme asceticism, nor exaggerated piety, but obedience to natural law, to the rational dictates of passion.<sup>71</sup> Passion was not synonymous with vice and self-restraint with virtue; Diderot conceived virtue in the intelligent pursuit of natural desires;<sup>72</sup> but his unbridled eulogy of passion offered ample scope for depraved minds who tended to obscure the restraining influence of reason and emphasize mere sensuality.

As reason conducted Diderot from deism to atheism, as eternal matter supplanted eternal spirit in his interpretation of nature, the conflict, between virtue as based on Christian morality, and virtue as based on natural instinct intensified. The elimination of the concepts of God and immortality, and the reduction of the soul and spiritual life to mere functions of matter, complicated the task of establishing virtue on a rational foundation; moreover, reason and natural law demanded the overthrow of traditional moral, social, and religious codes. Diderot could not decide the form that his moral code should take.

The logical conclusion of his materialistic interpretation of nature was the denial of liberty, but this did not solve the problem. Since exterior material motives governed will, liberty was non-existent; it was the necessary effect of one cause,<sup>73</sup> however complicated that cause might be.

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71. *Ibid.*, I : 106, 107, 144.

72. *Ibid.*, I : 150.

73. Scherer, *Diderot*, p. 104.



.... the word liberty is a word devoid of meaning; .... there have not been and there can never be free beings; .... we are merely what suits the general order, the organization, the education, the chain of events .... There is only one set of causes properly speaking; they are physical causes. There is only one sort of necessity; it is the same for all beings, whatever distinction it may please us to establish among them, whatever distinction really exists.<sup>74</sup>

Having reduced liberty to physical conditions, Diderot was forced to admit the relativity of morality. "There is no action which merits praise or blame; there is neither vice nor virtue, nothing which one must reward or punish...."<sup>75</sup> Thereupon, Diderot distinguished two kinds of men, those who did good and those who did evil.

The evil-doer is a man who must be destroyed; benevolence is good fortune, not virtue. But although the man who does good or evil is not free, man is none the less an amendable being. For this reason, the evil-doer must be destroyed on the public square .... [and] example, discourse, education, pleasure, pain, grief, greatness and misery [are efficacious].<sup>76</sup>

Physical causes had destroyed liberty and reconciled human nature with the maxim: "reproach nothing of others, repent nothing;"<sup>77</sup> but the dilemma remained unsolved.

The denial of evil which was implied in the denial of liberty further undermined the possibility of an absolute moral code. Neither pessimist, nor optimist,<sup>78</sup> Diderot recognized the

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74. Diderot, Lettre à Landais, 1756, requoted from Scherer, Diderot, pp. 110, 111.

75. Ibid., p. 111.

76. Ibid.

77. Ibid.

78. Scherer, Diderot, 112.

presence of evil but, by attributing its cause to necessity, and by considering it a changing concept, he reduced its stigma.

Evil exists; but it is the necessary consequence of the general laws of nature, and not the effect of a ridiculous apple. In order that evil be non-existent these laws would have to be different. Moreover, I admit that I have done my utmost to conceive a world without evil, but I have never been able to attain such a concept.<sup>79</sup>

Hunger and thirst oblige animals to provide for their physical needs; pain warns them of mortal danger; passion elevates man from the state of an automaton but entails grief.<sup>80</sup> Thus, reasoning from the laws of nature, Diderot reached a conclusion contrary to that of Leibnitz, using similar reason. They agreed that the world could never be but what it is; "but," Diderot declared, "when he [Leibnitz] concluded that all is good, he uttered an absurdity; he should have contented himself with saying that all is necessary."<sup>81</sup> All this, however, brought Diderot no closer to formulating a moral code.

Eloquent apologist of decency and virtue, vehement apostle of unrestrained passion, Diderot pondered the dilemma. Recognition of the relativity of vice and virtue failed to solve the problem, Diderot still sought a rational moral code in accordance with natural law.

"I am between two powers: one indicates the path towards goodness, the other inclines me towards evil. I must decide. At first, the crisis of the battle is cruel, but in time the difficulty

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79. Diderot, Oeuvres, I: 140.

