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# The philosophic and religious influences of Diderot and the Encyclopaedists on French thought

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Thesis

THE PHILOSOPHIC AND RELIGIOUS  
INFLUENCES OF DIDEROT  
AND THE ENCYCLOPAEDISTS  
ON FRENCH THOUGHT

by

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## Chapter I

In the progressive development of thought in the eighteenth century in France, the Encyclopaedists and most especially Diderot exerted a tremendous influence. It is in the great collaborative work of the Encyclopaedia that we shall search for the fundamental principles and doctrines of this new age of French philosophy.

That human nature is good, that the world is capable of being made a desirable place in which to live, and that the evils of the world are the fruits of bad education and bad institutions is essentially the great central moral of the Encyclopaedia. A hundred and fifty years ago, in France this was a new and wonderful gospel and the beginning of a new enlightenment. "It was the great counter-principle to asceticism in life and morals, to formalism in art, to absolutism in the social ordering, to obscurantism in thought."<sup>(1)</sup> Every social improvement since has been the outcome of that doctrine in one form or another. We can see what wide and far-reaching meaning such a doctrine possessed; how it raised all the questions connected with psychology and the formation of character; how it went down to the very foundation of morals; into what fresh and unwelcome sunlight it brought the articles of the old theology; with what new importance it clothed the relations of real knowledge and practical arts; and what intense interest it lent to every detail of economics, legislation and government.

(1)"Diderot and the Encyclopedists," John Morley P.5. Vol. I.

The great concern with which the churchmen looked on the rise of the encyclopaedic movement was natural. For, up to this time did not the church paint man as fallen and depraved, and did not this new curiosity about the earth and its individuals make man's care less absorbing about the kingdom of heaven? The Encyclopaedia was an informal, transitory, and provisional organization of the new spiritual power. Morality, positive law, social order, economics, the nature and limits of human knowledge, the constitution of the physical universe, had one by one disengaged themselves from theological explanations. The philosophical movement of the eighteenth century in France, which was represented by Diderot and the Encyclopaedists, now tended to a new social synthesis resting on a purely positive basis.

The man of letters shortly before the middle of the century was as much an outcast as a beggar in Paris or London. Around 1750, this man of letters became a distinctly marked type as distinguished alike from the old-fashioned scholar and systematic thinker. The all-important fact about this group of men in France was that they constituted a new order, that their rise signified the transfer of the spiritual power from ecclesiastical hands, and, that, while they were the organs of a new function, they associated it with a new doctrine. What, then, is this man of letters? Unlike the Jesuit fathers whom he replaces, he has no organic doctrine, no historic tradition, no effective discipline, and no definite aim. His contribution

to the age was to popularize new ideas, to interest men in these new ideas by dressing them up in varied forms of literary art, and to guide men to judge empirically each case of conduct, policy, or new opinion as it arises.

Fontenelle (1657-1757) was the first of this important class. He was sceptical, learned, ingenious, eloquent. When he was born the man of letters was unimportant politically. When he died, the man of letters was the most conspicuous personage in France. But when Diderot first began to roam about the streets of Paris, this enormous change was not yet complete.

Denis Diderot was born at Langres in 1713. Like so many other reformers of the eighteenth century, he was a pupil of the Jesuits. The usual struggle followed between youthful genius and old prudence. His father gave him his choice between medicine and law. Law he refused, "because he did not choose to spend his days in doing other people's business," and medicine, "because he had no turn for killing." His father resolutely refused him more money on these terms, and Diderot was thrown on his own wits for a living. For some ten years (1734-1744) Diderot's history is the old tale of hardship and chance. For a time he earned a little money teaching. His employers paid him as they chose, "in shirts, in a chair or a table, in books, in money, and sometimes they never paid him at all."

Circumstance and convention, words under which men hide many things, left Diderot absolutely uncramped. His life was

wholly uncorrupted by the formal mannerisms of the time, that great affectation of culture with which the great Goethe affected a part of the world a generation later. Diderot looked not to what people said, nor even to what they did, but to what they were. "I am affected," he said, "by the charms of virtue rather than the deformity of vice; I turn mildly away from the bad, and I fly to embrace the good. If there is in a work, in a character, in a statue, a single fine bit, there on that my eyes fasten; I see only that; that is all I remember; the rest is as good as forgotten."<sup>(1)</sup> Every man, it seems to me, might well partake of these words of wisdom so descriptive of one of the noblest traits of man.

We do not know in what way Diderot trained his understanding. A study of his earliest works show that he was well acquainted with Montaigne, Pascal; and Terence, Horace, Cicero, and Tacitus had all impressed him. Above all he was impressed by the ideas of Francis Bacon, and these ideas were the direct source of the great undertaking of Diderot's life.

At the time when he was having his greatest difficulty in procuring even his daily bread, he fell violently in love with Antoinette Champion and married her in 1743. Unfortunately, their marriage was unsuccessful. The pressure of home ties may have kept him from any great masterpiece. He was encyclopaedic from external necessity. The quality of rapid movement, energetic fancy, versatile idea marked him from the first for

(1) Diderot's "Oeuvres" XVIII P. 376

an Encyclopaedist. His interest was promptly and vehemently kindled on almost any subject. His very great enthusiasm, his freshness and vigor in suggestion, his initiative, all exerted a decisive force and influence on his fellows and later on society. Like Dr. Johnson in England, Diderot was a great conversationalist with a magnetic personality. To him we go for a store of fertile ideas, for some striking studies of human nature, and for a vigorous and singular personality.

In 1749, he published his "Letters on the Blind for the Use of Those Who Can See." They were the result of several years of meditation, and they became the first effective introduction to the great and fundamental principles of the new philosophy: "That all knowledge is relative to our intelligence, that thought is not the measure of existence, nor the conceivableness of a proposition the test of its truth, and that our experience is not the limit of the possibility of things." Diderot grasped the doctrine of Relativity in some of the most important and far-reaching of all its bearings. Although Diderot was by no means the first to discover Relativity, he did introduce it into the literature of his country at the moment when circumstances were ripe for it.

Condillac had published his first work, the "Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge," three years before in 1746. This was an undeveloped rendering of the doctrine of Locke, that the ultimate source of our notions lies in the impressions made on our senses, shaped and combined by reflection. In

1754, Condillac published the celebrated "Treatise on the Sensations" in which he maintained that reflection itself is nothing but sensation differently transformed. All knowledge rests on analysis. Condillac's theory of knowledge is the most vigorous attempt that had been made up to this time -- to deduce everything from experience.

Diderot and Condillac with their earlier writings were preparing the way for the great and decisive movement which was to characterize the entire rest of the century -- the encyclopaedic movement based on new ideas, theories, and doctrines.

## Chapter II

In France a hundred and eighty years ago, there was the first opening of a decisive breach in the walls that had sheltered men of western Europe against outer desolation for some fifteen centuries or more. Catholicism was not only an institution, nor only a religious faith; it was also a philosophy and a systematized theory of the universe. The Church during its best age directed the moral relations of individual men and attempted to humanize the relations of communities. Catholicism claimed to deal with life as a whole, and to leave no province of nature, no faculty of man, no need of intelligence or spirit uncomprehended. It rested upon authority and tradition, but it also sought an expression in an intellectual philosophy of things. The essence of this philosophy was to make man the final cause of the universe. Its interpretation of the world was absolute; its account of our moral rules, of our intellectual impressions, of our spiritual ideals made them all absolute; its conception of the Creator was absolute.

Diderot, when he wrote "Letters on the Blind," perceived that mere rationalistic attacks upon the sacred books, upon the miracles, upon the moral types of Catholicism, could only be partially effective for destruction, and could have no effect at all in replacing the old ways of thinking by others of more solid truth. The attack must begin in philosophy. The first fruitful process must consist in shifting the point of view, in enlarging the range of facts to be considered, in

pressing the relativity of our ideas, in freeing ourselves from the tyranny of anthropomorphism. The Church was a social organization made vital by a conviction. The greatest fact in the intellectual history of the eighteenth century is the decisive revolution that overtook that conviction. To substitute this relative point of view for the absolute was the all-important preliminary to the effectual breaking up of the great Catholic control. What seems to the careless observer a mere metaphysical dispute was, in truth, and still is, the decisive quarter of the great battle between theology and a philosophy reconcilable with science.

For the true parentage of the Encyclopaedia of Diderot and D'Alembert we must look to Francis Bacon, for it was Francis Bacon's idea of the systematic classification of knowledge which inspired Diderot and guided his hand throughout. The French Encyclopaedia was the direct fruit of Bacon's magnificent conception. In 1727, Ephraim Chambers published in London two folios entitled a "Cyclopaedia" or "Universal Dictionary of the Arts and Sciences." "Our view," says Chambers, "was to consider the several matters not only in themselves but relatively, or as they respect each other; both to treat them as so many wholes, and as so many parts of some greater whole." The compiler lacked the necessary grasp to realize this laudable purpose. The book was, however, the merit of conciseness, and is a singular monument of literary industry, for it was entirely compiled by Chambers himself.

