DIDEROT'S MORAL AND SOCIAL THOUGHT

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ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts to present a synthesis of the views on moral and social questions which may be found dispersed throughout Diderot's works and correspondence. In the course of the presentation a number of alleged contradictions are either denied or resolved, and it is demonstrated that the philosopher's mature doctrine attains a substantial, though not total, unity.

After his early deistic period, Diderot never departed from a materialistic and deterministic conception of the world and of man. It is inaccurate to say that on an emotional plane he rejected the determinism of which he was convinced intellectually. Moreover, between his denial of free-will and his social utilitarianism he admits no real incompatibility. In claiming that in a deterministic world the concepts of vice and virtue are meaningless and in replacing them by those of maleficence and beneficence, he retains the essential distinction between moral good and moral evil, but stresses that one must look especially to improvements in the structure of society to encourage individuals to act in the general interest.

Diderot's radical criticism of the moral code prevailing in his own society, especially with regard to sexuality, should be regarded not as advocacy of an anarchism which would run counter to the whole notion of a harmonious society, but as an appeal for a more rational social morality. His thinking, as it relates to moral conduct in existing social contexts, and his suggestions for possible reform of the moral code are cautious and imply a considerable degree of relativism.

A major spokesman of eighteenth-century liberalism, Diderot protests eloquently against arbitrary government and social injustice. He proclaims the principle of popular sovereignty, though he does not propose either direct or representative majority rule as an effective political solution. Disillusioned regarding the possibility of an absolutism dedicated to the general interest, he increasingly favours constitutionally limited monarchy. His vision of an anarchical, yet harmonious, society is a purely speculative ideal; for practical purposes, human imperfection renders government and legislation necessary. While fearful of the immediate consequences of revolution, Diderot nevertheless suggests that it may well be the only means of instituting a political structure more favourable in the long run to general happiness.

Although Diderot lays great emphasis on the value of individuality, and deplores the pressures which lead to a dull uniformity of character, he stops short of condoning the kind of individuality which must express itself in anti-social acts. His admiration for the _grandeur d'âme_ of certain criminals in no way implies moral approval of their conduct.

Diderot's ethical thought is not merely critical. He rejects extremes of moral relativism and seeks to base a universal moral law on the nature of man and of human relations. The moral obligation of the individual to obey this law presents Diderot with a difficult problem. He tries to show that the individual's self-interest, if correctly understood, must always prompt him

to act in accordance with the general interest. To demonstrate this proposition, Diderot is obliged to appeal to elusive subjective factors such as remorse. Even so, he is not thoroughly convinced that this doctrine of the bond between virtue and personal happiness is universally valid, for it conflicts with his recognition of the great variation in individual human nature. He is thus torn between his emotional need to believe a certain ethical doctrine and intellectual doubts regarding its validity. Here is the true conflict between head and heart in Diderot and the only important point upon which his ethical thought falls short of complete unity.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the present century the writings of Diderot have attracted increasing attention from students of literature and of the history of ideas. His fictional works have earned him high regard as a literary artist, while his philosophical ideas have been judged worthy of serious scholarly consideration. His growing reputation as a thinker can no doubt be partly explained by the declining influence of that nineteenth-century school of conservative denigration which saw in him a threat to established social and moral values, but the continuing interest in his ideas must be mainly attributed to their intrinsic value and to the powerful and stimulating forms in which they find expression.

It has often been said that Diderot is not a systematic thinker. If this judgment implies that his thought is chaotic, I would deny it categorically. If it means simply that he does not express his ideas in carefully constructed and logically argued treatises, it is indisputable. His opinions on most philosophical subjects are to be found scattered throughout his fictional and non-fictional works, often in the form of digressions, reflections on contemporary events or comments on other men's writings.

This lack of systematization is especially apparent in his moral and social thought, which is the subject of the present

dissertation. My aim will be to examine his various reflections on morality and the nature of society -- subjects which are inseparable in his thought -- and to present the main lines of his doctrine in as clear and coherent a manner as possible.

Practical considerations have prompted me to limit the scope of my enquiry by excluding, in principle, such peripheral questions as the sources of Diderot's thought, its relations to that of his contemporaries and its affinities with the views of later thinkers. I have, it is true, often found it necessary to examine his comments on other writers, since he so frequently defines his own position by his reaction to other men's ideas. Nevertheless, my sole purpose remains throughout to render an accurate account of Diderot's personal views on moral and social questions.

I have further restricted the main object of my scrutiny to the doctrine which is contained in the mature writings, giving only cursory attention to the early works, in which Diderot had not yet entirely rejected the religious views which were the legacy of his Christian upbringing and education. In the works he wrote after about 1756, the date of his important letter to Landois concerning determinism and its ethical consequences,[1]

[1] See below, pp. 58, 72-78. The precise date at which Diderot's deism gives way to atheism is difficult to establish with much certainty, since it is hard to determine the sincerity of his professions of orthodox or deistic belief in the 1740's and 50's. As I explain in connection with the article "Droit naturel" (See below, pp. 277-79), I am inclined to think that he had definitively abandoned deism well before 1756, but I am doubtful whether positive proof of an earlier date can be furnished.

his doctrine (when allowance is made for prudence in published works) manifests a coherence and a consistency which seem to me to justify treating it as a single whole. I therefore have considered it undesirable to complicate the discussion of this unified doctrine by laying undue stress on the evolution or fluctuation of Diderot's opinions on certain subjects in the earlier period. I have not, however, maintained a superstitiously strict rule of excluding from consideration everything he wrote before the mid 1750's.

While I deny that there is any marked transformation in Diderot's general position on moral and social questions after that time, I do allow that on points of detail there is some evolution, and I examine these cases as they arise. I am also ready to admit that his particular moral and social preoccupations were oriented toward different problems at different periods in his life. However, though I would agree that these changes in emphasis form an interesting part of Diderot's intellectual biography, I think such considerations are not essential to an account of his moral and social thought as a whole, as long as there is no incompatibility in his conclusions on the different problems he approaches.

In presenting as a cohesive system ideas which in Diderot's writings appear in a highly disconnected form, I have tried to avoid arbitrarily supplying logical connections of my own devising. I have sought instead to utilize those links which Diderot himself explicitly provides, or to clarify those which are

implicit. Since my primary object is to elucidate rather than to evaluate the ideas I discuss, I have tried as far as possible to prevent my personal ethical opinions from colouring my approach.

Diderot's philosophy has been the subject of a substantial body of critical literature. Various interesting studies examine particular aspects of his thought or assess the contribution of individual works to the total picture. Brief surveys of his moral and social thought are not lacking, in the form of articles[1] or of chapters in general studies of his writings. But no single work in this field can compare in scope and thoroughness with Pierre Hermand's Les Idées morales de Diderot, which was written before the First World War.[2]

While I am conscious of my debt to the commentators who have preceded me, my conclusions are based throughout on a personal and, I hope, thorough examination of the writings of Diderot over a period of several years. In general I have not cited the opinions of other scholars in corroboration of my own analysis, though I do occasionally refer the reader to their

[1] See especially René Hubert, "La Morale de Diderot," Revue du dix-huitième siècle, II, 1914, pp. 328-40, and III, 1916, pp. 29-42; Eugène Meyer, "Diderot moraliste," Revue des cours et conférences, XXVI (1re Série), 1925, pp. 375-81, 469-80, 641-49, and XXVI (2e Série), 1925, pp. 742-60.

[2] Paris, 1923 (Reprinted 1969).

works for further information on a question which I have decided to treat more succinctly. I have also found it helpful at times to stress my disagreement with a particular critical view in order to make my own position clearer.

The general tenor of Hermand's approach was to dispel the myth that Diderot's moral and social thought is a tissue of contradictions and to demonstrate instead its basic coherence. Since the publication of his study, however, many scholars have clung to the opinion that Diderot's thought is self-contradictory, though they tend to see in it not a chaos, but a dichotomy.

A notable example of this attitude is the view that there is in Diderot a conflict between head and heart with respect to the denial of free-will.[1] Between his determinism and his exaltation of duty and virtue, there exists, it is asserted, a contradiction of which he himself was aware and which caused him great distress. His determinism, the argument continues, is an intellectual conviction which, on an emotional plane, he refuses to accept; when he considers its logical consequences for ethics, he is dismayed; he would like to be able to deny determinism intellectually, but finds himself unable to do so, and must content

[1] Cf. Henri Lefebvre, Diderot, Paris, 1949, p. 284; Georges May, Quatre visages de Denis Diderot, Paris, 1951, pp. 148-49; Lester Crocker, The Embattled Philosopher, London, 1955, pp. 319-20 and 347.

himself with the conclusion that speculative theories may cease to be true when applied to real situations, in which one must listen to the reasons of the heart.

For my part, I shall attempt to show that, in fact, Diderot faces up to these ethical consequences of determinism and is not deeply troubled by them. I shall argue that, whereas, for prudential and strategic reasons he often adopts in his moralistic works a terminology compatible with belief in free-will, the essential moral message of even his exoteric writings remains unaltered when it is translated into terms concordant with his authentic views. My interpretation of Diderot's position on free-will and determinism and on their ethical consequences will form the subject of my first two chapters.