80. Ibid.

81. Ibid.

gradually diminishes; the sacrifice of passion no longer inflicts distress; from experience, I maintain that this sacrifice becomes sweet; in one's own eyes one draws so much greatness and dignity from it. Virtue is the sole mistress to whom one is attached as much by the sacrifices made in her behalf as by the charm attributed to her."<sup>82</sup>

Thereupon, Diderot concluded the contrary, declaring that a sense of morality was mere fantasy. Man's conduct, based on experience, education and interest, was purely egotistic. "How many secret and complicated motives inspire our approval and blame."<sup>83</sup> To complicate this problem of intuitive morality as opposed to utilitarian or empirical morality,<sup>84</sup> Diderot added his eulogy of passion, of conformity to uninhibited natural desires.

The logical consequences of his materialistic interpretation of nature favoured a kind of hedonistic utilitarianism; only the dualism of character, and his frequent relapses into romantic sentimentalism can account for his intermittent defense of intuitive morality. In his utilitarian moral code, which was motivated by self-interest, Diderot considered happiness to be the sole aim of mankind.

What are the duties of man? .... To make himself happy. From whence follows the necessity of contributing to the happiness of others, or, in other terms, of being virtuous.... If one presumes men created in such a way that they can subsist only by helping each other, it is clear that their actions are suitable or unsuitable in proportion to their approach to or withdrawal from this end, and that this connection with our preservation establishes the qualities of good and right, of bad and perverse, which consequently depend

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82. Diderot, Lettre à Landais, requoted from Scherer, Diderot, pp. 117, 118.

83. Ibid., p. 118.

84. Scherer, Diderot, p. 121.

not <sup>85</sup> on any arbitrary convention but on the very organization of man.

Self-interest demanded virtue, and self-preservation demanded mutual co-operation in the behaviour of man. To strengthen the argument, Diderot associated justice and benevolence with the idea of happiness. "The habit of justice and benevolence which make us happy principally by the movements of our own heart, makes us such by the feelings which it inspires in those who approach us."<sup>86</sup> Just as virtue entailed two rewards: the pleasure of doing good and the pleasure of winning the friendship of others; so vice evoked two punishments: one at the depths of the heart, the other in the feeling of aversion inspired in others.<sup>87</sup> Although his utilitarian moral code emphasized virtue, it did not preclude passion. On the contrary, Diderot maintained that passions, guided by reason, were an important source of happiness.<sup>88</sup> The very laws of nature, self-interest and the desire for happiness, dictated Diderot's utilitarian code of morality; henceforth, virtue, passion, justice, and benevolence would regulate man's behaviour.

If, however, the denial of liberty and evil logically

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85. Diderot, Oeuvres, I: 148; Encyclopédie; article, "Juste," requested from A. Collignon, Diderot, sa vie, ses oeuvres, sa correspondance (Paris, 1895), p. 209. Hereafter cited as Collignon, Diderot.

86. Ibid., p. 210; article, "Plaisir moral."

87. Diderot, "Lettre à Sophie Volland," requested from Scherer, Diderot, p. 123.

88. Diderot, Encyclopédie; article, "Plaisir", requested from Collignon, Diderot, p. 212.

followed a materialistic interpretation of nature, if time and custom governed morality, Diderot could justify a contrasting pattern in accordance with the same natural laws. There was no absolute moral truth. The Christians had elevated modesty, chastity, and conjugal fidelity to cardinal virtues, but natural man recognized no arbitrary prejudices nor conventions. According to Diderot, the artificialities of society had corrupted man's original state of innocence, freedom, and happiness.

There once existed a natural man; into this man was introduced an artificial man; and in the cave a perpetual civil war has arisen. Sometimes natural man is stronger; sometimes he is beaten to the ground by moral, artificial man; in either case the sad monster is gnawed, pinched, tormented, stretched out on the wheel; ceaselessly groaning, ceaselessly unhappy, whether a false enthusiasm of glory transports and elates him, or a false shame bows and dejects him. Only extreme circumstances bring man back to his original simplicity.... In misery, man is without remorse, and in sickness, woman is without shame.<sup>89</sup>

Civilization had tyrannized man.