Some fifteen years after the publication of Chambers' Cyclopaedia, an Englishman by the name of Mills and a German, Sellius, went to LeBreton, a bookseller, with a project for its translation. The bookseller obtained the requisite privilege from the government, but he obtained it for himself and not for the projectors. Later, LeBreton carried the undertaking to Guy de Malves, but he was a busy man, and so the project made no advance in his hands. The embarrassed bookseller next applied to Diderot who then was in much need of work that should bring him bread. By an admirable intuition he divined the opportunity which would be given by the encyclopaedic form, of gathering up into a whole all that new thought and modern knowledge which existed as yet in unsystematic and uninterpreted fragments. His enthusiasm fired LeBreton. It was resolved to make Chambers' work a mere starting point for a new enterprise of far wider scope. Diderot went to old D'Agnesseau who had a passion for universality and a certain encyclopaedic sense. He had faith in the young man and protected the Encyclopaedia. LeBreton then procured a new privilege on January 21, 1746.

Other booksellers joined these two to promote the enterprise. D'Alembert, son of Madame de Tencin, became a close associate of Diderot. D'Alembert was a pupil of the Jansenists, strongly devoted to mathematics, but he was not, however, a specialist. In his quiet precision he offers a sharp contrast to exuberant, prodigal, and disordered Diderot. A consciousness

of the power and exaltation of their calling which the men of letters now acquired marked the rise of a new teaching order and the suppression of the old. Diderot burst the bonds of a paralyzing dogma by the supreme cry, "Détruisez ces enceintes qui rétrécissent vos idées! Élargissez Dieu!"(1)

The Encyclopaedia became a powerful engine for aiding the transformation from the old to the new. It effected national life on every side; enlightened principles in all branches of material and political organization; united members of rival destructive schools in a constructive task. Many contributors formed a fraternity which helped make the literature of the time famous. The Encyclopaedia was a collective work -- the work of all the men of genius to produce an abstract of knowledge which was to be philosophic and scientific testament of a generation.

Let us look at the actual situation in France in 1750. The revolutionary spirit had existed before the philosophic, the quarrels of the parliaments, and the ecclesiastical affairs had already placed the altar and the throne in danger. Never was poetry, the theatre, the novel, the critic more indigent in works. From this time on literature was to express in the language of the common people the ideas, up to now, known only by the few. It instructed; it vulgarized; it became the expression of the new social ideas. Religion had lost a part of its authority in the Jansenist quarrels.

(1) Diderot, "Pensées Philosophes" No. 26.

Luxury was undermining society more and more. The "salons," most important of which were those of Madame de Pompadour, Madame de Luxembourg, Madame de Deffand, Madame d'Epinau, and Madame de Lespinasse, exerted a tremendous influence on the philosophic and scientific thought of the day. Sciences and both physical and natural mathematics were fast becoming important. Science, in opposing other forms of knowledge, had for its basis something entirely apart from religion, philosophy, or history. It was to emancipate us from the superstitions of the past by setting up as its new basis the "constation du fait," verification by fact. These three facts: a changing of the orientation in literature, the moral dissolution of the state, and the formation of a certain concept of science, form the fertile soil in which the seed of the encyclopaedic movement was planted.

### Chapter III

The aim of the Encyclopaedia was not theory but practice, not literature but life. The details of this great undertaking were worked out between 1745 - 1748, and they were announced in 1750 in a "Prospectus" written by Diderot. In 1751, the first volume appeared, the second in 1752, and so on, a volume a year for seven years. Diderot owes great indebtedness to Bacon for many of his ideas in developing applied sciences, and a closer relationship between the speculative and practical activities of man. D'Alembert outlined the philosophy of sciences in his "Le Discours Préliminaire de l'Encyclopédie." These two, the "Prospectus" of Diderot, and the "Discours Préliminaire" of D'Alembert, expressed clearly the intentions of the Encyclopaedists.

It was a question of writing a dictionary of the progress of intelligence. Their masters were to be Bacon, Descartes, Newton, and Locke, who had taught that certainty was born only from reason, facts, and experience. Sensation is the basis of everything. It is through experience that we acquire, little by little, attention, reflection, judgment, etc. Little by little, through experience, humanity has transformed life. Human history is the story of that transformation, and reason can be the only instrument of progress which has slowly triumphed over the cruelties, ignorance, and prejudices. From Bacon comes the idea that human knowledge is divided into three branches; history, which is related to memory; philosophy,

which is the fruit of reason; and fine arts, to which imagination has given birth.

Diderot's idea was to give mathematics to the mathematicians, philosophy to the philosophers, economics to the economists, etc. Quesnay, Turgot, Forbonnais were to work on economics; D'Alembert, on mathematics; Holbach, on chemistry and minerology; Rousseau, on music; Buffon, on natural history; while Diderot himself visited all the trades, made "planches," plates, to illustrate their arts, and asked specific and detailed questions for the sake of clarity and exactitude. Unfortunately, the collaborators did little work. It was Jancourt who spent thirteen and fourteen hours a day working on the material. But it was Diderot who bore the burden of all the material and moral direction. He wrote the articles on the trades. He sought material first from Chambers' Encyclopaedia; then from the historic dictionaries of Bayle and Moreri; from the dictionary of antiquities by de Hedrich; from the histories of philosophy of the Frenchman Deslandes and the German Brücker. The articles by Voltaire, Turgot, Rousseau, and Marmontel add little to the glory of their authors. Those signed by Diderot often were not his. However, the philosophic propaganda contained within these articles was designed to change the general manner of thinking by the popularization of the secret of the arts, sciences, and trades.

Shortly after the first volume of the Encyclopaedia was published in 1751, the clerical party and the Jesuits became

jealous. They denounced the Encyclopaedia as containing ideas of atheism and materialism. At first their attack was indirect. On November 18, 1751 Abbe Jean Martin de Prades of the diocese of Montauban had presented at the Sorbonne a thesis tending toward Deism. This was denounced as a dangerous proposition. Ten leading articles were condemned "comme respectivement blasphematoires, hérétiques, erronées, favorisant le matérialisme et contraires a l'autorité et à l'intégralite' des lois de Moïse."<sup>(1)</sup> Abbé de Prades himself was condemned January 27, 1752, and thus, the Jesuits, jealous of the success of the Encyclopaedists, sought to discredit the new undertaking and induce government prohibition. Like all suppression and censorship, this led to the extension of the vogue for the Encyclopaedia. The flagrant social incompetence of the church brought liberalism into vogue and power. It was the weakness and unsightly decrepitude of the ecclesiastics that opened the way for the thinkers.

A king's decree on February 7, 1752 suppressed both volumes of the Encyclopaedia. Diderot trusted to reason and handed over to the authorities all the papers, proof sheets, and plates in his possession. The Jesuit Cabal had failed, however, to suppress his genius. In May 1752, the government was obliged to appeal to Diderot and D'Alembert to resume work. The third volume appeared in 1753 with D'Alembert's introduction. Thereafter, they produced a volume a year until 1757. There was steady progress in popularity during the years

(1752 - 1757). Then came the storm of division marking a memorable epoch in the history of the book. Diderot, D'Alembert, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Buffon were denounced as "heads of a formal conspiracy, a clandestine association, a midnight band, united into a horrible community of pestilent opinions and sombre interests." Public opinion was changing though. The mere fact that these new ideas created opposition proved that they were becoming food for thought of the many people in France. This new interest, though adverse at first, helped to better establish the revolutionary ideas even if the people were unconscious as yet of the tremendous power in back of the great encyclopaedic movement.

D'Alembert visited Voltaire at Ferney then came home to write an article on religious opinions. In it, he associated disbelief in the divinity of Jesus Christ, in the mysteries of faith, and in eternal punishment with a practical life of simplicity, purity, and tolerance. It was a reproach against the churchmen in France. Calas was murdered, LaBarre tortured and beheaded. Helvetius published "De l'Esprit" in 1758. With all these things there followed a general insurrection of public opinion -- scandalous, licentious, impious, and pregnant with peril. In 1759, the procurator-general laid information before the court against Helvetius, and finally, against the Encyclopaedists, later in 1759. In May a decree was passed prohibiting the sale of the seven volumes, yet the actual printing was not suspended a week and the circulation continued.

This decree against the Encyclopaedia marks the central moment of a collision between the two antagonistic conceptions: the exclusion of political authority from the sphere and function of directing opinion; and it implies absolute secularization of government.

Rousseau had published about this time his celebrated letter to D'Alembert on stage plays. The article on Geneva in the seventh volume of the Encyclopaedia had not only praised pastors for their unbelief; it also assailed the time-honored doctrine of churches that the theatre is an institution of hell and an invention of devils. Rousseau had long been brooding over certain private grievances of his own against Diderot. He took the occasion now to declare the breach between himself and Diderot. This was, however, no mere quarrel of rival authors. It marked a fundamental divergence in thought, and proclaimed the beginning of a disastrous reaction in the very heart of the school of enlightenment. Among the most conspicuous elements of reaction were: the subordination of reason to emotion; the displacement of industry, science, energetic and many-sided ingenuity, by dreamy indolence; and finally, the suppression of opinions deemed to be anti-social by the Church. The crisis of 1758-1759, then, is a date of the highest importance. It marks a collision between the principles of the age of Louis the fourteenth, of the Bartholomew Massacre, of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, and the new rationalistic principle of spiritual

emancipation.

A more vexatious incident now befell the all-daring, all-enduring Diderot than either the decree of the council or the schism with Rousseau. D'Alembert declared his intentions of abandoning the work, and urged his colleague to do the same. Voltaire wrote that it was monstrous that such a genius as Diderot should make himself the slave of booksellers, and the victim of fanatics. "Men are on the eve of a great revolution in the human mind and it is you to whom they are most indebted for it."<sup>(1)</sup> More and more Voltaire entreated Diderot to finish his work in a foreign country after D'Alembert's desertion, but always Diderot replied in the negative. Thus, for seven years the labor of conducting the vast enterprise fell upon Diderot alone. He had not only to write articles upon the most exhausting and various kinds of subjects; he had also to distribute topics among his writers, to shape their manuscripts, to correct proof-sheets, to supervise the preparation of the engravings, to write the text explanatory of them, and all this amid constant apprehension and alarm from the government and police.