Another version of the view that Diderot's ideas present a dichotomy is the contention that his supposed contradictions result from a conflict between two diametrically opposed aspects of his personality. Typical of this school of thought have been the many influential interpretations of _Le Neveu de Rameau_ which see the two interlocutors _Lui_ and _Moi_ as incarnations of divergent tendencies within the author himself. In _Moi_ we are to see the Diderot who prides himself on his virtue, but for whom virtue consists in conformity to the prevailing notions of respectability, a man more concerned with his public reputation than with the essential principles of ethics, in short, something of a hypocrite. _Lui_, on the other hand, is to be regarded as the embodiment of that unfettered bohemianism which might have been Diderot's mode

of existence if he had not succumbed to the temptations of bourgeois respectability and the material and psychological security which it affords; at the same time, we are told, Diderot ascribes to the Nephew the ethical position to which his own materialism leads him when he follows it to its logical conclusion. Thus Lui is seen as a manifestation of Diderot's authentic self, of an alter ego, amoral but free from hypocrisy, which is generally suppressed to the subconscious level, but which emerges in the characters of his fiction or in cultural and social day-dreams which his bourgeois consciousness rejects as mere paradox.[1]

I have not thought it necessary to offer a systematic refutation of such an interpretation of Le Neveu de Rameau, though I shall have occasion to take issue with it on several specific points. I have, on the other hand, considered it important to argue at length against the general attitude of which this analysis of the work is an example, namely that Diderot's supposed psychological duality manifests itself in an unresolved conflict between two facets of his moral and social thought.

Even Hermand subscribes in some measure to this view, speaking

[1] I do not claim that the interpretation of Le Neveu de Rameau which I have outlined here can be found in precisely this form in any particular critic. It is to be taken as a composite theory typifying a whole school of thought. It combines elements from such writers as Hegel (La Phénoménologie de l'Esprit, trans. Jean Hyppolite, Paris, 1939, II, 76-84), Daniel Mornet ("La véritable signification du Neveu de Rameau," Revue des Deux Mondes, 1927, pp. 881-908) and, to quote a recent example, James Doolittle (Rameau's Nephew, a study of Diderot's Second Satire, Geneva, 1960).

of "la contrariété qui existe, irréductible, nous semble-t-il, entre l'individualisme de Diderot et une morale qui sera essentiellement sociale."[1] In contrast to this opinion, the whole of the central portion of my study (chapters III-VI) may be considered as an attempt to demonstrate that in fact Diderot never exalts individualism at the expense of that form of society which he considers to be most conducive to the general happiness of mankind.

Thus, in my third chapter, I shall study Diderot's views on sexual morality and show that, while he challenges the desirability of most of the restrictions which custom and legislation have placed on the expression of sexuality, he is far from condoning, even in a radically simplified society, unrestrained individualism in sexual relations. Even in his Tahitian utopia, sexuality is still governed by a social ethic.

Again, in the fourth and fifth chapters, which treat specifically of Diderot's views on the relation between the individual and society and between the individual and government, I shall point out that even in his bitterest and most radical criticisms of the prevailing political and social structure he does not go so far as to cast doubt on the value of social bonds *per se*. Of these two chapters, the first will be devoted to Diderot's protest against unjustifiable infringements of personal liberty by government, while the second will refute the view that

[1] *Op. cit.*, p. 116.

the profound motivation underlying these criticisms is a rejection of that limitation of individual freedom of action which is implied by any form of society. With respect to government, I concede that it is for Diderot an unfortunate necessity and that he would like to believe that an anarchical society could maintain itself in harmony and happiness. He stresses, however, that such an arrangement is an ideal which must forever remain in the realm of speculation.[1]

Having dealt, in my third to fifth chapters, essentially with Diderot's plea that no arbitrary restrictions be placed on the satisfaction of needs common to all mankind, in my sixth I shall turn to his defence of the right of each individual to develop his own peculiar potentialities. Diderot's illustrations of his position generally concern individual peculiarities which present no real threat to the welfare of other people. But some critics[2] have suggested that he tends toward the view that the right to the free development and expression of individuality should be granted even to men whose peculiar propensity is to commit harmful acts. In order to demonstrate the falsity of this critical opinion, I shall examine Diderot's views on great criminals and his conception of strength of character. I shall

[1] See below, pp. 158-63.

[2] E.g. Henri Lefebvre, op. cit., pp. 208-09, and Charly Guyot, Diderot par lui-même, Paris, 1953, pp. 74-76.

endeavour to show that, while he finds aesthetic value in the consistent development of original propensities even in criminal characters, he does not accord moral approval to criminal acts as such, and I shall further argue that there is no evidence that he claims a right for maleficent individuals to express their original personality without restriction. I shall conclude the chapter by showing that the strength of character which Diderot admires in certain great criminals pleases him still more in the virtuous man.

In my last two chapters I shall leave the discussion of Diderot's plea for human liberty and turn to his views on the nature of moral obligation. In the seventh chapter, I shall deal with his claim that there is a universal and immutable moral law. On the assumption that the general interest is the right end for all individuals to pursue, Diderot deduces from the positive reality of common human nature certain moral principles which are binding on all men at all times and in all places. This "natural" morality, he claims, is the standard by which local and temporary customs and institutions must be judged. It lays down both the inalienable rights of the individual and the limits which he is morally obliged to set upon his own conduct.

Diderot could conceivably have been content to consider as self-evident the basic assumption that all individuals <u>ought</u> to pursue the general good; in other words, he could have treated the concept of moral obligation as <u>sui generis</u>. He takes the view, however, that moral obligation is a psychological experience,

actual or potential, and therefore feels the need to justify his utilitarian principle by appealing to the hedonistic notion of enlightened self-interest. However great a sacrifice may be required, virtue is still, Diderot attempts to show, the best way to happiness for every individual.

In my eighth and final chapter, I shall weigh the significance of Diderot's doubts regarding the validity of this relation between virtue and happiness. He has a profound and persistent emotional need to believe that a motivation to obey the "natural" moral law arises from the depths of the individual nature of all men. But the evidence of variation in the psychological needs of individuals forces him at times grudgingly to admit that he is deluding himself. This admission certainly does not mean that he is tempted to reject the universal moral law; but if men are not, when enlightened, universally motivated to obey it, its authority seems to him to be difficult to comprehend. This is not simply an intellectual problem for Diderot. He is emotionally committed to the view that human nature, not only in a general sense, but in each individual, is basically good; but he finds it difficult to maintain this position intellectually in the face of positive evidence to the contrary. Here, rather than over the question of free-will and determinism, one may speak of a conflict between head and heart in Diderot.

Since Hermand's day, much work has been done to establish a

correct text of Diderot's works and correspondence and I have taken full advantage of the most recent editions. For the sake of convenience, however, I refer uniformly to the Oeuvres complètes edited by Assézat and Tourneux,[1] except for works not contained therein or works of which a considerably modified text appears in a more reliable edition.[2] For the Correspondence I refer to the edition by Georges Roth.[3] Where I quote from the Oeuvres complètes, I occasionally prefer a reading from another edition, in which case the change and its source will be indicated.

I am also more fortunate than most of my predecessors with regard to the canon of Diderot's works. Certain long accepted attributions have been rejected. This is particularly the case with a large number of Encyclopédie articles with which Assézat or Tourneux credited Diderot. We are indebted primarily to Jacques Proust and John Lough for clarifying this question.[4] I have accepted Lough's view that Diderot's authorship of a considerable number of articles can be sufficiently established on internal evidence in the absence of the editorial asterisk or the testimony of Naigeon. My opinion on the attribution of

[1] Paris, 1875-77. Designated hereafter by the initials "AT".

[2] Thus I have referred, in the case of the Eléments de physiologie, to the edition of Jean Mayer, Paris, 1964.

[3] Paris, 1955- . Hereafter referred to as "Roth".

[4] Cf. J. Proust, Diderot et l'Encyclopédie, Paris, 1967, pp. 117-49 and 532-40, and J. Lough, "The problem of the unsigned articles of the Encyclopédie," Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, XXXII, 1965, pp. 327-90.

individual articles to Diderot generally coincides with that of Lough; the small number of cases where I differ concern mainly articles which are irrelevant to this thesis and which I have therefore not mentioned.[1]

A further restriction of the canon has resulted from an article by Jean de Booy[2] which reveals that four short works attributed to Diderot by Assézat were in fact written by Mme d'Epinay.[3]

These reductions of the canon have been more than compensated for by the addition of a number of new texts. These include the Lettre apologétique pour l'abbé Raynal,[4] the Pages contre un tyran,[5] and the Commentaire sur Hemsterhuis.[6] Finally, it has been demonstrated that large portions of Raynal's Histoire des

[1] For my views on the authorship of "Liberté (Morale)", see below, p. 23, note 3.

[2] "Inventaire provisoire des contributions de Diderot à la Correspondance littéraire," Dix-huitième siècle, I, 1969, pp. 353-97.

[3] The works concerned are Qu'en pensez-vous?, La Marquise de Claye et le comte de Saint-Albin, Cinqmars et Derville and Mon père et moi, all of which appear in vol. IV of the Oeuvres complètes.

[4] First published by Herbert Dieckmann in his Inventaire du Fonds Vandeul, Geneva, 1951. I refer to the text presented by Paul Vernière in Oeuvres philosophiques, Paris, 1961, pp. 621-44.

[5] First published by Franco Venturi, Paris, 1937. I refer to the edition by Vernière in Oeuvres politiques, Paris, 1963, pp. 127-48.