If you wish to tyrannize.... [man], civilize him; poison him to the best of your ability with a moral code contrary to nature; forge for him shackles of every sort; hinder his movements with a thousand obstacles; fabricate phantoms which frighten him; eternalize the war in the cave; let natural man be forever enchained there, at the foot of moral man. Do you want to make him happy and free? Do not meddle in his affairs..... I call into question all institutions - political, civil and religious; examine them profoundly. If I am not greatly mistaken, from century to century, you will see the human species burdened with the yoke which a handful of scoundrels ventured

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89. Diderot, Oeuvres, I: 495.

to impose on it. Distrust anyone who wishes to establish order,<sup>90</sup>  
"Instinct not convention should guide human activity," said Diderot.  
In the mind of primitive man, nothing was more contrary to the  
laws of nature than modesty, chastity and conjugal fidelity.  
What was marriage but the tyranny of man which had converted the  
possession of woman into propriety,<sup>91</sup> but a ridiculous convention  
commanding a constancy which could not be, and limiting the most  
capricious of pleasures to the same individual.<sup>92</sup> Marriage  
violated the liberty of male and female by chaining them forever  
to one another.<sup>93</sup> "From the time that woman became the property  
of man, and the furtive pleasures of a young girl were looked  
upon as theft, the terms: modesty, discretion, and propriety<sup>94</sup>  
were devised, and imaginary vices and virtues conceived.  
Primitive man attached no ignominy to incest: such relations<sup>95</sup>  
were neither unutilitarian nor harmful to the general good.  
His pattern of behaviour, dictated by self-interest and the

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90. Ibid., I: 495, 496. Compare this concept with Rousseau's theory of the degeneration of man under civilization expressed in his essay on the "Progress of the arts and sciences." Whether Rousseau owed the idea to a visionary inspiration while on his way to visit Diderot at Vincennes, or to Diderot, it is difficult to determine. Guénin, in his life of Diderot, attributes the original idea to Diderot; Lowell, to Rousseau. See Diderot, Oeuvres choisies, I: XVI - XXI, and Edward Lowell, Eye of the French revolution (New York, 1892), p. 282 f.

91. Ibid., I: 494.

92. Ibid., I: 478.

93. Ibid.

94. Ibid., I: 493.

95. Ibid., I: 485.



desire for happiness, contrasted sharply with the conventions of society. His virtues - incest, promiscuity, infidelity - were the direct antithesis of the virtues of civilized man; and yet, reason and natural law sanctioned both patterns: one spiritual, the other sensual.

Diderot again stated the dilemma: should man return to nature, to the voluptuous free-play of natural instinct, or should he submit to the laws of society, to the restraining dictates of a spiritual ideal. There was no absolute moral truth; vice and virtue were relative. If convention violated reason and natural law, was man not justified in establishing his own code of morality? Although Diderot once maintained that wise man knew no laws,<sup>96</sup> he preferred a more conservative solution. He advised man to conform to the established code of morality and to strive for the reconciliation of social and natural law.

We will combat foolish laws until they are reformed; while waiting we shall conform to them. He, who, by his own private authority, infringes a bad law, authorizes his fellow to infringe the good. There are fewer inconveniences in being foolish with fools than in being wise all alone. Let us say to ourselves: let us cry out incessantly that people have attached shame, punishment and ignominy to actions innocent in themselves; but let us not commit them, for shame, punishment and ignominy are the greatest of evils.<sup>97</sup>

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96. *Ibid.*, I: 537.

97. *Ibid.*, I: 498.

### CONCLUSION

Similarities and differences stand out in the religious and moral ideas of Voltaire and Diderot. Both trusted in reason as the omnipotent and autonomous arbiter of all things; both placed overwhelming confidence in the rational approach to knowledge and ultimate truth. Their faith in human understanding precluded belief in the miraculous, in revelation and in supernatural intervention in the affairs of men. Their faith in reason evoked violent criticism of Christianity and increased the antichristianism of the century. Both Voltaire and Diderot denounced revealed religion, formal worship, sacraments, rites, and anthropomorphic representations as contrary to reason and natural morality.

Voltaire submitted all religious belief to the test of social utility, and as a result devoted his life to the extirpation of superstition, intolerance, and irrationalism, and to the undermining of established religion.