As his toil was drawing to an end, he suddenly received the most mortifying of all the blows that were struck at him in the course of his prolonged, hazardous, and tormenting adventure. LeBreton, who had been entrusted with the printing of the last ten volumes, had taken possession of the sheets and proceeded to retrench, cut out, and suppress every passage,

(1) Voltaire's letters to Diderot - Jan. 1753.

line or phrase that appeared to him to be likely to provoke clamor or anger of the government. One day when the printing was nearly completed (1764) Diderot, having occasion to consult an article under the letter "S", found it completely spoiled. He stood confounded. He never forgot the horrible chagrin, and he never forgave the ignoble author of it. In 1765 the subscribers did receive the concluding ten volumes.

## Chapter IV

All writers on the Enlightenment in France in the eighteenth century call our attention to the quick transformation which took place after the middle of the century from a speculation or philosophical agitation into a political or social one. Physical science had taken immense strides. This both dwarfed the sovereignty of theology and theological metaphysics, and indirectly disposed men's minds for non-theological theories of moral as well as physical phenomena. Deism was comparatively impotent against the Church in England; first, because it was an intellectual movement and not a social one; secondly, because the constitutional doctrines of the Church were flexible. Deism in the hands of French propagators became connected with social liberalism, because the Catholic Church in those days was identified with all ideas of repression. And the tendencies of Deism in France grew more violently destructive, not only because religious superstitions were greater, but because that superstition was incorporated in a strong and inexpansile social structure.

"It would be a mistake," wrote the well-informed D'Argenson in 1753, "to attribute the laws of religion in France to the English philosophy, which has not gained more than a hundred or so philosophers in Paris, instead of setting it down to hatred against the priests, which goes to the last extreme. All minds were turning to discontent and disobedience, and everything is on the high road to a great revolution both in religion and in

government. And it will be a very different thing to that rude Reformation, a medley of superstition and freedom which came to us from Germany in the sixteenth century! As a nation and our century are enlightened in so very different a fashion, they will go whither they ought to go; they will banish every priest, all priesthood, all revelation, all mystery." (1) This represents the vast change which D'Argenson foresaw some thirty-six years before its consummation.

The broad features of the speculative revolution of which the Encyclopaedia was the outcome cannot be mistaken. The transition from Descartes to Newton meant the definite substitution of observation for hypothesis. The exaltation of Bacon meant the advance from supernatural explanation to explanation from experience. The acceptance and development of the Lockian psychology meant the reference of ideas to bodily sensations, and led men by what they thought a direct path to the identification of mind with functions of matter. What concerns us most is this new tendency to expel Magic as the decisive influence, in favor of ordered relations of cause and effect, only to be discovered by intelligent search. The universe began to be more directly conceived as a group of phenomena capable of rational and connected explanation. Man's consciousness of his power over controlling forces to secure what he desires was increasing. Thus, man became the centre of the world to himself, nature his servant, and human society the field of

(1) As quoted by John Morley - "Diderot and Encyclopaedists."

his interests and his exertions. The sensational psychology, again, clearly tends to heighten our idea of the power of education and institutions upon character. The more vividly we realize the share of external impressions in making men what they are, the more ready we shall be to concern ourselves with external conditions and their improvement.

Diderot struck a note of difference between the old Catholic spirit and the new social spirit, between quietist superstition and energetic science in the casual sentence in his article on alms-houses and hospitals: "It would be far more important to work at the prevention of misery, than to multiply places of refuge for the miserable."<sup>(1)</sup> Upon this idea hinges modern methods of prevention, of social welfare, of education, of science and medicine. With the spread of scientific discoveries came many new preventions of misery. With sanitation came a great degree of health and happiness.

Though the Encyclopaedists had not established an impregnable scientific basis for their philosophy, the important thing is that their metaphysics and psychology were calculated to inspire an energetic social spirit, because they were pregnant with humanistic sentiment. It was the Encyclopaedists who first stirred opinion in France against colonial tyranny and the abominations of slave trade. They demonstrated the folly and wastefulness and cruelty of a fiscal system that was eating the life out of the land. They voiced strong opposition to the barbarities of the penal code. It was this band of writers

(1) "Oeuvres" Vol. XV

who first grasped the great principles of modern society. In the great number of political articles we feel the immense impulse that was given to sociological discussion by the "Esprit des Lois" by Montesquieu. The change of which we are conscious in turning from the "Ésprit des Lois" to the articles in the Encyclopaedia in that the political ideas have been grasped as instruments. Philosophy has become patriotism.

The articles on "Agriculture" are remarkable for the precision with which they exposed the actual state of France; for the clearness with which they trace its inadequateness to its true sources. It was again to arouse the attention of the general public to the causes of the forced deterioration of French agriculture, namely, the restriction on trade, the arbitrariness of taxation, and the flight of the population to the large towns.

To understand this new passion for civil equality in France we must turn back and seek its root in the undying memory of the curse that was inflicted on its citizens, morally and materially, by the fiscal inequalities of the old régime. The article "Privilège," urges the desirableness of inquiring into the grounds of the vast multitude of fiscal exemptions, and of abolishing all that were no longer associated with the performance of real and useful service. What the Encyclopaedists really did was to shed the light of rational discussion on such practical grievances as even the most conservative person in France does not now dream of bringing back.

The Encyclopaedia seems inspired by the same motive, the same earnest enthusiasm for all the purposes, interest, and details of productive industry. It has often been told how Diderot himself used to visit the workshops to watch men at their toil, to ask a thousand questions, to sit down at the loom, to have the machine taken apart and put together before his eyes, to slave as an apprentice himself in order, as he says, to be able to instruct others how to do good work. He took good care to make the Encyclopaedia a complete storehouse of the arts and trades. Morley says, "To turn over volume after volume is like watching a splendid panorama of all the busy life of the time."<sup>(1)</sup> The Encyclopaedia, then, marks two great elements in the great modern transition: first, it is the definite recognition of the basis of a new society; second, it is the substitution of interest in things for interest in words, of positive knowledge for mere verbal disputation.

(1) J. Morley "Diderot and Encyclopaedists." Vol I P. 189.

## Chapter V

The three great doctrines of the Encyclopaedia upon which they based their philosophy and religion may be briefly stated as: negation of the supernatural, exclusion of finality, and negation of Providence.

Negation of the supernatural became the new rationalistic doctrine in France. "Rationalism signifies a certain cast of thought or bias of reasoning -- which leads man on all occasions to subordinate dogmatic theology to the dictates of reason and of conscience."<sup>(1)</sup> In this sense it finds its best expression in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century in France. This rationalism in morals and theology is derived from the insistence by Descartes upon method, and upon clearness and distinctness as criteria of truth. It is combined, however, with an empiricism which descends from Locke.

"Rationalism is that trend of philosophy which intercedes from the rights of 'natural reason' and sees in it the source of all truth. Common to all the historical forms of rationalism is the belief in the anatomy of thought, i.e. the view that thought can discover by its own strength, without support from a supernatural revelation and without appeal to sense perception a system of 'eternal truths,' a system presented to thought within its own realm and comprehended by thought as necessary."<sup>(2)</sup>

First, what do we mean by final causes? Causality signi-

(1)W.E.H. Lecky's "History of Rationalism in Europe" 1,(16)(1870)

(2)Encyclopaedia Britannica - Vol. 18 P 991.

fies the relation of cause to effect. Common sense assumes that things and events are products or results of certain other things or events. The old believers in Magic were content to view the world as a mere sequence of disconnected phenomena. They regarded God as the Creator (or Cause) of each successive creation in the sequence of mutually disconnected events. But the thought of such supernatural interference at every moment in the flow of events did not appeal to the philosophers with their new scientific outlook. They began to believe that final causes should be abolished, and that in accordance with human experience that there was an orderly continuity in each sequence of changes. The idea of evolution is already taking on a recognizable form. This idea which dominated the period had a far-reaching effect on thought not only among the philosophers, but among the many who were zealously scanning the volumes which contained these new theories.

Final causes had been one of the cornerstones of the old Catholic spirit. Let us look now to see how the eighteenth century philosophers apposed this theory. Sir Isaac Newton's philosophy had come to be that "God's existence is proved through the intelligence of the mechanism of nature. And that intelligence must be infinitely great if it is to afford a proof of the existence of God."<sup>(1)</sup> Voltaire maintained that speculative and dogmatic results are of little importance within the practical and moral sphere. He believed in a God, but all the suffering which he saw about him convinced him

(1)Höffding's "History of Modern Philosophy" P. 412.

that God was not omnipotent. Montesquieu had opposed "final causes," in explaining by natural and material reasons what, up to this time, had been attributed to God and Providence. But it is the Encyclopaedia which has achieved the complete change and defined negation of "final causes." The article in the Encyclopaedia entitled "Causes finales" gives us the essential idea.