[6] Published by Georges May in François Hemsterhuis, Lettre sur l'Homme et ses rapports, avec le commentaire inédit de Diderot, New Haven, 1964.

deux Indes, and especially of the third edition (1781), came from Diderot's pen.[1]

It is to be hoped that we shall not have long to wait for the presently projected edition of Diderot's complete works, and that it will encourage and facilitate critical discussion and interpretative studies. With regard to Diderot's moral and social ideas, I neither hope nor desire to have said the last word, but simply to have clarified a certain number of points by presenting them in the total context of his thought on individual conduct and the nature of society, and perhaps to have gone a little further than previous scholars in bringing out the coherence of his ideas and the dominance and compatibility of the two major facets of his position, namely his desire that the individual should be free and that society should effectively serve its essential purpose of assuring the happiness of its members.

[1] Cf. Anatole Feugère, "Raynal, Diderot et quelques autres 'Historiens des Deux Indes'," Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France, XX, 1913, pp. 343-78; Michèle Duchet, "Le Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville et la collaboration de Diderot à l'Histoire des Deux Indes," Cahiers de l'Association Internationale des Etudes Françaises, XIII, 1961, pp. 173-87; Yves Benot, "Diderot, Pechmeja, Raynal et l'anti-colonialisme," Europe, Jan.-Feb., 1963, pp. 137-53. I have made sparing use of Diderot's contributions to the Histoire des Deux Indes, since I think it prudent to wait until further research has established with greater certainty which particular passages can be attributed to him.

CHAPTER I

DIDEROT AND DETERMINISTIC MATERIALISM

No adequate discussion of Diderot's moral ideas can fail to take account of the continuity which he postulates between the physical, psychological and moral aspects of human nature. Since he considers human beings to be entirely composed of matter and in no way separate from the general material system, I shall first briefly discuss his conception of the physical world, before going on to show how man is, in his view, integrated into this scheme of things.

Pascal was troubled by Descartes's picture of the material universe because it made God almost redundant. All that was required of the Prime Mover was to give a fillip to set in motion the system of matter, after which inexorable laws took charge of everything with no further help from God.[1] Diderot goes a step further than Descartes. He dispenses with God completely, considering that motion is an essential attribute of matter and that therefore the original fillip is not required.[2]

Thus Diderot conceives of the material universe as self-sufficient and subject to immutable laws. Thinking in terms of a corpuscular theory of matter, he expresses as follows his

[1] Pensées, in Oeuvres complètes, ed. Jacques Chevalier, Paris, 1954, p. 1137.

[2] Cf. Principes philosophiques sur la matière et le mouvement, AT, II, 64-70.

idea of the rigorous mechanism governing the ever-changing state of the physical world:

> Si la somme peut-être infinie de la multitude peut-être infinie des molécules de la nature nous était parfaitement connue, il m'est évident que nous verrions tous les phénomènes s'exécuter par des lois rigoureusement géométriques . . . .[1]

It follows that a given conjunction of conditions can be succeeded only by one particular new set of conditions:

> Je crois que la forme actuelle sous laquelle la matière existe est nécessaire et déterminée, ainsi que toutes les formes diverses qu'elle prendra successivement à toute éternité.[2]

In principle, all phenomena would be predictable if we knew completely and with perfect accuracy the conditions obtaining at one particular moment. But, in fact, predictions can never be anything but approximate and probable:

> On ne peut rien prononcer sur la marche d'un phénomène compris entre une seule cause et un seul effet; parce qu'il ne peut être que le résultat d'une infinité de causes, et la cause d'une infinité d'effets.[3]

Associated with this doctrine of determinism in the physical

[1] Eléments de physiologie, ed. Mayer, Appendice II, p. 330.

[2] Commentaire sur Hemsterhuis, ed. G. May, p. 127.

[3] Eléments de physiologie, ed. Mayer, Appendice II, p. 330.

universe, though perhaps not logically a part of it, is the rejection of finalism. Diderot denies that either the universe as a whole or any part of it is what it is because of some purpose which it is meant to fulfil. One of the traditional teachings of the Church was that the existence and goodness of God was manifested by the loving care with which He had furnished the world with a multitude of things conducive to the well-being of man. In such a simplistic form it never was a very solid argument, and Diderot is one of many eighteenth-century free-thinkers who ridicule it. In Jacques le fataliste, the master tries to account for the insects which plague Jacques as "une nuée de petits chirurgiens ailés qui viennent avec leurs petites lancettes te piquer et te tirer du sang goutte à goutte." Jacques retorts: "Oui, mais à tort et à travers, sans savoir si j'en ai trop ou trop peu. Faites venir ici un étique, et vous verrez si les petits chirurgiens ailés ne le piqueront pas."[1] Similarly, in the Salon de 1767, in his discussion with the abbé on the question of Providence, Diderot uses the particle of grit which has lodged itself in the abbé's eye as a practical example to refute the opinion that nature has been arranged with a view to the well-being of man. In fact, says Diderot, the world in which we live is partly favourable and partly unfavourable to us:

> Nous sommes dans la nature; nous y sommes tantôt bien, tantôt mal; et croyez que ceux qui louent la

[1] AT, VI, 263.

> nature d'avoir au printemps tapissé la terre de vert, couleur amie de nos yeux, sont des impertinents qui oublient que cette nature, dont ils veulent retrouver en tout et partout la bienfaisance, étend en hiver, sur nos campagnes, une grande couverture blanche qui blesse nos yeux, nous fait tournoyer la tête, et nous expose à mourir glacés. La nature est bonne et belle, quand elle nous favorise; elle est laide et méchante, quand elle nous afflige.[1]

Besides, if nature were not, on balance, sufficiently conducive to our continued existence, we would simply cease to exist:

> Ce bel ordre qui vous enchante dans l'univers ne peut être autre qu'il est. Vous n'en connaissez qu'un, et c'est celui que vous habitez; vous le trouvez alternativement beau ou laid, selon que vous coexistez avec lui d'une manière agréable ou pénible. Il serait tout autre, qu'il serait également beau ou laid pour ceux qui coexisteraient d'une manière agréable ou pénible avec lui. Un habitant de Saturne, transporté sur la terre, sentirait ses poumons déchirés, et périrait en maudissant la nature. Un habitant de la terre, transporté dans Saturne, se sentirait étouffé, suffoqué, et périrait en maudissant la nature . . . .[2]

Not only does Diderot deny that anything in the universe possesses a finality related to man's purposes, he also asserts that neither the universe nor any of its parts has any purpose at all, and that therefore the terms <u>good</u> and <u>evil</u> cannot be applied to things in themselves:

> C'est qu'il n'y a ni bien ni mal absolu dans le tout; c'est que supposer dans le tout un mélange de bonnes et de mauvaises lois, pour en déduire le bien et le mal des individus, c'est une absurdité. Le bien et le mal ne peut se dire non plus de l'univers que

[1] <u>Salon de 1767</u>, AT, XI, 109.

[2] <u>Ibid</u>., p. 104.

> d'une machine particulière où il y aurait une partie qui en fatiguerait une autre.[1]

Since we cannot predicate good or evil of the universe as a whole, it follows that the transformations to which it is subject cannot be said to constitute improvements or deteriorations:

> . . . l'ordre général change sans cesse. Les vices et vertus de l'ordre précédent ont amené l'ordre qui est, et dont les vices et les vertus amèneront l'ordre qui suit, sans qu'on puisse dire que le tout s'amende ou se détériore. S'amender, se détériorer sont des termes relatifs aux individus d'une espèce entre eux, et aux différentes espèces entre elles.[2]

The passages concerning the order of the universe which I have quoted so far evoke a completely impersonal mechanistic system and seem to exclude the possibility of an emotional response to it on the part of man. Yet some commentators have spoken of pantheism as one of the tendencies of Diderot's thought.[3] The text which lends most support to such a view is Le Rêve de d'Alembert. But Vernière is probably right in

[1] Eléments de physiologie, ed. Mayer, Appendice II, p. 329. "Individus" has in this text the technical philosophical sense of "individual entities"; it does not refer to human beings. Cf. also the Encyclopédie article "Laideur, AT, XV, 410.

[2] Ibid., p. 209. A similar passage occurs in Commentaire sur Hemsterhuis, ed. May. p. 503. It should be noted that in these two passages the terms "vertus" and "vices" should not be taken as referring to human morality in particular, but rather to harmonious and discordant features in the universe, or perhaps to what human beings consider to be favorable or hostile to themselves. Again the "individuals" and "species" mentioned are not necessarily living beings.

[3] Cf., for example, D. Mornet, Diderot, l'homme et l'oeuvre, Paris, Boivin, 1941, pp. 47-48.

remarking that Diderot's "acceptation intellectuelle du panthéisme et son image baroque de l'immense araignée étreignant l'univers ne sont que jeux d'esprit."[1] It is true that one finds at times in Diderot, if not a truly religious or mystical feeling towards the impersonal mechanism which for him constitutes the universe, at least a certain awe, and a sense of man's insignificance. "Pardonnons à la nature qui est aveugle," he writes, "et qui a fait la partie pour le tout, et non le tout pour une des parties."[2] But despite the superficially religious tone of such passages, a careful analysis of the ideas they contain brings us back to Diderot's usual view of the universe as void of any directing purpose.[3]

Such reflections on the deterministic universe probably reveal the influence of Spinoza.[4] But, whereas modern commentators recognize in Spinoza's pantheism a truly religious attitude, Diderot, like the philosophes in general, considers it to be a disguise for atheism and values it as such. He is typical of

[1] Spinoza et la pensée française avant la Révolution, Paris, 1954, II, 599. Vernière refers to AT, II, 142-43.