Every man of sense, every good man ought to hold the Christian sect in horror. The great name of deist, which is not sufficiently revered, is the only name one ought to take. The only Gospel one ought to read is the great book of nature, written by the hand of God and sealed with his seal. The only religion that ought to be professed is the religion of worshipping God and being a good man. It is as impossible that this pure, eternal religion should

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1. Preserved Smith, History of modern culture (2 vols., New York, 1934), II: 21.

produce evil as it is that Christian fanaticism should not produce it.<sup>2</sup>

All his later writings: Dictionnaire philosophique, 1764; Examen important de milord Bolingbroke, 1767; La Bible enfin expliquée, 1776; Histoire de l'établissement du Christianisme, 1777;

questioned the authenticity of both the Old and New Testaments, and the divinity of Christ. They ridiculed the accounts of the deluge, the miracles of Christ, and other stories by comparing them with similar stories in pagan mythology.<sup>3</sup> His desire to crush the intolerant, persecuting spirit of the French Roman Catholic Church as manifested in the unjust punishment of Galas and La Barre, carried his criticism to excess, and even to vulgarity. His belief in the Supreme Being, however, remained constant, and his unbounded faith in reason for the solution of religious and metaphysical problems avoided Hume's universal skepticism<sup>4</sup> and Kant's criticisms of pure reason.

Diderot's attacks on Christianity were as vehement as those of Voltaire. First as a deist, then as an atheist, Diderot criticized Christian dogma, ecclesiastical hierarchy, fanatical devotees, rites, ceremonies, and superfluous moral rules.

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2. Voltaire, Oeuvres, vol. 41, p. 422; Examen important de milord Bolingbroke.

3. For the influence of the English deists on the critical as well as the philosophical phases of Voltaire's deism, see Norman Lewis Torrey, Voltaire and the English deists (London, 1930). Hereafter cited as Torrey, Voltaire.

4. Torrey, Voltaire, p. 2.

The Christian religion is to my mind the most absurd and atrocious in its dogmas; the most unintelligible, the most metaphysical, the most intertwined and obscure, and consequently the most subject to divisions, sects, schisms, and heresies; the most mischievous for the public tranquility, the most dangerous to sovereigns by its hierarchic order, its persecution, its discipline; the most flat, the most dreary, the most Gothic, and the most gloomy in its ceremonies; the most puerile and unsociable in its morality, considered not in what is common to it with universal morality, but in what is peculiarly its own, and constitutes it evangelical, apostolic, and Christian morality, which is the most intolerant of all. Lutheranism, freed from some absurdities, is preferable to Catholicism, Protestantism (Calvinism) to Lutheranism, Socinianism to Protestantism, deism with temples and ceremonies to Socinianism.<sup>5</sup>

He published a long tirade against clerical hypocrisy, La Religieuse, and covertly inserted materialism and antichristianism into the articles of the Encyclopédie. Diderot was as interested as Voltaire in propagating tolerance, benevolence, and humanitarianism. However, he devoted his life not to the deliberate destruction of Christianity but to the formulation of a rational synthesis of knowledge, and to a scientific interpretation of nature. Even though he developed a kind of evolutionary materialism which denied the existence of God, the books that presented these ideas; Interprétation de la nature and the Rêve de d'Alembert, never became household works like those of Voltaire; these works passed relatively unnoticed in comparison with the writings of his brilliant contemporary. The rationalism of Diderot which led him to atheism did not change the deistic temper of the century. Nevertheless, the attacks of Voltaire and Diderot, on

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5. Diderot, "Lettre à Damilaville," 1766, requoted from John Randall, The making of the modern mind (New York, [1940]).

revealed religion in general, and on Christianity in particular, incited and encouraged the antichristianism which prevailed in intellectual circles. The world will probably never know whether their attacks on Christianity were rooted in a sincere, deep-seated disbelief in Jesus, Christ and His moral teaching, or merely in their desire to reduce all religious belief to reason.<sup>6</sup>

Both Voltaire and Diderot expressed their concepts in terms of natural law. After the publication of Newton's Principia, in 1687, the attention of all learned men was focused on natural law. Newton had demonstrated the universal, physical laws of nature, and thereby inspired men to search for similar universal,