"Le principe des "causes finales" consiste a trouver les lois des phénomènes dans des principes métaphysiques -- aussi le Chancelier Bacon, ce génie sublime ne paraît pas faire grand cas de l'image des causes finales dans la physique -- Bacon avait bien senti que nous voyons la nature trop en petit pour pouvoir nous mettre à la place de son auteur."(1)

The Encyclopaedists revolt against tradition and scorn authority. With them begins a new era. The Ancients so long struggling in the battle against modern ideas finally meet their Waterloo, and up from the last ruins of the battle there arises a new epoch in the history of humanity. Bacon, the master of observation and experience, and Descartes the founder of reason were the guides to this new form of humanity.

The article "Evidence" by Quesnay tells us what the Encyclopaedists mean by reason. "L'evidence résulte necessairement de l'observation intime de nos propres sensations. Ainsi, j'entends par evidence, une certitude à laquelle il nous est aussi impossible de nous refuser, qu'il nous est impossible d'ignorer nos sensations actuelles." We see, clearly, there-

(1) "Oeuvres Choisies of Diderot" P. 62.

fore, that their new doctrines were to be based entirely on experience and reason. It was their plan to submit philosophy, religion, and morals to reason and, thereby, to purify them, purge them of all the metaphysic, to make everything logical, positive, and experimental. We ask, what then is a rational religion? What is a "morale" without metaphysics, without obligations or sanctions? It is still today a difficult question to answer. We only know that this encyclopaedic idea of "morale" and religion became the keystone to the encyclopaedic propaganda.

The Encyclopaedists founded their natural religion on this triple base of the negation of the supernatural, the exclusion of finality, and the negation of Providence. They denied Providence, because it existed from the evil in the world, and because it was not conceived from a God of justice and kindness. They denied Providence, because the dignity of an all-powerful God "s'accomode mal de l'intervention dans les petites affaires des hommes." Finally, they denied Providence, because this divine intervention seemed to them incompatible with the idea of progress. For, Progress supposes that we are each one of us masters of our own destinies. This seemed a radical idea to the Churchmen. It aroused public opinion and created an uncomfortable atmosphere for the poor Diderot and his friends. The government, we remember, suppressed and censored, and forbid. Priests and Churchmen protested. Yet, everywhere circulation of the volumes containing this revolu-

tion of ideas against the old dogmas of the Church increased. Gradually, more and more people came under the influence of the new doctrines, and they began to question things. As Diderot had said not the "why", but the "how" of things was to interest people. The more these books were read, the greater the influence was on French thought. The Encyclopaedia became a powerful instrument for the distribution of the great doctrines of the new epoch.

Providence may be defined as a theological term including two elements: God's preservation and administration of the material universe and His moral government over His rational creatures. Both of these are combined in the conviction that the universe and all its inhabitants move towards the end appointed by God, and, therefore, man may trust His goodness and wisdom in the events of life. This doctrine has both a religious and philosophical aspect. The religious aspect is the earlier in history and the more important for practical life. Religion as far back as it can be traced, included the belief that men could obtain the aid of the higher powers who were able to mold the course of events to the good of men. The philosophical aspect of the doctrine arises whenever philosophy enters the realm of religious thought. Thus, Socrates, Plato, and the Stoics emphasized the idea of a world-order working for good. Christianity borrowing from both Hebrew and Greek thought, early added to its religious trust in God's Providence a philosophical doctrine regarding it. Augustine held that all

things, even evil, are but the working out of the will of God, and that nothing can thwart his purpose. This has been the general position held in all branches of the Church, and is not essentially effected by discussions of the relations of sins to the will of God, since all have believed in the final triumph of the will of God. The philosophical aspect has borne fruit in religion, and furnished a basis in reason for a loving trust in God. Later theology divided Providence into general, governing the order of the universe, and particular, governing the events in the life of man; and into ordinary and extraordinary, the first operating through natural causes, the latter through miracles. Diderot defined Providence as the care that God takes of his workers as much in protecting them as in directing their activities. (1)

With Providence, supernatural, and finality all withdrawn from their idea of religion, just what does remain? There remains a God, creator and ruler of the world. It is the God of Voltaire, Beranger, and Renan; the God who has fashioned the world like a clock-maker constructs a clock. A God who has given us the taste for luxury and pleasure; and finally, the God who will punish like a father. Here is where the Encyclopaedists disagree. D'Alembert said in opposing Voltaire, "C'est l'un des grands griefs, la persistance du patriarche à croire son Dieu vengeur et rémunérateur."

To the Encyclopaedists it is a question of founding a moral philosophy on some natural and reasonable basis. To do (1) "Oeuvres" Vol. 16. ;p 442. article on "Providence."

this, they made a seemingly simple enough assertion, but, in reality, one of the boldest up to this time. It was a "morale du bonheur." -- "la bont  de l'homme." It was the dogma set forth by Helvetius in his "De l'Esprit." Nature means for us to be happy. Instead of being "s v res, tristes, durs, nous serons doux, gais, complaisants." God, if he exists, is kind "L'ouir c'est l'honorer, jouissons, il ordonne."

"Faites tout ce qui vous pla t." counsels La Mettrie.

"Jouissons sans crainte, soyez heureux," is the advice of Holbach. However, they said, this moral philosophy would lead to egotism, and unchecked passion for pleasure leads us only to satiety, sickness, and war. In addition, our personal interest is linked to the common interest of mankind. It is necessary to teach man the best way to take care of himself. Experience and reason must be joined to oppose "la bont  de l'homme."

With these three doctrines of negation of the supernatural, exclusion of finality, and negation of Providence before us, let us now turn to a more detailed study of the philosophers and the development of these doctrines in their works in relation to the influence on the thought of the day.

## Chapter VI

"Le philosophe est donc, un honnête homme qui agit en tout par raison et qui joint à un esprit de reflexion et de justesse les moeurs et les qualités sociables."<sup>(1)</sup>

To better understand what we mean by "philosophers" since we are to consider the Encyclopaedists Diderot, Helvetius, Holbach, Condillac, and Raynal as philosophers, let us look at some of their characteristics.

It has been said that "reason is to the philosopher what faith is to the Christian." Grace determines the Christian's action, and so reason determines the way in which the philosopher acts. Other men are carried away by the fire of their passions without hesitating for reflection upon their actions. The philosopher acts only after careful reflection. He forms his opinions upon an infinity of detailed observations. He examines a principle from its very source, and thus he discovers its proper value and not merely knows the use for which it is created. He takes for true what is proved true, for false what is false, and for doubtful what is doubtful. The philosophic spirit of observation and justice unites everything to its basic principles.

Philosophy is a theory of existence, the theory of the universe. R. G. Collingwood defines philosophy as the "free activity of critical thought, and is applicable to any problem which thought can raise."<sup>(2)</sup> And so, with this age of new ideas

(1) Diderot's "Oeuvres" Vol. 16. Article on "Philosophe" p. 277.

(2) R. G. Collingwood "Religion and Philosophy" p. 17.

and discoveries comes the season of the endeavors to order and systematize the wealth of thoughts and facts, and to reduce them to simple, well established, fundamental notions. The new world-scheme and the new science had now to be interwoven with the other intellectual content which appeared to consciousness as indisputable. The problem of existence thus came into the foreground.

Descartes, the first of great system makers, and the father of modern French philosophy, finds a way to constructive thought through analysis. "The whole philosophy," says Descartes, in the Preface to "Principes de la Philosophie," "is like a tree, the roots of which are metaphysics; the trunk of which is the science of physics, and the branches shooting from the trunk are all the other sciences which may be reduced to three main ones, viz., medicine, mechanics, and ethics, by which last I mean the highest and most perfect ethics which, since it presupposes a complete knowledge of the other sciences, is the supreme degree of wisdom." He proposes reason to enlighten and guide us. Reason was Descartes' supreme judge. In his "Discours de la Méthode," he says that you should never accept a thing as true which you do not clearly know to be such. To this formula which he laid down science owes its perfection. It was also to become the regulating principle of the new philosophy, "Evidence."

Descartes has said, "I know myself as thought and I positively do not know myself as brain." All modern forms of

idealism start here. To him the soul is a thing that thinks, and the body is simply a thing which has extension. Thus, he has set up a purely rational physical science. The "age of reason" of the seventeenth century with its philosophy of "clear ideas" spread all over Europe, but Locke, Hume and Condillac did not have quite the same conception of evidence as Descartes. However, the Cartesian spirit prevailed. It put an end to superannuated doctrines, cleared the ground, and set physics free from the clogs of metaphysical hypothesis. It set up a provisional doubt, and formulated problems that needed to be formulated. It heralds Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason." In short, the Cartesian spirit influenced all France throughout the eighteenth century. Cartesian rationalism is extremely important, then, to the Encyclopaedists in forming their philosophy.

The leading spirit of the sceptical school of philosophical thought in France in the eighteenth century was Diderot. Rosen Kranz characterizes him as a most versatile man who "combined in his own nature, both consciously and unconsciously, all the modern instincts of French thought."<sup>(1)</sup> Diderot's nature resented the lifeless formalism of the Church, the tyranny of the priests, their oppression of the masses, their priveleges, their casuistry, and dogmatism. He welcomed, therefore, a philosophy which tended to undermine the position and power of an unreasonably favored class, and reduce mankind to a fair level of opportunity and privilege. To him ecclesiasticism meant dogmatism; and

(1) RosenKranz "Diderot" Vol. 1. p.5.

dogmatism meant the traditional metaphysic of sophistry and credulity. The philosophy of sensationalism, for that reason, appealed all the more forcibly to a nature which had become embittered by the theological dogmas, urged to support a decayed ecclesiastical system and inimical to the welfare of the French people.