[2] Roth, IX, 179 (Undated fragment). Cf. also Moi's reference to the wisdom of Nature, in Le Neveu de Rameau, AT, V, 397, which I shall discuss in chapter VI (see below, pp. 191-92).

[3] For further examples of a superficial religiosity serving as a veil for materialism, see the Encyclopédie articles "Harmonie", AT, XV, 76, and "Imparfait", AT, XV, 185.

[4] P. Vernière, Spinoza et la pensée française, II, 607-08, demonstrates that this influence was direct as well as from intermediary sources.

his age in that his metaphysical thought is merely a prelude to his thought on man. It serves, like that of Lucretius, to rid the heavens of menacing presences, and to weaken the power of their earthly representatives. For Diderot, what really matters is man.

What, then, is man in the midst of this rigorously determined universe? Rejecting the notion of the spiritual human soul, to which Cartesian dualism attributed a mysterious independence from the body and an even more mysterious capacity for controlling it, Diderot asserts that man is composed of only one substance, matter. Man's consciousness is an awareness, on the part of the matter of which he is formed, of its own actual state. This awareness does not distinguish man essentially from other material beings, for sensibility (by which Diderot seems to mean self-awareness, and not simply responsiveness to stimuli) is an inherent quality of all matter. Even inanimate matter possesses an "inert" sensibility, which becomes "active" in living beings.[1] What distinguishes sentient beings is that in them awareness is not momentary, but continuous. This is the result of memory,

[1] Cf. Entretien entre d'Alembert et Diderot, AT, II, 106. This distinction between "inert" and "active" sensibility raises difficult problems both with regard to Diderot's exact meaning and to the validity of his views on this point. For further discussion, see, for example, Emile Callot, La philosophie de la vie au XVIIIe siècle, Paris, 1965, pp. 280-87.

which Diderot considers to be a physical process.[1] As for thinking beings, Diderot suggests that the particular type and degree of self-awareness which they possess are attributable to the special function of the brain, which acts as a unitary receiving-point for information from the senses.[2]

Against the dualists' view that the spiritual soul is capable of governing the actions of the body by the operation of a faculty called the will, Diderot denies that the will, whatever it is, can operate without a cause. Thus he objects to Hemsterhuis's constant use of the term "velléité" on the grounds that this term "semble supposer en moi un acte sans cause, ce que je ne saurais admettre."[3] There can be no causeless act in man because man is a part of nature and must obey its laws:

> La volonté est l'effet d'une cause qui la meut et la détermine; un acte de volonté sans cause est une chimère. Rien ne se fait par saut dans la nature; tout y est lié. L'animal, l'homme, tout être est soumis à cette loi générale.[4]

The following argument, attributed to Jacques, demonstrates in more precise terms the impossibility of free-will:

> Quelle que soit la somme des éléments dont je suis composé, je suis un; or, une cause n'a qu'un

[1] Cf. Entretien entre d'Alembert et Diderot, AT, II, 112.

[2] Cf. Réfutation d'Helvétius, AT, II, 318, 319-20, et passim.

[3] Commentaire sur Hemsterhuis, ed. May, p. 65.

[4] Eléments de physiologie, ed. Mayer, p. 262.

> effet; j'ai toujours été une cause une; je n'ai donc jamais eu qu'un effet à produire; ma durée n'est donc qu'une suite d'effets nécessaires.[1]

Similarly, in Le Rêve de d'Alembert, Bordeu speaks as follows:

> Est-ce qu'on veut, de soi? La volonté naît toujours de quelque motif intérieur ou extérieur, de quelque impression présente, de quelque réminiscence du passé, de quelque passion, de quelque projet dans l'avenir. Après cela je ne vous dirai de la liberté qu'un mot, c'est que la dernière de nos actions est l'effet nécessaire d'une cause une: nous, très compliquée, mais une.[2]

In the article "Liberté," Diderot declares that "ce que nous sommes dans l'instant qui va suivre dépend si nécessairement de ce que nous sommes dans l'instant présent, qu'il est métaphysiquement impossible que nous soyons autres,"[3] and offers

[1] Jacques le fataliste, AT, VI, 180.

[2] AT, II, 175. L. G. Crocker defends free-will against Bordeu-Diderot as follows: "Actually, all he [Bordeu] has done is to stipulate a motive for every action. But 'free-will', or freedom of the self, does not mean that our acts have no causes, or that our desires are free. Freedom, if it exists, lies in the conscious control we have over the passage of impulse into action. The strongest motive we must obey. It is not determined, however, by a mechanical competition for nerve paths, but selected by the Self, by an operation of the mind, by our own decision. The mind is capable of creating or being its own cause." (The Embattled Philosopher, p. 331.) But Crocker fails to indicate how a decision of the "Self" or the "mind" (by which he presumably means an immaterial entity) can cause effects in the human body, without the matter of which the body is composed ceasing to obey the laws which govern physical phenomena in general. His position is much the same as that of Descartes, and equally untenable.

[3] AT. XV, 481. The article "Liberté (Morale)" is included in the Oeuvres complètes and was therefore accepted as Diderot's by many critics until the findings of Jacques Proust and John Lough were published. (See above, p. 12.) It was assumed that motives of prudence explained any discrepancies between the views expressed in the article and Diderot's known opinions on the free-will question. Paul Vernière, in his discussion of "Liberté"

the following graphic illustration:

Supposons une femme qui soit entraînée par sa passion

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in Spinoza et la pensée française, II, 589-91, does not question the attribution of the article to Diderot. However, once the principles of attribution on which Assézat and Tourneux based their collection of articles had been shown to be unreliable, it became abundantly evident that "Liberté" contained passages which could not possibly have been written by Diderot. Proust remarks that "il n'y a aucune raison de l'attribuer à Diderot." (Diderot et l'Encyclopédie, p. 311, note 72.) Proust refuses to attribute definitely to Diderot any article which does not bear the editor's asterisk, unless his authorship is vouched for by Naigeon or confirmed by some other external evidence. Lough considers such caution to be excessive and is willing to attribute numerous articles to Diderot on internal evidence. However, he still rejects "Liberté." For my part, I consider that certain portions of the article were in fact written by Diderot. A large proportion of the text consists of a confrontation of arguments in favour of free-will and others supporting determinism, the former presented as the opinion of the author, the latter as anticipated objections which he must refute. However, the deterministic arguments sometimes bear a strong resemblance, in phraseology as well as in thought, to texts definitely attributable to Diderot. I suggest that the article in its present form is the result of collaboration between Diderot and another writer who favoured free-will. (This may perhaps have been the abbé Yvon. See Proust, op. cit., p. 158, note 178.) The basic text seems to have been submitted to Diderot, who interpolated objections which the other writer then answered. In favour of this hypothesis, it should be noted that, whereas we read, on p. 480: "On peut réduire tous les arguments dont Spinoza et ses sectateurs se sont servis pour soutenir cette absurde hypothèse à ces deux . . . ," we are given, after two briefly summarized Spinozistic arguments, lengthy third and fourth arguments, which judging by both style and content, I consider to have been written by Diderot. (From p. 481: "En troisième lieu, ils ajoutent . . ." to p. 484: ". . . d'une nature différente de celle des poids.") The first two Spinozistic arguments are answered systematically (pp. 484-85), but Diderot's interpolation is not. The writer of the article continues instead by defending free-will on the basis of the subjective conviction of liberty. He then introduces a further objection to free-will with the sentence: "Un des plus beaux esprits de notre siècle a voulu essayer jusqu'à quel point on pouvait soutenir un paradoxe." (P. 487.) The reference, I think, is to Diderot. The defender of free-will has scarcely

> à se jeter tout à l'heure entre les bras de son amant; si nous imaginons cent mille femmes entièrement semblables à la première, d'âge, de tempérament, d'éducation, d'organisation, d'idées, telles, en un mot, qu'il n'y ait aucune différence assignable entre elles et la première: on les voit également soumises à la passion dominante, et précipitées entre les bras de leurs amants, sans qu'on puisse concevoir aucune raison pour laquelle l'une ne ferait pas ce que toutes les autres feront.[1]

Diderot, then, denies the freedom of the will. He does not, however, deny the existence of the will. If he did so, he would find it hard to give an effective answer to the argument, to which Rousseau, for example, appeals,[2] that we have an inner

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begun to reply to the "paradoxe", when he is interrupted by a series of objections: (P. 489: "Mais, 1° dans ce système . . ." to p. 491: ". . . sur les dispositions matérielles.") These objections are then answered by the orthodox writer (pp. 491-97). The article takes on the aspect of a veritable dialogue. There is no evidence of any interpolation or intervention on Diderot's part in the remainder of the article. My conclusion is that, while the bulk of the article cannot be attributed to Diderot, it contains several passages which can with confidence be restored to him. His contribution to the article seems not to have consisted simply of interpolations in a manuscript submitted to him; there must have been discussion between the writer of the basic text and himself. All passages from "Liberté" quoted in this thesis are taken, unless otherwise stated, from parts of the article which I consider to have been written by Diderot.

[1] "Liberté", AT, XV, 481. The article "Machinal", AT, XVI, 34, which Lough accepts as Diderot's work, contains a very similar passage, as Assézat already notes.