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6. In later life, Voltaire insisted on receiving communion regularly. Although he maintained that the gesture was mere mockery, a social necessity to keep his servants in order, and a simple precaution to secure a decent burial, he threatened a poor parish priest with execution when the latter wanted to withhold the Host until Voltaire should sign a recantation. Diderot, for his part, allowed his daughter to receive a Catholic education. He seemed to feel the inner stirrings of religious sentiment although he attributed it to man's susceptibility to ceremony. He once declared that a Protestant would become a Roman Catholic upon entering St. Peter's in Rome, and that he himself was moved by religious ceremony. Both, however, died without receiving the last rites. Voltaire communicated during what he thought was a mortal illness several weeks before his actual death, but refused religious consolation at the last moment. Diderot, more sincere than Voltaire, abstained from receiving communion for the greater part of his life. On his death-bed, he conversed amicably with the parish priest, but died a "confirmed" atheist. Curiously enough, Diderot, who denied God, was entombed in the local Church vault; while Voltaire, who affirmed the Supreme Being, had to be buried secretly. See Paul Nourrisson, Voltaire et le voltairianisme (Paris, 1896), pp. 247, 248, 258; and Diderot, Oeuvres choisies, I: LXII, LXIII.

natural laws in the social as well as the physical sciences. Newtonian philosophy implied that the world was an intricate mechanism, governed by a few eternal laws which could be deduced through simple logic. Both Voltaire and Diderot were influenced by Newtonian philosophy.

Using the same fundamental precepts of reason and natural law, however, Voltaire and Diderot reached opposing notions of God, matter, and the universe. Voltaire unquestioningly accepted the Newtonian concept of the universe as an intricate mechanism governed by immutable laws. From the basic arguments of the theists: design, and the necessity of a first cause, he rationalized his belief in the existence of a Supreme Being, who was the intelligent designer of the universe, and the source of movement and thought. God, to Voltaire, was the impartial, absentee God of the deists, who having determined the universal laws of nature, abstained from altering their immutable courses. Diderot used the concept of the Newtonian world-machine, but only as point of departure; he progressively rejected theism, deism and pantheism, and eventually formulated a materialistic evolutionary concept of the universe. He denied an exterior divine force and believed that movement and sensibility were inherent properties of matter. Whereas Voltaire balked and retreated whenever his doctrines approached pantheism, Diderot traversed pantheism and arrived at atheism. Both systems, established on reason and natural law, rather than on observation and experiment, were shattered by the arguments of Hume and Kant.



The moral codes of Voltaire and Diderot had more permanent value than their concepts of God and nature. Even though they disagreed on the details of the virtuous, they agreed on the necessity of man's conformity to the established rules of society. Through his adherence to natural religion Voltaire advocated the principles of morality which he thought were common to the human race; neither extreme asceticism, false piety, nor the exaggerated pursuit of passion were suitable behavior patterns for mankind. His lapse into hedonism seems to have been temporary; his recognition of a relative moral code was probably the result of unintentionally pursuing reason and natural law to their logical conclusions. Voltaire more usually extolled those virtues which were necessary for social living, and maintained that man, following the rational dictates of human nature, could satisfactorily provide for his own self-interest and happiness, and for the general good. Diderot, after denying free-will and the existence of God, permanently recognized the relativity of virtue. He could not decide whether man should conform to traditional Christian morality, to rational sensualism or to absolute hedonism. In the end, he became convinced that man should follow the natural dictates of passion in so far as society condoned their practice. Both Voltaire and Diderot believed in the natural goodness of man; they established morality on natural law and the rational pursuit of happiness; they formulated a kind of moral utilitarianism which allowed the maximization of individual

happiness and the maximization of the collective well-being. Both exhorted man to cultivate those virtues which were respected by society, and to strive for the reconciliation of social law and natural law. As philosophes, Voltaire and Diderot extolled the primary virtues of tolerance, benevolence, and humanitarianism.