Early in his career Diderot had come under literary and philosophical influences of England. Locke exerted considerable influence upon the philosopher's views concerning the primary sources of knowledge. He accepted the Lockian premises, and also his general conclusions. In his article on Locke in the Encyclopaedia, Diderot takes Locke's query as to the possibility of matter being endowed with thought as though it were a positive and established dogma. "Locke has said in his 'Essay Concerning Human Understanding' that it was not impossible to conceive that matter might have the capacity of thought. --- Supposing sensibility were the primitive germs of thought, and common property of all matter, scattered through all the products of nature in various proportions, manifesting itself in weaker or stronger degrees according to the varying complexity of different organisms, what evil consequences could anyone possibly infer from this? None. Man would still remain what he is, and would continue to be judged solely by the good or evil uses to which he may devote his activities."(1)

It is true that Diderot was one of the most mind-stirring writers that the world has ever known. Höfding says of him, (1) Encyclopaedia. Vol. 15, article on "Locke."

"He touches the zenith of philosophical thought and of revolutionary spirit."<sup>(1)</sup> In his early writings, Diderot was still a deist in accordance with the popular theology of the day. After the manner of Voltaire, and like him he was under the influence of Locke and Shaftsbury. He then thought that modern physics had dealt materialism and scepticism a fatal blow. This philosophy ceased to satisfy him, and gradually he inclined to the more attractive form of materialism, that which attributes to organic molecules, desires, aversions, feelings, and thought. In his dialogue called "A Conversation between D'Alembert and Diderot," he conceives capacity of receiving sensations, sensibility, to be a general and an essential quality of matter, that is, a distinction between potential and actual sensibility. For Diderot the life and intelligence of Nature are everlasting. They are never mere results or products of purely mechanical effects. They existed in

disposition of the particles able to produce consciousness! No; that which possesses life and consciousness has always possessed them, and always will possess them.<sup>(1)</sup> This thought is elaborated in the "Conversation between D'Alembert and Diderot," and in "D'Alembert's Dream," two dialogues which in virtue of their form, as well as their content, rank among the classics of philosophy.

The difficulty of explaining the origin of consciousness falls the more easily into the background with Diderot since all finite individuals in virtue of their inner connection form one great whole. "Do you not admit that everything in Nature is connected and that it is impossible that there can be any break in the chain? What do you mean then by your individuals? There are no individuals, none at all. There is only one single great individual, the whole," says Diderot.

sense. But his letters clearly show that he afterwards abandoned that view. That which is called a moral instinct, and which appears in our involuntary actions or judgment of actions, is, in fact, the result of an infinite number of small experiences which begin with life itself. A crowd of different motives here come into play, none of which, however, need come into consciousness in the moment of acting or judging. Everything in us rests on experience. (1)

We find in Diderot, signs of an examination into the history of the development of moral feeling, and it is especially interesting to note that his great enthusiasm for the "motives of great and noble minds" is not in the least degree weakened by his view that these motives are the fruit of a development on the soil of experience. But he did not succeed in applying this view in all cases--especially when he stands face to face with the precepts of ordinary social morality. Only in the individual--not in society--does he find a natural development. Society as it existed exhibited rules and institutions which appeared to him so contrary to reason, especially when he compared them with the accounts of the life of savage peoples, that he could only suppose them to have arisen out of superstition and lust for power. Between the savage and the civilized man he could find no natural middle terms. How can a morality which is contradictory to nature have arisen except through the slyness and arbitrariness of rulers? "Examine carefully

(1) Lettres à Mademoiselle Volland, Sept. 2, 1762, Oct. 4, 1767.

all political, civil and religious institutions; unless I am very much mistaken you will find that for centuries long the human race has bowed under a yoke imposed upon it by a parcel of rogues. Beware, above all things of those who will introduce order. To set in order always means to set oneself up as ruler over other men by placing hindrances in their way."<sup>(1)</sup> It would be difficult to find a clearer evidence of how completely Diderot's time was lacking in the faculty of discovering historical connection. Even Diderot in his great aptitude for living into and feeling all sorts of circumstances could find no other explanation but arbitrariness and lust for power. The interval between the longing and striving of the individual and that exhibited by society, between the powers which each man felt within him and the narrow room in which the existing order allowed him to exercise them, was too great to render an understanding possible. From the future everything might be hoped, but the past held nothing beyond knavery.

Religious faith in general seemed to Diderot nothing but a source of evils. It is something more than a joke when he says in a letter that he lays the blame on the gods rather than men. Belief in God is no harmless matter; it begets evil in two ways. In the first place, it inevitably involves a form of worship, when ceremonies and theological dogmas soon take the place of natural morality and deform its precepts. Secondly, since the great suffering that there is in the world is con-

(1) *Supplément au voyage de Bourgainville.*

trary to the idea of a good God, men are reduced to all sorts of absurdities and contradictions in order to palliate the fact. In the latter case, religion is contrary to reason, in the former, to morality.<sup>(1)</sup> At length his philosophy came to be a sort of pantheistic naturalism. Several paths led him to that goal. He perceived that the irreducible dualism of the soul and body was generally upheld for religious quite as much as for philosophical reasons. This alone was enough to drive him away from it. Secondly, in his "Letters on the Blind," he attempted to work out--as Condillac later did--a psychological development of our sensations. He says that experience shows that life is everywhere, who knows but sensation is everywhere?

His positivism is joined to an eager, universal, and insatiable scientific curiosity. A fervent love of humanity animates and limits Diderot's idea of science and is found again in his polemics against Christian religion. His ethics is, however, perhaps unfortunately, influenced by the lacrymose sentimentality of the times. He believes that justice is rooted in the very nature of man and that it is bad education that makes us wicked. It is bad examples and bad legislation that deprave us, not that nature has created us wicked. We shall see these same ideas deeply rooted in the philosophy of the other Encyclopaedists. Diderot's philosophy was to have a lasting influence on his fellow associates, especially Holbach and Helvetius. With the circulation of their ideas, both in (1) *Lettres à Mademoiselle Volland*, Oct. 6, 1765, Oct. 20, 1760.

the salons and cafés and by the publication of their writings, the masses in France became imbibed with the same far-reaching principles. Thus, the seeds of the encyclopaedic doctrines grew and grew and flourished in the rich soil of the awakening French minds, and finally ripened and bore the fruits which nourished the Revolution.

Diderot anticipated the progress of natural sciences and the change they were to bring to the general conception of the universe, and consequently to the whole of mankind. He was among the first to recognize the social importance of the mechanical arts by giving them the place they were entitled to in the Encyclopaedia. His glorification of the arts and sciences sealed the alliance of philosophy with work and mechanical arts which contributed so powerfully to the progress of humanity. He raised in public esteem men who practiced these arts. "Salons" were making the beginnings of art criticism on dramatic art.

In fine, Diderot brought forward many ingenious and profound ideas. In the articles of the Encyclopaedia he revealed a searching knowledge of the history of philosophy then neglected and almost unknown in France. Goethe called him, "The most Germanic of French heads." Few philosophers have had a keener sense of the pulse of universal life and of the creative power of nature, or as sound and penetrating an insight into manifold reality. In our study of him, we find ourselves constantly marvelling at the seemingly tireless zeal with which he

attacked his work and at the minuteness of the detail contained in his works.

Larousse says, "Diderot was neither an atheist, materialist, pantheist, nor believer, but from time to time he has enjoyed each opinion. He is versatile and everywhere tolerant. Diderot knew God only in metaphysics, only law in moral, only a rule in the aesthetic, nature in all its force, in all its grandeur, but also in all its simplicity, nature without frills, but without ideal."<sup>(1)</sup>

Throughout our reading we have found Diderot characterized in many ways, and we have found him the father of many influences. He was a sometime inspirator of the materialistic works of the eighteenth century, "Le Système de la Nature," especially influencing Helvetius and Holbach; he was the forerunner of the positivistic and sensationalistic logic of Condillac. What characterizes his philosophy is the naturalistic idea as opposed to the theologic supernaturalism and the scepticism of the metaphysical spiritualist.

(1) Larousse, "Diderot." p. 58.

## Chapter VII

Claude Adrian Helvetius (1715-71) another of the great philosophers of the Encyclopaedic School wrote his "De l'esprit" (1758) in direct concurrence with the growing sympathy for free movement. "De l'esprit" was treated as one of the most godless of books. Immediately upon its publication it aroused public opinion, and especially it was condemned by the Archbishop of Paris, by the Pope, and even by the Parliament of Paris. Helvetius, who had hoped to gain literary fame by his work, found himself obliged to leave the country. We recall that this work was published in 1753 just at the time when Diderot was having a difficult struggle to keep on with his work with the Encyclopaedia. It is interesting to note the great sensation this book made both in France and abroad. There are two main paradoxes contained in it: first, that personal interest or the pursuit of happiness is the only principle, whether confessed or not, of human actions; secondly, that education can do everything. His writings, not only "De l'esprit" but "De l'homme," proceed from the conviction that the exclusion of individuals from active participation in public life must lead to unhappy results. Character finds not sufficiently great motives and objects for action. Both literature and morals must suffer from such a state of affairs. For, both talent and virtue, and intellect as well as integrity are conditioned and developed by the form of government which also determines education. This is the great and profound thought from which

Helvetius' work started.