[2] Cf. the following passage from La Nouvelle Héloïse: "J'entends beaucoup raisonner contre la liberté de l'homme, et je méprise tous ces sophismes; parce qu'un raisonneur a beau me prouver que je ne suis pas libre, le sentiment intérieur, plus fort que tous ses arguments les dément sans cesse, et quelque parti que je prenne dans quelque délibération que ce soit, je sens parfaitement qu'il ne tient qu'à moi de prendre le parti contraire. Toutes ces subtilités de l'école sont vaines précisément parce qu'elles prouvent trop, qu'elles combattent tout aussi bien la vérité que

awareness of the freedom of our will. Diderot admits that we have an awareness of the exercise of our will, but denies that we have an awareness of its freedom. He contends that the word "will" refers to our consciousness of the motives which prompt us to perform an action:

> Il paraît à celui qui examinera les actions humaines de près, que toute la différence des volontaires et des involontaires consiste à avoir été, ou à n'avoir pas été réfléchies. Je marche, et sous mes pieds il se rencontre des insectes que j'écrase involontairement. Je marche, et je vois un serpent endormi, je lui appuie mon talon sur la tête, et je l'écrase volontairement.[1]

However, our awareness of the motives which prompt us to perform an action does not mean that these motives are within our control, in the sense that we can choose either to have them or not to have them. The article continues:

> Ma réflexion est la seule chose qui distingue ces deux mouvements, et ma réflexion, considérée relativement à tous les instants de ma durée, et à ce que je suis dans le moment où j'agis, est absolument indépendante de moi.[2]

In "Liberté" Diderot writes:

> Il n'y a de différence entre l'homme automate qui

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le mensonge, et que soit que la liberté existe ou non, elles peuvent servir également à prouver qu'elle n'existe pas. A entendre ces gens-là, Dieu même ne serait pas libre, et ce mot de liberté n'aurait aucun sens." (Ed. Mornet, Paris, 1925, IV, 246-47.)

[1] Art. "Involontaire", AT, XV, 242.

[2] Loc. cit. There is a trace here of the attitude which I shall term "pseudo-scientific fatalism". (See below, pp.31-32.) In rejecting unmotivated acts of reflexion, Diderot finds himself separating the self from its activities. But I think that this is only a verbal slip, as he so consistently rejects any kind of dualism.

> agit dans le sommeil et l'homme intelligent qui agit et qui veille, sinon que l'entendement est plus présent à la chose; quand à la nécessité, elle est la même. . . . L'homme n'est donc pas différent d'un automate? Nullement différent d'un automate qui sent; c'est une machine plus composée.[1]

The motivation which leads us to perform a voluntary act consists of a desire or an aversion, or, where there are several conflicting desires and aversions, of the final impulse which results from their combination.[2] The will, says Bordeu in Le Rêve de d'Alembert, is "la dernière impulsion du désir et de l'aversion."[3] Partisans of free-will may perhaps object that our desires and aversions are created, at least sometimes and in part, by our will. But Diderot will have none of this:

> Prétendre qu'il y a dans l'âme une activité qui lui est propre, c'est dire une chose inintelligible, et qui ne résout rien. Car il faudra toujours une cause indépendante de l'âme qui détermine cette activité à une chose plutôt qu'à une autre . . . .[4]

People claim, he remarks, "que le désir naît de la volonté; c'est le contraire; c'est du désir que naît la volonté. Le désir est fils de l'organisation . . . ."[5]

The deterministic mechanism governing the operation of the will is often described by Diderot in psychological terms. We

[1] AT, XV, 482.

[2] Cf. "Liberté", AT, XV, 482, where the analogy of the balance is used, as also in the letter to Landois (see below, p. 73).

[3] AT, II, 175.

[4] Art. "Liberté", AT, XV, 481.

[5] Eléments de physiologie, ed. Mayer, p. 265.

have already noted Bordeu's claim that acts of will always arise "de quelque motif intérieur ou extérieur, de quelque impression présente, de quelque réminiscence du passé, de quelque passion, de quelque projet dans l'avenir."[1] This is the sort of language we use when we describe the contents of our consciousness, which we know intuitively; it is not the objective language of pure materialism. Again, in the following passage from the Eléments de physiologie, the determinism to which human beings are subject is expressed in terms of the psychological analysis elaborated by Locke and Condillac:

> Toutes les pensées naissent les unes des autres; cela me semble évident. Les opérations intellectuelles sont également enchaînées. La perception naît de la sensation, de la perception la réflexion, la méditation, le jugement. Il n'y a rien de libre dans les opérations intellectuelles, ni dans la sensation, ni dans la perception ou la vue des rapports des sensations entre elles, ni dans la réflexion ou la méditation ou l'attention plus ou moins forte à ces rapports, ni dans le jugement ou l'acquiescement à ce qui paraît vrai.[2]

In the Réfutation d'Helvétius Diderot remarks that man is subject to a double determinism, psychological and physical:

> Dans l'homme qui réfléchit, enchaînement nécessaire d'idées; dans l'homme attaché à telle ou telle profession, enchaînement nécessaire de telles ou telles idées. Dans l'homme qui agit, enchaînement d'incidents dont le plus insignifiant est aussi

[1] AT, II, 175.

[2] Eléments de physiologie, ed. Mayer, pp. 59-60.

> contraint que le lever du soleil. Double nécessité propre à l'individu, destinée ourdie depuis l'origine des temps jusqu'au moment où je suis . . . . Tout s'est fait en nous parce que nous sommes nous, toujours nous, et pas une minute les mêmes.[1]

But, whereas Helvétius is led astray by taking too literally the Lockean metaphor of the tabula rasa and gives a simplistic pseudo-materialistic version of human motivation, Diderot never forgets that the only real causes are physical ones, that true materialism speaks in terms of the brain, not the mind, and of causes rather than motives. True, when he wishes to refute Helvétius's reduction of all higher motives to crudely hedonistic ones, he distinguishes between physical pleasures and those of the "entendement", or "understanding"; but he still believes that, for all the validity and usefulness of this distinction, the "entendement" itself is, in the final analysis, only the subjective awareness of highly complicated modifications of the brain, from which it has no independence. In other words, consciousness is for Diderot an epiphenomenon. He explicitly affirms that man's will and understanding are physical and are subject to the same rigid laws as the rest of the material universe:

> La volonté n'est pas moins mécanique que l'entendement. La volition précède l'action des fibres musculaires. Mais la volition suit la sensation; ce sont deux fonctions du cerveau; elles sont corporelles.[2]

It is to this identification of the subjective world of the human mind with the objective world of matter that Diderot refers when

[1] AT, II, 373.

[2] Eléments de physiologie, ed. Mayer, p. 262.

he says of Jacques that "la distinction d'un monde physique et d'un monde moral [i.e. a psychological world] lui semblait vide de sens."[1]

In short, man is part of the material world and conforms to the same basic laws which govern the movements of all matter. In man, matter is endowed with awareness of itself, but possesses no special faculty whereby it might suspend the operation of the laws of nature and thus free itself from its subjection to these laws.

As I pointed out in my Introduction,[2] many critics have claimed that such a view of man is in contradiction with Diderot's position as a moralist and that he was bitterly aware of this dilemma, feeling himself torn between his intellectual convictions and the promptings of his heart. I will attempt in my next chapter to show that, in fact, he regarded his deterministic materialism as compatible with a personal commitment to beneficence and did not think himself illogical in exhorting others to make a similar "choice". The remainder of the present chapter will be devoted to showing that Diderot does not think that his conception of determinism entails the belief that the human

[1] Jacques le fataliste, AT, VI, 180.

[2] See above, pp. 5-6.

individual is merely a passive witness of his own destiny. The fragility of many of the arguments advanced by the critics to whom I have referred above will become apparent.

It will facilitate our discussion to distinguish three different, though related, doctrines or attitudes regarding the degree of autonomy attributable to man, all of which play a part, of greater or lesser importance, in Diderot's thought. I shall designate these, admittedly in a rather personal and arbitrary fashion, by the following terms: 1) scientific determinism; 2) mythological fatalism; 3) pseudo-scientific fatalism. By "scientific determinism" I mean the theory, which I have already examined in Diderot's writings, that the human individual is part of the material universe and therefore subject to the same immutable laws which govern all matter. By "mythological fatalism" I mean the belief that, although we have the possibility of choosing to act in different ways, the line of conduct we adopt cannot affect the really important events in our life, since these are pre-ordained. Innumerable versions of this belief may be found in literature and in popular superstition even in the most "advanced" contemporary societies. This type of fatalism, which Shakespeare expresses in the words "There's a Divinity which shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will," derives no support from a scientific view of the world; indeed, it is difficult to reconcile the two. I shall use the term "pseudo-scientific fatalism" to refer to the doctrine which sees the

human individual as the passive witness both of the events which take place in the physical universe (including his own body) and of the succession of his own thoughts. This view differs from scientific determinism in that it implies a kind of dualism: the self is thought of as separate from the body and even from the mind. In scientific determinism, on the other hand, the self is identified with the body and with the epiphenomenal mind. It is not free from the general chain of events, being a part of it, but neither is it entirely passive, since, like every other part of the universe it possesses its own original dynamism and thus contributes its share to the development of the whole.