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The most valuable sources for the study of the religious and moral ideas of Voltaire and Diderot are, of course, their original works, and because of the nature of this monograph, their works have constantly been the center of my research. The Mehl edition of Voltaire's works is almost complete and includes the greater part of his voluminous correspondence. Separate editions of his Philosophic dictionary, his novels, and his philosophic dialogues, published by Garnier Frères, are helpful for the formulation of a chronological pattern; the introduction and the notes of these editions point out the dominant characteristics of Voltaire's thought. Although the 1818-19 edition of Diderot's works is supposed to be complete, only six volumes are listed in the catalogue at the École Supérieure des Lettres. The edition does not include his correspondence, many of his novels, nor his articles for the Encyclopédie. Two volumes containing selections from his works and the separate publication of his letters to Sophie Volland fill some of the gaps but the complete collection of his writings, edited by MM. Assezat and Tourneux (1875-77), would have been preferable. An examination of Voltaire's private collection of books, which he annotated for future reference, would have been necessary for a definitive treatment of his ideas, but unfortunately, this collection is in Leningrad.

Diderot's library was also inaccessible; I presume that it, too is in Russia because it was purchased by Catherine the Great.

In La Pensée européenne au XVIIIe siècle, Paul Hazard presents a detailed and sound picture of eighteenth century thought. He limits himself to a study of the rational philosophers, describing their attacks on Christianity, their overwhelming confidence in reason and natural law, and their inability to construct a permanent "city for men." Carl Becker's Heavenly city of the eighteenth century philosophers offers similarly a stimulating though more modest treatment of eighteenth century thought. Daniel Mornet's three books: Les origines intellectuelles de la révolution française, La pensée française au XVIIIe siècle, and Le romantisme en France au XVIIIe, cover the century. The first, though inadequate and inaccurate as a study of economic and social history, is useful in showing the influence of the intellectuals in arousing a desire for reform; the second treats the development of French thought from rationalism in the first half of the eighteenth century to the curious eclecticism of rationalism, empiricism and sentimentalism in the later half; the third describes the rise and spread of romanticism in the eighteenth century. Relevant chapters in John Randall's The making of the modern mind offer a suggestive and somewhat personal treatment of the influence of reason and natural law in the eighteenth century. Preserved Smith, in The age of the enlightenment, presents a comprehensive picture of the century, but fails to stimulate the reader's interest. Leslie Stephen's English thought

in the eighteenth century and J.M. Robertson's A short history of free thought, which would have rounded out the picture of eighteenth century thought by their treatment of the English deist movement, were not available.

The various biographers of Voltaire usually present either an extremely apologetic or an extremely critical point of view. Lanson, however, is both impartial and sound in judgement. Only one volume of Desnoiresterres' monumental work, Voltaire et la société française au XVIIIe siècle, was available. His eight volumes are said to be the foundation for most of the biographies of Voltaire which appear periodically without renewing the material. Among these are the biographies of Henriette Celarié, André Maurois and John Charpentier, which are delightful reading but uncritical. The Abbé du Maynard criticizes Voltaire's character and his writings from a Roman Catholic point of view. Voltaire et le volterrianisme, by Paul Nourrisson, also presents a Catholic judgement; the author takes pleasure in pointing out the inconsistencies in Voltaire's writings. Raymond Naves treats Voltaire as the great critic of the eighteenth century, and maintains that Voltaire's attitudes are the result of three great disillusionments which followed three great enthusiasms. Norman Lewis Torrey, in Voltaire and the English deists presents a thorough and scholarly study of the influence of the English deists on the philosophic and critical phases of Voltaire's deism. Champion's Études critiques clarifies many mistaken impressions concerning Voltaire: his character, philosophy and influence, but errs slight-

ly on the side of apology.

Among the biographies of Diderot, Edmond Scherer's study presents a sound though personal judgement of Diderot's philosophy; his book seems to be the basis for other biographies. Joseph Reinach and Louis Ducros restate Scherer's views, but are better organized. A. Collignon offers a full treatment of Diderot's philosophy, with much valuable material; but his chapters are very disorganized, and uncritically apologetic. Jean Pommier, in Diderot avant Vincennes, traces the development of Diderot's early thought but not very clearly. Diderot et l'Encyclopédie by Joseph le Gras, is restricted to a detailed factual study of the publication of the Encyclopédie, and Diderot's role as editor; it fails to treat the philosophical ideas expressed in the Encyclopédie. Avezac-Lavigne in Diderot et la société du baron d'Holbac presents a general picture in which the society of the enlightenment serves as a background for the lives of Diderot and Holbach. In Les encyclopédistes et les femmes, Marguerite Dupont-Chatelain offers delightful sketches of both Diderot and Voltaire.



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