Helvetius carries on the theory of the development of our faculties through experience and external influences. Even self-love is acquired, for we could not feel love unless we had first felt pain. Susceptibility to pleasure and pain is, therefore, the only gift with which Nature has directly endowed us. It arouses and sharpens our attention and determines our actions. What it is that will attract our attention depends upon our education--taking this word in its widest sense, so that it includes everything in our environment and circumstances which has influenced our development even down to the smallest trifles. With this interpretation of the word, Helvetius is able to assert that no two men ever received exactly the same education. All men are equally gifted, but the conditions of their development are different, he says. We may well note the importance of this idea on the theories of modern psychology. Helvetius derives all differences of character from education and since this is dependent on public relations and the form of government we see how far this theory prompted his sorrow and anger at the internal conditions of France. He is described as a free-thinking, tenderhearted, and benevolent man who employed the riches he had amassed as farmer-general in the service of literature and philanthropy.

His ideas on morality are indeed interesting. The moral instinct, the moral sense is not to be admitted. Moral depravity consists not so much in the excesses to which individ-

uals are addicted as in the general cleavage between individual and social interests. It is hypocritical of moralists to attack the private vices of single individuals instead of at once directing their attack toward public abuses and oppression in high places. Morality, the art of making laws, and pedagogy are not endeavors in three different spheres; they all rest on the same principle according to Helvetius, i.e., the principle of public utility, utility to the greatest possible number of men who are bound together in one state. Here again is one of our fundamental present day economic principles, that of utilitarianism.

Inequality of minds is due to various circumstances. Pedagogy is to the individual what political science is to the nations. Error is an evil which can be avoided. To insure the happiness of mankind, it will be necessary to bring the art of education to perfection. Most men only recognize as good that which is in harmony with their own limited interests. A man is just when all his actions tend to the public good. "To be virtuous, it is necessary to unite nobleness of soul with an enlightened understanding. Whoever combines these gifts, conducts himself by the compass of public utility. This utility is the principle of all human virtues, and the foundation of all legislations. It ought to inspire the legislator, and to force the nations to submit to his laws."<sup>(1)</sup>

It is a leading principle with Helvetius that we can only

(1) Helvetius "De l'homme." V. ii 6.

recognize such ideas and qualities of character as agree with our own ideas and feelings. We only recognize intellect when the new thought-connections which we encounter present a certain analogy with our own thoughts, and are in harmony with our own interests. Unless our interest is set in motion we recognize nothing. But according to him, interest is of two kinds: "Some men there are animated by noble and enlightened pride, maintaining their minds in that state of suspension which allows the free entrance of new truths. Among such belong a few philosophic minds and a few youths, too young still to have formed their opinions so fixedly that they would blush to change them----- . There are others-----and amongst these reckon most men--who are animated by a less noble vanity. Such men can only esteem in other ideas conformable with their own, and calculated to justify the high opinion which they all have of the justice of their minds."(1) "The man of genius has as his only protectors and panegyrists, youths and a few enlightened and virtuous men."(2)

Besides ignoble vanity, Helvetius mentions laziness as a hindrance to the recognition of new ideas and new virtues. According to his view, both of these hindrances can only be conquered by a feeling of sufficient strength to rouse men out of their apathy and narrowness. Both Helvetius' works investigate the conditions for the arising of great minds and important qualities of character, and for the recognition of the

(1) "De l'esprit." ii 3.

(2) "De l'homme." iv 6.

same when they have arisen, and he finds the fundamental condition to lie in the intimate association of individual with public life. His theories of the original sameness of individuals, of the fundamentality of self-interest, and of the omnipotence of education, all seem to emphasize one and the same principle of thought.

Helvetius' religious standpoint is deistic with special prominence given to the unknowableness of God. He polemicises against theological morality which attacks private vices only and not the seat of the evil, i.e., the relations of public life, and against the clergy whose interests cannot coincide with that of the nation as a whole.

Finally, let us turn to the influence and value of Helvetius' thought. As we have seen he was one of the agents of expression of the philosophy vitally related to the problems of the century. His thought was a modification, an epitome of the eighteenth century thought with additional stress on certain aspects. As we have noted the philosophy of the period was the product of a joint-coöperative effort. Helvetius shared in this effort, for his mind stimulated as well as it was stimulated by the currents of his time. Keim says, "Helvetius had a greater influence on many thinkers and writers than can be imagined."<sup>(1)</sup> He has so successfully summed up the ethical thought of his day and so clearly and fully articulated the ethical implications of sensationalist philosophy

(1) A.Keim, "Helvétius, Sa vie et sa oeuvre." p. 604.

that he has aroused the opposition of most of the thinkers who were allied to him in spirit, such as Diderot, Voltaire, and D'Alembert. This opposition led Barni to believe that Helvetius was not the "veritable expression of the eighteenth century, since he was contradicted by the greatest spirits of his time."<sup>(1)</sup> However, he mistakes opposition of the less extreme adherents of an idea to one who would carry the idea to its logical conclusion, for a real opposition of principles. For, Diderot's morality, and Rousseau's somewhat similar point of view are but mid-joints between arbitrary morals and sensationist morals half way attempts to base morality on human nature. Helvetius realized this and he moved to the extremity of the line.

There are many possible sources of influence. In his own day his thought relation with his contemporaries was a case of action and reaction of interstimulation. It is, therefore, impossible to say which ideas are his and which are acquired from others, in what respects he influenced others and in what respects others influenced him. It is impossible to distinguish clearly between the influence of Helvetius and the influence of the encyclopaedic thought--his thought being part and parcel of the encyclopaedic movement. Helvetius was a materialist. He undoubtedly contributed some share to nineteenth century materialism, but it is difficult to estimate the degree of his contribution when we consider that La Mettrie,  
<sup>(1)</sup> Barni, "Les Moralistes Français." Vol.3. p.137. du XVIII Siècle.

Holbach, and Diderot were materialists, too, and that materialism was one of the strong strains in encyclopaedic thought, and that nineteenth century materialism has some of its roots in Hegelianism. Or take utilitarianism. Undoubtedly, Helvetius' contribution in this direction is very important. But the pain and pleasure criterion of value of an act or an experience has been upheld by the sophists, by Hobbes, by Locke, by Hume, and by all the encyclopaedists. Under such circumstances it is difficult to determine Helvetius contribution to nineteenth century utilitarianism. Nor can we tell from whom Bentham borrowed his famous formula of the standard of good. Similarly, Helvetius influenced the development of "ideology" that was quite an important current of thought in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. His advocacy of the objective observation of man for the purpose of formulating laws helpful in the universalization of happiness probably had its influence on the development of positivism. The main theme of Helvetius that "education can accomplish anything" and that through education and legislation human happiness can be immensely increased, probably contributed to the stress on the importance of education, the hopes in general enlightenment and the attention devoted to legislative reform in the nineteenth century particularly among the utilitarians.

The aim of this summary is not to determine the degree of influence nor to be exhaustive of influences. We shall simply now indicate some direct references to the possible lines of

his influence. The first thing that ought to be noticed is the immense popularity that his works, especially "De l'esprit," enjoyed among his contemporaries. He was read by thinkers as well as the general public. "De l'esprit" being very largely an epitome of the thought of the period this popularity was probably an influential factor in making the dominant ideas of the time familiar in wider circles.

The opinion in which his contemporaries held him serves as another indication of his influence. While criticising the exaggerations contained in "De l'esprit" and "De l'homme," Diderot had but words of praise for the general contents of these books. In Rousseau, "De l'esprit" stimulated a strong opposition to their author's point of view. The most eminent political writers during the revolution looked upon Helvetius as a master. Abbé Sièyes, whose influence on the course of the revolution was profound, reflected over the idea of Helvetius during 1725-1775.<sup>(1)</sup> Helvetius was one of the most influential minds in shaping that of Condorcet, unquestionably one of the most fruitful thinkers of the revolutionary France. The latter's conception of progress as the continuous growth of human culture presented in the "Esquisse" tallies with Helvetius' conception of progress as purely cultural. His ardent devotion to education, his great hopes at results from general enlightenment, and particularly from study of the social subjects, is probably to some extent an echo of Helvetius.

(1) A. Keim, "Helvétius, Sa vie et sa oeuvre." p. 646.

As we mentioned, very significant is Helvetius influence on the course of utilitarianism through the stimulating effect he had on Bentham. "Nobody pretends," says Morley, "that Helvetius has discovered utilitarianism-----but what is certain and what is in itself enough to entitle Helvetius to consideration is that from Helvetius the idea of general utility as the foundation of legislation was derived by that strong and powerful English thinker who made utilitarianism the great reforming force of legislation and the foundation of jurisprudence. Bentham himself avowed the source of his inspiration."<sup>(1)</sup> His emphasis on legislation and the making "happiness of the greatest number" the central principle of legislation the salient features of Bentham are also among the outstanding features of Helvetius work.

Helvetius may also have exercised some influence on Saint Simon. In speaking of his "Utopian Social Order," Höffding remarks, "The guiding principle on which the new order was to be based was conceived by Saint Simon as the insight and harmony of interests very much as this was conceived by Helvetius."<sup>(2)</sup>

What the permanent effects of Helvetius were on the French eighteenth century thinkers, we cannot say, but we are inclined to believe that they were profound. The idea of general lay education under social control was probably strongly reinforced by the Encyclopaedic thought. To evaluate Helvetius we have to evaluate sensationalism, utilitarianism, environmentalism,

(1) J. Morley, "Diderot and the Encyclopaedists." Vol. II p. 136.  
(2) Höffding, "History of Modern Philosophy." Vol. II p. 316.

education as a preparation etc., which is far beyond the scope of this short work. Suffice it to say that his sensationalism, utilitarianism, environmentalism, and education were all of tremendous importance on French thought in the eighteenth century.