Let us first consider the role of mythological fatalism in Diderot's thought. We find this attitude in several texts in which Diderot complains that human beings are the playthings of destiny. He writes, for example, to Mademoiselle Jodin:

> . . . nous sommes tous sous la main du destin qui nous promène à son gré, qui vous a déjà bien ballottée, et qui n'a pas l'air de vous accorder sitôt le repos. Vous êtes malheureusement un être énergique, turbulent, et l'on ne sait jamais où est la sépulture de ces êtres-là.[1]

Diderot advises the young lady to take the direction of her life

[1] Roth, IX, 25 (Feb. 10, 1769). It is perhaps surprising that Diderot should claim that the energetic soul is less master of its fate than the placid soul. Probably "energetic" has here a somewhat different connotation from when Diderot extols the "energy" of the <u>âmes fortes</u>. (See below, pp. 194-200.) The latter are, presumably, less the playthings of forces exterior to themselves. But in the case under discussion, Diderot probably refers rather to capriciousness and to a tendency to violent and rapid changes; in other words, the adjectives "énergique" and "turbulent" are here synonymous.

seriously in hand, so as to bring as much of it as possible under the control of her will:

> Si vous êtes sage, vous laisserez au sort le moins de lisières que vous pourrez; vous songerez de bonne heure à vivre comme vous voudriez avoir vécu. A quoi servent toutes les leçons sévères que vous avez reçues, si vous n'en profitez pas? Vous êtes si peu maîtresse de vous-même; entre toutes les marionnettes de la Providence, vous êtes une de celles dont elle secoue le fil d'archal qui l'accroche, d'une manière si bizarre que je ne vous croirai jamais qu'où vous êtes, et vous n'êtes pas à Paris, et vous n'y serez peut-être pas sitôt.[1]

Diderot never attempts to express this sort of fatalism with logical rigour. We may assume that it is simply a striking way of expressing the conviction that the important events and turning-points in our lives are often the result of circumstances quite outside our control, or of decisions which we ourselves make, but with insufficient consideration of their probable consequences. Few people would claim that our experience is wholly the result of the exercise of our will; most would admit that it is the result of an interaction between events which arise from the exercise of our will and events which occur independently of it. Doubtless the proportion varies from person to person, partly because of personality differences and partly because of pure chance. Diderot urges us to increase our control over the course of our lives by the exercise of our reason.

[1] Roth, IX, 26. The use of the religious term "Providence" need not deceive us; Diderot means "destiny".

What I have called pseudo-scientific fatalism is harder to distinguish from the form of determinism which Diderot actually accepted, for the two doctrines have many points in common. Thus Jacques's fatalism consists of a mixture of principles which Diderot accepts and of conclusions which he derides. When Jacques, after Spinoza, expounds universal determinism and denies free-will, he is Diderot's mouthpiece. But Diderot shows that when Jacques deduces from this that it is useless to exercise prudence, he entangles himself in ridiculous contradictions. Jacques believes that since all things are pre-ordained, prudence can be of no avail, since, no matter what precautions one takes, one cannot alter the inevitable course of events. This paradox leads to absurd practical results, as the following episode illustrates. Spending the night at an inn, Jacques and his master encounter a band of dangerous brigands. Before setting off again in the morning, Jacques takes the precaution of locking the rogues in their room, so as to gain time in the event of being pursued by them. Nevertheless, he refuses to go faster than a walk, "toujours d'après son système."[1] His "system" tells him that human reason is incapable of knowing what fate has decreed, so that, by galloping, he and his master might run into some quite unforeseen danger. His captain, he explains,

> . . . croyait que la prudence est une supposition, dans laquelle l'expérience nous autorise à regarder les circonstances où nous nous trouvons comme causes

[1] AT, VI, 18.

> de certains effets à espérer ou à craindre pour l'avenir. . . . Mais, disait-il, qui peut se flatter d'avoir assez d'expérience? Celui qui s'est flatté d'en être le mieux pourvu, n'a-t-il jamais été dupe? Et puis, y a-t-il un homme capable d'apprécier juste les circonstances où il se trouve? Le calcul qui se fait dans nos têtes, et celui qui est arrêté sur le registre d'en haut, sont deux calculs bien différents. Est-ce nous qui menons le destin, ou bien est-ce le destin qui nous mène? Combien de projets sagement concertés ont manqué, et combien manqueront! Combien de projets insensés ont réussi, et combien réussiront![1]

Now Diderot was certainly acutely conscious of the uncertainty of our destinies, in spite of all the care and forethought by which we attempt to direct them. But the practical conclusion he draws from this fact is quite different from Jacques's views on prudence. In the Conclusion to the Eléments de physiologie, he likens life to a gambling-house. There is no certitude; one must act, must take decisions, without knowing for sure whether the results will be good or bad: "Je ne saurai qu'à la fin ce que j'aurai perdu ou gagné dans ce vaste tripot . . . ."[2] Here Diderot does not conclude that prudence is pointless, but simply laments that all our prudence can never give us a solid assurance that we are acting in the way which will produce the best results.

[1] AT, VI, 20.

[2] Ed. Mayer, p. 307. The sentence immediately preceding this quotation, namely, "Le monde est la maison du plus fort," or, as AT has it, ". . . du fort," (IX, 428) does not seem to be logically connected with the context in which it is placed. Diderot is not concerned here with how the strong push the weak to the wall, nor with the struggle in which men must engage against nature, but with the uncertainty of all human affairs, which presumably applies to the strong as well as the weak. The emendation suggested by Pierre Hermand (Les Idées morales de Diderot, p. 293), i.e. "Le monde est la maison du sort," fits far better, since it leads naturally to the image of the gambling-house.

In another text he makes more explicit the practical conclusion which he draws. Referring to the estimation of probabilities, he writes:

> C'est elle qui indique le parti le plus sûr ou le moins incertain, et qui console lorsque l'événement ne répond pas à une attente bien fondée.[1]

He continues with a remark which is closely related in thought to the passage from the Eléments de physiologie which I have just quoted. "Toute notre vie," he says, "n'est qu'un jeu de hasard; tâchons d'avoir la chance pour nous."[2] We should exercise all the prudence and foresight of which we are capable, and from the ethical point of view this is all that can be asked of us. Thus to Catherine II he writes:

> Mais à l'impossible nul n'est tenu. On a tout fait, lorsqu'on a cherché, trouvé et mis en oeuvre les meilleurs moyens que la prudence humaine pouvait inspirer, prudence qui ne s'étend ni à la violence ni aux hasards qui sont recelés dans la poitrine obscure du destin et qui sont au-dessus de nous.[3]

It seems reasonable, then, to take Jacques's view of the practical conclusions to be drawn from determinism with regard to the exercise of prudence as an amusing paradox and not as Diderot's own soberly held opinions.

[1] Plan d'une université pour le gouvernement de Russie, AT, III, 456. Cf. also Roth, XII, 39 (To the comtesse de Forbach; circa 1772).

[2] Plan d'une université, loc. cit.

[3] Mémoires pour Catherine II, ed. Vernière, Paris, 1966, p. 128.

Another of Jacques's false opinions concerning determinism is that such a system logically implies that one should resign oneself to events. This appears to have been a conclusion which Diderot himself at times considered valid. In the letter to Landois, for example, he expounds a certain philosophy of resignation, not only to the calamities which the forces of inanimate nature cause, but also to the harm done to us by our fellow-men. Determinism, he claims, leads to "une sorte de philosophie pleine de commisération, qui attache fortement aux bons, qui n'irrite non plus contre le méchant que contre un ouragan qui nous remplit les yeux de poussière."[1] Commiseration can be regarded as a humanitarian consequence of determinism, and attachment to good people as a utilitarian consequence; I shall consider these questions in the following chapter. But the rest of the passage is concerned with quite a different attitude, namely an emotional acceptance of the inevitable course of events. Presumably Diderot does not mean that we should refrain from <u>showing</u> anger toward the wicked man, since, as we shall see, he thinks that anger is useful in deterring the latter's enterprises; presumably he means that we should try not to <u>feel</u> anger beyond the instinctive momentary reaction which we cannot control, and that there is no point in harbouring resentment against wicked men.

[1] Roth, I, 214 (June 29, 1756).

Resignation to the inevitable course of events certainly has a great attractiveness for Diderot. He quotes approvingly the ancient Stoic prayer: "O Destin, conduis-moi où tu voudras, je suis prêt à te suivre; car tu ne m'en conduirais et je ne t'en suivrais pas moins, quand je ne le voudrais pas."[1] He considers such resignation to be the mark of wisdom. It is doubtful, however, whether this theme ever became an integrated part of his philosophy, since he makes no attempt to show that it has any logically valid connection with determinism. Indeed, he would have found this very difficult. We may assume that the Stoics did not mean that one should make no efforts to conduct one's own life in the way one desires (since such efforts are included in the pre-ordained order of events), but rather that when one has made all possible efforts to direct one's life, one should adopt an attitude of resignation to the actual outcome. But this is a wise policy whether one believes in determinism or not. Whether a man is able to adopt it depends on his character. Diderot says that he himself can manage it at times and feels much better for it, but that he cannot achieve it consistently. He remarks in a letter to Sophie Volland:

> Hier je disais avec Damilaville que, quand j'étais las de voir aller les choses contre mon gré, il me prenait des bouffées de résignation. Alors la douleur des hypocondres se détend; la bile accumulée coule doucement; le sort ne me laisserait pas une chemise au dos, que peut-être j'en plaisanterais. Je conçois

[1] Roth, V, 207 (To Falconet; Dec. 4, 1765).

> qu'il y a des hommes assez heureusement nés pour être par tempérament et constamment ce que je suis seulement par intervalle, de réflexion, et par secousses.[1]

In another letter, he remarks that business worries and a liver complaint have resulted in a serious bout of melancholia:

> Je n'y connais qu'un remède, qui malheureusement n'est pas fait pour moi; ce serait une parfaite indifférence sur les choses de la vie, faire tout pour le mieux et n'en pas perdre un moment de repos ni un coup de dent, lorsque tout va mal. Mais, ma foi, je ne saurais; je m'afflige comme un sot, et mon mal empire.[2]

This personal experience is humorously transposed in a passage in Jacques le fataliste which illustrates the futility of maintaining that resignation follows logically from the cosmic order, when in fact it depends on one's character. Jacques would like to be completely indifferent to the ups and downs of life, but, try as he may, he still feels pleasure and grief. The annoying thing is that, whereas he is unshakeably steadfast on certain perilous occasions, at other times a mere trifle can upset him. He has given up the attempt, he says:

> . . . j'ai pris le parti d'être comme je suis; et j'ai vu, en y pensant un peu, que cela revenait presque au même, en ajoutant: Qu'importe comme on soit? C'est une autre résignation plus facile et plus commode.[3]

This sort of resignation is scarcely resignation at all, since it has no effect on one's mental state.

[1] Roth, III, 245-46 (Nov. 9 and 10, 1760).

[2] Roth, XII, 88 (To François Tronchin; July 17, 1772).

[3] AT, VI, 87.

Jacques has his own version of the Stoic prayer:

> Toi qui as fait le grand rouleau, quel que tu sois, et dont le doigt a tracé toute l'écriture qui est là-haut, tu as su de tous les temps ce qu'il me fallait; que ta volonté soit faite. Amen.[1]

This prompts his master to enquire: "Est-ce que tu ne ferais pas aussi bien de te taire?" Here Diderot is probably making fun of the religiosity of such an attitude, implying, no doubt, that prayers to an all-powerful and omniscient Christian God are equally pointless; but he is also ridiculing the idea that the doctrine of the inevitability of all events can justify resignation or any other practical attitude.

Both the denial of the efficacy of prudence and the doctrine of submission to inevitability are aspects of pseudo-scientific fatalism in that they leave out of account that inherent activity by which the individual contributes to the total scheme of things. It may well be true that some men are pre-determined to exercise prudence and others not, but the reality of determinism does not in itself prevent a given individual either from being prudent or benefiting from his prudence. The individual is not a totally passive victim of forces exterior to himself. Resignation to misfortune is a gift which some men possess and for which they are all the happier; others cannot achieve it. But in neither case does determinism affect the question. Such resignation is

[1] Ibid., p. 167.

only advisable when nothing further can be done to remedy the situation. If it became a constant attitude to life it would be very harmful.

The critics who claim that Diderot is torn between an intellectual acceptance of determinism and an emotional faith in the reality of human liberty lay great stress on a fragment of a letter concerning the comet of 1769:

> Votre question sur la comète m'a fait faire une réflexion singulière; c'est que l'athéisme est tout voisin d'une espèce de superstition presque aussi puérile que l'autre. Rien n'est indifférent dans un ordre de choses qu'une loi générale lie et entraîne; il semble que tout soit également important. Il n'y a point de grands ni de petits phénomènes. La constitution Unigenitus est aussi nécessaire que le lever et le coucher du soleil; il est dur de s'abandonner aveuglément au torrent universel; il est impossible de lui résister. Les efforts impuissants ou victorieux sont aussi dans l'ordre. Si je crois que je vous aime librement, je me trompe. Il n'en est rien. O le beau système pour les ingrats! J'enrage d'être empêtré d'une diable de philosophie que mon esprit ne peut s'empêcher d'approuver, et mon coeur de démentir. Je ne puis souffrir que mes sentiments pour vous, que vos sentiments pour moi soient assujettis à quoi que ce soit au monde, et que Naigeon les fasse dépendre du passage d'une comète. Peu s'en faut que je ne me fasse chrétien pour me promettre de vous aimer dans ce monde tant que j'y serai; et de vous retrouver, pour vous aimer encore dans l'autre. C'est une pensée si douce que je ne suis point étonné que les bonnes âmes y tiennent. Si Mlle Olympe était sur le point de mourir, elle vous dirait: "Ma chère cousine, ne pleurez pas, nous nous reverrons." Et puis voilà où m'a mené

votre perfide question sur la comète.[1]

Many commentators have taken this text very seriously, treating it as a sort of recantation on an emotional plane of the determinism which Diderot accepts intellectually. They contrive to make him appear as a being divided into two selves, perpetually in dialogue, but ultimately agreeing to differ. According to Lester Crocker, for instance, the fragment in question expresses a "conflict between [Diderot's] inexorable rationalism and an emotional heart that rebelled against the conclusions of his intellect."[2] Georges May notes of this fragment that "on le cite d'ordinaire en exemple pour faire voir que le philosophe lui-même est quelquefois conscient du divorce qui existe entre sa morale et sa métaphysique."[3] May's own view conforms to this critical tradition. "Le mérite unique . . . du fragment . . .," he claims, "est de révéler la véhémence avec laquelle [Diderot] s'élève lui-même contre [le] déterminisme en dehors du domaine purement abstrait."[4]

[1] Roth, IX, 154-55. The source of this text is a copy, in Naigeon's hand, of a number of detached fragments, presumably from Diderot's correspondence. Roth dates it, hypothetically, from the end of September 1769. It was formerly thought to be part of a letter to Sophie Volland, but Jean Pommier in his "Etudes sur Diderot" (Revue d'histoire de la philosophie et d'histoire générale de la civilisation, 1942, pp. 176-80) argued convincingly that it was addressed to Mme de Maux, and this has recently been proved conclusively by Mme Lydia-Claude Hartman in her article "A propos de Sophie Volland," Diderot Studies, XII, 1969, pp. 101-02.

[2] The Embattled Philosopher, p. 319. A similar view is expressed by Jean Thomas in L'Humanisme de Diderot, Paris, 1938, pp. 52-53.

[3] Quatre visages de Denis Diderot, p. 148.

[4] Ibid., pp. 148-49.

I think it can be demonstrated that these critics are seriously mistaken regarding, in the first place, the tone of the fragment: it is not anguished soul-searching, but a whimsical paradox intended to be both amusing and thought-provoking. Their erroneous estimate of the general significance of the text seems to me to be due to an incorrect understanding of Diderot's meaning. Crocker, for example, renders the sentence " . . . l'athéisme est tout voisin d'une espèce de superstition presque aussi puérile que l'autre," by "Atheism is close to being a kind of superstition, as puerile as the other."[1] A more literal translation is also more faithful: "Atheism is very close to a kind of superstition almost as childish as the other." Crocker seems to imply that Diderot suspects that his deterministic doctrine may really be a superstitious belief. What Diderot in fact means is that it is a delicate matter to distinguish between the determinism upon which his atheism is founded and the old astrological beliefs, which are a superstition almost as puerile as the belief in a personal immaterial being on whose will all that happens in the world depends. The interpretation of determinism which Diderot outlines in the fragment is not his true doctrine, but the convenient representation of a subtly distorted version thereof, which lends a specious credibility to the superstition regarding the influence of comets. His paradox

[1] The Embattled Philosopher, p. 320.

runs as follows. Since all events, great and small, are linked together by a universal law, any alteration in the smallest event would entail an alteration in every part of the system. Thus one may claim that there is no real difference in importance between events which are usually considered greater or smaller. Although it is true that small events depend on great ones, it is equally true that great events depend on small ones. Any particular event may be considered as entirely entailed by the total context of events in which it is placed. Thus the human individual, who is nothing but a succession of physical events, may be seen as nothing but the inevitable result of all the events which constitute the ever-changing universe. There is in him no principle which might direct his acts, or even his thoughts, any more than there is, in someone who is swept downstream by a raging torrent, a principle which determines the direction he takes. Moreover, not only do the acts and thoughts of the human individual result from the universal context in which he is situated, but any event, great or small, which is part of this context may be said to influence them. Naigeon has, it would appear, facetiously pointed out that this doctrine is very close to the old superstition about comets and that, for all Diderot knows, he would never have fallen in love with Mme de Maux if it were not for the appearance of the comet of 1769. Diderot's actual experience of his feelings tells him, however, that his love is not imposed on him by any force exterior to himself.