## Chapter VIII

Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789) was a German who had settled in Paris and had drawn around him some leading radical writers. His salon was often frequented and became the great center of intellectual life in Paris. His famous suppers had caused him to be named "le maître d'hôtel de la philosophie." He spent much of his time at chemistry, but it was under Diderot's influence that he took up philosophical studies. The "System of Nature" was published in 1770, eight years before the death of Voltaire and Rousseau, and it gathered up all the scattered explosives of criticism of the century into one thundering engine of revolt and destruction. No book ever produced a more widespread shock. Everybody insisted on reading it and almost everybody was terrified. It suddenly revealed to the readers the views of a half a century of enlightenment to which they had been led quite unsuspectingly. Holbach was a confessed materialist. His work is an expression of materialistic and atheistic dogmatism. He says that man is a material thing being organized so as to feel, think, and be modified in certain ways peculiar to himself, that is, to the particular combination of the substances of which he is composed. Thus, he reduced his materialism to a system. The significance of his new system lies in the energy and indignation with which he opposed spiritualistic views. Holbach startled the eighteenth century thinkers by writing the appalling judgments that there is no God; that the universe is only

matter in spontaneous movement; and most grievous of all, that what men call their souls die with the death of the body. Holbach shows that it is necessary to believe in spiritual causes, in a God in relation to the world, in a soul in relation to the body, ONLY, if material nature were dead, passive and incapable of moving itself. If motion is a fundamental property of matter, where is the necessity of spiritual causes? They explain nothing says Holbach. An appeal to spiritual causes is only an expression of our ignorance, merely a survival of the way in which savage men explained natural phenomena through the intervention of spirits. The spiritual quality is connected with the brain. "It is of a disposition or combination peculiar to living things, in virtue of which a lifeless and insentient matter ceases to be lifeless and obtains the capacity of feeling by being taken up into the living being."(1)

Holbach did not agree with Diderot that sensations are the fundamental property of matter. He explains thought as molecular motion of the same kind as that which underlies fermentation, nutrition and growth----- . "Let us rest content with the knowledge that the soul is moved and modified by those material causes which work upon her."(2) All science then is physics, and ethics is applied physics. It is physical science and experience that man ought to consult in religion, morals, legislation, as well as in knowledge and the arts.

(1) Holbach, "Système de la Nature." i. p. 105.

(2) Holbach, "Système de la Nature." i. p. 118.

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It is by our senses that we are bound to human nature; it is by our senses that we discover her secrets. The concept of duty arises out of the concept of nature. Each individual seeks his own happiness. Reason, "which is nothing but physical science applied to the behavior of men in society"<sup>(1)</sup> is all important. The happiness of one individual depends on the happiness of others. "Jouissez sans peur soyez heureux." We may sum up, then, three of the author's definitions as:

1. Motion is an effort by which a body changes or tends to change its place. 2. Matter in general is all that affects our senses in any fashion whatever; and the qualities that we attribute to different kinds of matter, are founded on the different impressions that they produce in us. 3. Science derived from experience is the source of all wise action.

"Spiritualism is theoretically so unfounded that there can be no doubt that this system is the fruit of a very deep and very interesting theological policy."<sup>(2)</sup> According to Holbach, the theologians are the real makers of gods. If we go back to the beginning, we shall always find that ignorance and fear have created gods; fancy, enthusiasm, or deceit has adorned or disfigured them; weakness has worshipped them; credulity preserves them in life; custom regards them and tyranny supports them in order to make the burdens serve its own ends.<sup>(3)</sup> This is the epitome of Holbach's philosophy of religion, a startling and direct opposition to the old ideas of

(1) Ibid, ii. p. 126.

(2) Système de la Nature. i. p. 97.

(3) Système de la Nature. ii. p. 200.

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authority and tradition.

Man flatters himself that he must be eternal, says Holbach. "O, man, wilt thou never conceive that thou art but an insect of a day? All changes in the universe; nature contains not a form that is constant; and yet thou wouldst claim that thy species can never disappear, and must be excepted from the great universal law of incessant change!"

We may pause for a moment to see how the orthodox theologian and the atheistic Holbach use the same language. Holbach was sincere when he said this, because it was indispensable in order to prepare men's minds for the conception of the universe as a whole. With the theologian, he rebukes man's pride in order to insinuate the miracle of Grace. The preacher of naturalism replaces a futile vanity in being the end and object of the creation, by a fruitful reverence for the supremacy of human reason, and a right sense of the value of its discreet and disciplined use. The theologian restores this absurd and misleading egoism of the race by representing the Creator as above all else concerned to work miracles for the salvation of a creature whose understanding is at once pitifully weak and odiously perverse, and whose heart is from the beginning wicked, corrupt and given to reprobation. The theologian discourages men; they are to wait for the miracle of conversion, inert or desperate. The naturalist arouses them; he supplies them with the most powerful of motives for the energetic use of the most powerful of their endowments.

"Men would always have Grace," says Holbach, "if they were well educated and well governed."<sup>(1)</sup> And so here again in another philosopher we find the same fundamental ideas of materialism, and education.

Immortality of the soul is a religious dogma of use only to priests. Moral freedom is quite out of the question since necessary laws govern all natural phenomena both intellectual and moral. On the question of the existence of God, Holbach subjected deism and theism to a searching criticism, doubtlessly directed towards Voltaire's natural religion. He says that the study of nature should have nothing to do with moral or theological instincts lest a new chance of errors be added to all those which we already have to guard against. What we call finality is but the total sum of the conditions required for the existence of every being. When these conditions are found combined, these conditions exist, and so when they cease, finality disappears. The personality upheld by the theists is untenable. The deist's God is useless, the theist's God is full of contradictions. Holbach says, "Oh, God, hidden from view where I cannot discover you, pardon me in the weakness of my reason for having denied your existence. How can my crude eyes perceive you in a world where all my senses reveal only material objects to me? I cannot bend myself down before the authority of those men who demand of me the sacrifice of reason which you have given me. In the hateful image of you that they offer me I cannot recognize you.

(1) *Système de la Nature*. Chap. xi.

But I have always atuned my ear to reason of which you are the author, and virtue, which pleases you. I have always loved.<sup>(1)</sup>

It seems to me that if we accept Holbach's ideas, we have no right to reject anything in the name of reason, and we are inconsistent if we go further and submit to religious dogma. Theism is liable to as many heresies and schisms as orthodox religion, and is, from a logical point of view even more untenable. Holbach makes this interesting statement, "There will always be but a step from theism to superstition." It is fear and ignorance of causes, then, that first suggested to man the idea of his gods, and nothing but science can cause this instinctive theology to disappear.

Again, let us turn to influences and values. The "Système de la Nature" created a great deal of commotion among the philosophers. Voltaire had no sooner read the work than he at once snatched up his pen and wrote a refutation.<sup>(2)</sup> And at the same time he took good care that the right persons should hear what he had done. He wrote to his old patron and friend, Richlieu, that it would be a great kindness if he would let the King know that the abused Voltaire had written an answer to the book that all the world was talking about. I think, he says, that it is always a good thing to uphold the doctrine of the existence of a God who punishes and rewards; society has need of such an opinion. The author, he wrote to Grimm, ought to have felt that he was undoing his friends,

(1) "Système de la Nature." ii. "Existence of God."

(2) See article "Dieu" in the "Dictionnaire Philosophique."

and making them hateful in the eyes of the King and the court.<sup>(1)</sup> This came true in the case of Frederick of Prussia who was offended by a book which spared political superstitions as little as theological dogma, and treated kings as boldly as it treated priests. Though busily occupied in watching the war then waging between Russia and Turkey, he found time to compose a defence of theism. "'Tis a good sign," Voltaire said to him, "when a king and a plain man think alike; their interests are often so hostile, that when their ideas do agree, they must certainly be right."<sup>(2)</sup> The philosophic meaning of Holbach's propositions was never really seized by Voltaire. In truth, it was a characteristic of Voltaire always to take the social, rather than the philosophic view, of the great issues of theistic controversy.

Goethe, then a student at Strasbourg, has told us what horror and alarm the "Système de la Nature" brought into the circle there. "But we could not conceive," he says, "how such a book could be dangerous."

Holbach was a vigorous propagandist. Two years after the appearance of his master work, he drew up its chief propositions in a short and popular volume called "Good Sense;" or "Natural Ideas Opposed to Supernatural." His zeal led him to write and circulate a vast number of other treatises and small volumes, the bare list of which would fill several pages, all inciting their readers to an intellectual revolt against the

(1) Voltaire's Correspondence. Nov. 1, 1770.

(2) Voltaire's Correspondence. July 27, 1770.

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reigning system in Church and State. He lived to get a glimpse of the very edge and sharp bend of the cataract. He died in the spring of 1789. If he had only lived five years longer, he would have seen the great church of Notre Dame solemnly consecrated by legislative decree to the worship of Reason, bishops publicly trampling on the crosier amid universal applause, and vast crowds exulting in processions whose hero was an ass crowned with mitre. Such was the French Revolution with its worship of Reason and its great cries for "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity."

## Chapter IX

L'Abbé Raynal (1711-1796) was one of the most constant guests at the philosophic meals of Baron d'Holbach and Helvetius. Like Holbach and Helvetius he nourished his ideas by contact with Diderot; like them he accentuated the negations of the Encyclopaedists and made a deadly war on the monarchial and theological traditions to the profit of a new regime which would lay its foundations on tolerance, humanity, philosophy and sciences. His writings, often echoing what he heard said among the people, show that society was his workshop. He pressed everyone with questions as to all matters, great or small, with which he was familiar. Raynal looked about him and he saw millions of men subjected to the power of a few kings and high official rulers.

In the same year that the "Système de la Nature" appeared, 1770, Raynal published his "History of the Indies." And, like Holbach's work, it, too, received immense popularity. It is also interesting to note that just as in the case of the "Système de la Nature," so people set down the "History of the Indies" to Diderot, and even the most moderate critics insisted that he had at any rate written not less than one-third of it. The book came into immediate vogue. A second edition was demanded in a couple of years, and it is computed that more than twenty editions, as well as countless pirated versions, were exhausted before the universal curiosity and interest were satisfied.

The true source of the popularity of Raynal's "History" lay in the fuel which the book supplied to the two master emotions of the hour,--the hatred and contempt for religion, and the passion for justice and freedom. The subject easily lent itself to these two strong currents. Or we may say that hatred of religion, and passion for justice and freedom, were in fact the subjects, and that the commercial establishments and political relations of the new worlds in east and west were only the setting and framework. Raynal was perhaps the first person to see that the surest way of discrediting Catholicism was to write some chapters of its history. He made Christianity seem ugly, in the imaginary simplicity, and unbroken gladness of the native races whose blood was shed by Christian aggressors as if it had been water. The ruthless cruelty of the Spanish conquerors in the new world is a profoundly instructive illustration of the essential narrowness of the papal Christianity, its pitiful exclusiveness, its low and bad morality, and above all, its incurable unfitness for dealing with the spirit and motives of men in face of the violent temptations with which the wealth of the new world now assailed and corrupted them. Catholicism had held triumphant possession of the conscience of Europe for a dozen centuries and more. As Catholicism now in France in the eighteenth century proved itself unable to harmonize the new moral aspirations and new social necessities of the time with the ancient tradition, Raynal was right in telling over again the afflict-

ing story of her earlier failure, and in identifying the creed that murdered Calas and LaBarre before their own eyes, with the creed that had blasted the future of the fairest portion of the new world two centuries before.

The mere circumstance, however, that the book was one long and powerful innuendo against the Church would not have been enough to secure its popularity. Attacks on the Church had become cheap by this time. The eighteenth century has a positive side of at least equal importance and equal strength with its negative side. As we have so often said, its writers were inspired by zeal for political justice, for humanity, for better and more moral laws, for the improvement of the common people--a zeal which in energy, sincerity, and disinterestedness, has never been surpassed. Raynal's work was perhaps, on the whole, the most vigorous and sustained of all the literary expressions that were given to the great social ideas of the century. The "History of the Indies" was full of movement, of reality, of vivid and picturesque incident, a story that went straight to the hearts of many people. It was the book of the eighteenth century which brought the lower races finally within the pale of right and duty in the common opinion of France.

The most effective chapters in the book were eloquent sermons on simple and pathetic texts. They brought Negroes and Indians within the relations of human brotherhood. They preached a higher morality towards these poor children of bondage, they inspired a new pity, they moved more generous

sympathies, and they did this in such a way as not merely to affect men's feelings about Indians and Negroes, slave-labor, and slave-trade, but at the same time to develop and strengthen a general feeling for justice, equality, and beneficence in all the arrangements and relations of the social union all over the world. The same movement which brought the suffering blacks of the new world within the sphere of moral duty, and invested them with rights, intensified the same notion of rights and duties in association with the suffering people of France.

Raynal foresaw that, henceforth, the triumph of reason and justice was inevitable, but that it could not be won without revolutionary aid. He says, "Liberty will conquer." His public writings helped to kindle this great love of liberty in the hearts of the people of revolutionary France. He lived in the very darkest days, and watched the succession of events with a keen eye. Long before the bloodier days of the Revolution, and on the eve of the attempted flight of the King, he addressed a letter to the National Assembly (May 31, 1791.) "I have long dared," he wrote, "to tell kings of their duties. Let me today tell the people of their errors, and the representatives of the people of the perils that menace us all."<sup>(1)</sup> This time he denounced the government enslaved by popular tyranny, soldiers without discipline, chiefs without authority, ministers without resources, the rudest and most ignorant of

(1) As quoted by Morley, "Diderot and Encyclopaedists."  
Vol. II. p. 247.

men daring to settle the most difficult political questions. The Assembly listened, but not without some rude interruptions. After condemning the tone of Raynal's letter, Robespierre disclaimed any intention of calling down the severity either of the Assembly or of public opinion upon a man who still preserved a great name; he thought that a sufficient excuse for the writer's apostasy might be found in his advanced age.<sup>(1)</sup> Raynal lived to see his predictions fulfilled with a terrible bitterness of fulfilment.

(1) Hamel's Robespierre, i. 456-8 as quoted by J. Morley, "Diderot and the Encyclopaedists." p. 248.

## Chapter X

From the foregoing chapters we have seen how the Encyclopaedia became a powerful engine in aiding the transformation from the old to the new spirit; how it effected life on every side; enlightened principles in all branches of material and political organization; and became the scientific and philosophic testament of a generation--a veritable Bible of progress. We recall that the seed of the encyclopaedic movement had been planted in the fertile soil of changing ideas, moral dissolution of the state, and rapid advancement of discoveries and science.

All the forces, all the influences, all the talents, all the aspirations, and all the ideas of the century were united into one common center, the Encyclopaedia. Never before had any book been produced under such favorable circumstances. France was detaching herself more and more from the past; the present displeased her and she was regarding the future with impatient expectation. Perhaps what led especially to the vogue for these volumes was the fact that they were condemned and publicly denounced. All the hatreds of the past which felt their interests, and their very foundation and existence threatened, united against the Encyclopaedia to crush and destroy it. It only served to create a more deep and lasting sympathy for the new progressive ideas. People resorted to all sorts of ruses and stratagems to obtain and retain the books. The more that was done to destroy the work, the greater

became the vogue for it, and, consequently, the more diffused became the ideas contained within it. Thus, the Encyclopaedia rapidly gained and multiplied its power.

We can trace step by step in the writings of the eighteenth century the march of its influence. Many writers cited it, and quoted passages from it. It was always combatted by the enemies of reason and progress. While, on the other hand, the friends of the new philosophy never ceased to defend it. It is around the Encyclopaedia that the great intellectual battle of the century broke and, thanks to the doctrines that it propagated, it nourished public opinion, child of the eighteenth century. In forming the rank and file of French people by putting into their hands the great dictionary of human knowledge, the philosophers broadened their field of understanding, aroused their curiosity, and set in motion the great revolution of ideas which inevitably stimulated the great French Revolution. Public opinion grew into the great monster which was to overthrow the old monarchical government and set up a new government of "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity."

If the Encyclopaedia was the great engine bringing about the transformation in the eighteenth century France, then the Encyclopaedists generated the tremendous power of ideas which fed the great engine. The man of letters, after the middle of the century, became the leading exponent of philosophic thought. His contribution to the age was to popularize new ideas, and to guide men to judge empirically all conduct,

policy or opinion as it arose. What the permanent effects of the French eighteenth century thinkers were it is difficult to judge, but we are inclined to believe that they were profound. They lay stress on: materialism and atheism as opposed to metaphysical speculation; on science and social studies as opposed to the ignorance, bad education and subjugation of the old régime; on utilitarianism, social and individual, as opposed to the formalism and intolerance of the few; on nature and happiness as opposed to the old ideas of morality by Divine Grace; and finally, on the supreme idea of progress and rationalism as opposed to the old spiritual ideal of the Church that man is the final cause of the universe. Just how each idea was emphasized by the various writers, Diderot, Helvetius, Holbach, and Raynal we have already examined.

Diderot strongly under the influence of Bacon, Locke and Descartes bears credit for the final accomplishment of the Encyclopaedic enterprise. His philosophy is characterized by the naturalistic idea as opposed to the theological supernaturalism and the scepticism of the metaphysical spiritualist. His sensationalistic, materialistic, and positivistic ideas were essentially the inspirational influence on most of the philosophers and thinkers of this period.

Helvetius in his "De l'esprit" and "De l'homme" developed a philosophy based on general lay education under social control. His broad theories of sensationalism, utilitarianism, and environmentalism excited a great deal of controversy among

his contemporaries, some opposing, some commending him, and, thus, he helps to reinforce the influences of encyclopaedic thought.

Baron d'Holbach in his "Système de la Nature" becomes the most startling atheist and materialist. In his salon he created a milieu for the exchange of ideas and thereby helped to propagandize and popularize his philosophy.

Abbé de Raynal in his "History of the Indies" emphasized the tyranny of monarch and ecclesiastic. His book enlightened the masses concerning the evils of Christianity and the abominations of slavery and bondage. He created revolutionary ideas of liberty, freedom, atheism, and education which had a direct influence on the French Revolution.

The philosophic and religious ideas of Diderot and the Encyclopaedists helped to bring about a complete change in France in the latter half of the eighteenth century. These great doctrines became the philosophy of the masses and the exciting force of the great French Revolution.

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