The argument is, in fact, a sophism, because it fails to take account of the original dynamism inherent in every particle of matter, a principle which Diderot himself expounds in his Principes philosophiques sur la matière et le mouvement. "Un atome remue le monde;" he writes, "rien n'est plus vrai; cela l'est autant que l'atome remué par le monde: puisque l'atome a sa force propre, elle ne peut être sans effet."[1] Thus the analogy of the man in the torrent lends only specious support to the paradox, for, though his struggles may not be effective in saving his life, they are bound to have some effect on the direction he takes. In this paradoxical context, the sentence "Les efforts impuissants ou victorieux sont aussi dans l'ordre," seems to imply that man has not the slightest measure of autonomy. In fact, however, while this statement is consistent with Diderot's determinism, one may not logically conclude from it that man has no autonomy, for the fact that his autonomy is included in the universal order does not nullify it. Indeed, the sentence under discussion admits this by allowing that man's efforts may be efficacious. Naigeon would be right if he went no further than claiming that the passage of the comet must have some effect, however negligeable, on the course of events which constitutes Diderot's life. But, as for his claim that Diderot would not have fallen in love if the comet had not appeared, he might just as well assert that the comet would not have appeared if Diderot

[1] AT, II, 67.

had not fallen in love! I think we may be sure that Diderot knows that his paradox is fallacious. He knows perfectly well that it is not true that all events in the universe have an equal effect on all others. This is evident from a passage in Le Rêve de d'Alembert in which Bordeu points out to Mlle de l'Espinasse that our senses receive impressions from all parts of the universe, but that their strength is in inverse proportion to the distance of their origin.[1] Several passages from different works make it clear that the cause which produces the individual's act or thought is not simply the context in which he is placed, but comprises also his own nature.[2] I think that when Diderot says, "J'enrage d'être empêtré d'une diable de philosophie . . . ," he refers not to his real deterministic doctrine, but to the particular falsified version of it which he outlines here. But what does he mean when he says that his mind cannot help approving it, though his heart rejects it? One could suppose that Diderot is merely pretending to believe in his paradox, but I think the matter is in fact more complicated. I suggest that in formulating this paradox Diderot has momentarily become his own dupe, that he is not clearly conscious that he has crossed the fine line between scientific determinism and pseudo-scientific fatalism. The reason why so many critics have

[1] AT, II, 141-42.

[2] See above, p. 22, the quotations from Jacques le fataliste, AT, VI, 180, and from Le Rêve de d'Alembert, AT, II, 175.

taken this fragment as the serious expression of a profound philosophical and emotional dilemma may well be that Diderot has managed to give a certain tone of sincerity to his paradox. Instead of analysing the precise way in which determinism could be distorted into fatalism, he here recalls a frame of mind in which he sometimes finds himself, when he feels that within the deterministic system, in spite of the kind of autonomy and original dynamism which it allows the individual, man is still a helpless witness of his own destiny. The following text shows that Diderot was familiar with such a feeling:

> On est bien ou mal né. On se trouve, en entrant dans le monde, jeté en bonne ou mauvaise compagnie. On a des goûts honnêtes ou dissolus. On est un homme d'esprit ou un sot. On a du bon sens ou l'on est un insensé. On a de la sensibilité ou l'on est une pierre. On est heureux ou malheureux. La nature nous dispose à un rôle ou à un autre. Très souvent les circonstances nous condamnent à celui pour lequel nous n'étions pas faits, et sans avoir dit avec le stoïcien: O destin! conduis-moi où tu voudras, me voilà prêt à te suivre! nous n'en sommes ni plus ni moins conduits.[1]

The fact that Diderot is capable of adopting such an attitude does not, I think, justify the conclusion that, either here or in the sophistical argument in the fragment concerning the comet, we have the carefully weighed position which we could call his philosophy. Nor are such feelings of emotional dissatisfaction with the situation of man in a deterministic scheme of things frequent enough to justify our seeing Diderot as split between his intellect and his heart.

[1] AT, IV, 98 (Remarks concerning a work entitled Principes philosophiques pour servir d'introduction à la connaissance de l'esprit et du coeur humain).

I think that in the fragment concerning the comet Diderot does allude to a philosophical problem which preoccupied him, but I think also that it is quite different from the dilemma to which Crocker and May refer. To make my point clear, I must quote from a passage in the article "Romains", in which a similar problem is evoked. The article opens with a reference to the "frivolous science" of augury, which provokes the following reflections:

> O combien nos lumières sont faibles et trompeuses! Tantôt c'est notre imagination, ce sont les événements, nos passions, notre terreur et notre curiosité qui nous entraînent aux suppositions les plus ridicules; tantôt c'est une autre sorte d'erreur qui nous joue. Avons-nous découvert, à force de raison et d'étude, quelque principe vraisemblable ou vrai, nous nous égarons dès les premières conséquences que nous en tirons, et nous flottons incertains. Nous ne savons s'il y a vice ou dans le principe, ou dans la conséquence; et nous ne pouvons nous résoudre, ni à admettre l'un, ni à rejeter l'autre, ni à les recevoir tous deux. Le sophisme consiste dans quelque chose de très subtil qui nous échappe.[1]

How, asks Diderot, could one refute purely by rational argument an augur who claimed that his art was founded on the principle that all things in nature are interconnected, and declared that he had observed a constant relation between the condition of the entrails of the sacred chickens and important events on which the fate of the empire depended? The answer is that reason alone is powerless to refute him; one is forced to have recourse to experimental verification:

[1] AT, XVII, 27.

> Et voilà mon philosophe, s'il est un peu sincère, réduit à laisser de côté sa raison, et à prendre le couteau du sacrificateur, ou à abandonner un principe incontestable: c'est que tout tient dans la nature par un enchaînement nécessaire. . . . Qu'on rende le philosophe si subtil que l'on voudra, si l'augur n'est pas un imbécile, il répondra à tout, et ramènera le philosophe, malgré qu'il en ait, à l'expérience.[1]

There is a striking and instructive similarity between the problem with which Diderot deals in this passage from "Romains" and the question which is raised in the fragment concerning the comet. In each case the problem arises because, from a general principle which Diderot considers incontrovertible, namely the principle of universal determinism, a conclusion is drawn which he finds unacceptable though he is unable to demonstrate the falsehood of the deduction. In both texts he admits that determinism lends an apparent support to superstitious beliefs. What makes Diderot reject the augur's belief is his sense of the comparative probability of different combinations of events, a sense which results from an immense number of observations, in other words, from experience.[2] It is fortunately possible to establish by a series of experiments whether or not the inspection of chickens' entrails enables one accurately to predict the result of battles. In the fragment concerning the comet, on the other hand, all that Diderot can invoke to counter Naigeon's facetious suggestion that his love for Mme de Maux has

[1] Ibid., p. 28.

[2] Cf. Pensées sur l'interprétation de la Nature, sect. III, AT, II, 24.

been the result of the passage of the comet is the evidence of his heart. This is experience, but it is not experiment. The comet will come only once in Diderot's lifetime and he will never have a way of proving that he would still have fallen in love with Mme de Maux even if it had not appeared. This is why he must remain "empêtré" and continue to "enrager".

To sum up my conclusions on the significance of the fragment concerning the comet, I believe that it does not express an emotional rejection of Diderot's intellectually accepted determinism, but reveals instead his awareness of the contradiction between the evidence of his emotional experience and the pseudo-scientific fatalism into which defective, but specious, logic sometimes leads him.

The Réfutation d'Helvétius[1] provides further evidence that Diderot believed there was a vital distinction to be made between, on the one hand, that sort of determinism in which part of the causality which governs the individual's acts and thoughts is to be found within himself, and, on the other hand, the pseudo-scientific fatalism according to which the individual is merely passive. According to Helvétius, the personality of the individual is entirely the result of the influence of the environment. If two babies could be brought up so as to have an identical experience, they would, from the psychological point of view, be

[1] The only complete edition is that which appears in the Oeuvres complètes (AT, II, 275-456), under the title Réfutation suivie de l'ouvrage d'Helvétius intitulé l'Homme.

indistinguishable. In Diderot's view, this would only be true if they were identical at birth in their physical constitution, for this endows them with peculiar predispositions and aptitudes. Thus, for Helvétius, man is a passive witness of effects produced in him by external forces, while Diderot insists on the importance of individual biological differences which interact with the influence of the environment to cause the individual to function as he does.[1]

In my discussion of Diderot's determinism, I have endeavoured especially to ascertain what sort of human liberty he denies when he rejects free-will and what sort of autonomy his deterministic doctrine allows the human individual. From what I have said, it will, I think, be clear that the notion of freedom he discards is quite different from that freedom of which, as I will show in chapters III-VI, he was the unflagging champion. The liberty which matters for Diderot is liberty from oppressive forces acting upon the individual. Man cannot but be subject to external

[1] Diderot stresses his disagreement with Helvétius over this point constantly throughout the Réfutation. His general comment on Section I of De l'Homme is as follows: "L'auteur emploie les quinze chapitres qui forment cette section à établir son paradoxe favori, 'que l'éducation seule fait toute la différence entre des individus à peu près bien organisés . . . ,' condition dans laquelle il ne fait entrer ni la force, ni la faiblesse, ni la santé, ni la maladie, ni aucune de ces qualités physiques ou morales qui diversifient les tempéraments et les caractères." (AT, II, 276.) It should be noted that both Diderot and Helvétius use the word "éducation" in a very broad sense: we would say "environmental influences".

influences, but he cannot be happy when they exert an excessive and stifling effect on the development of those original forces which are within him. The happiness of the individual and of society depends upon a certain balance between the inherent needs and propensities of the individual and the pressures exerted upon him by society.

Before turning, however, to the question of the individual's relation to society, I must examine Diderot's views on the logical consequences which the denial of free-will entails for ethics.

CHAPTER II

THE ETHICAL CONSEQUENCES OF DETERMINISM

I endeavoured to show in the previous chapter that Diderot remains a confirmed determinist throughout his mature career. I denied, in particular, that the fragment concerning the comet provides, as so many scholars have claimed, evidence that on an emotional plane Diderot rejected the determinism of which he was convinced intellectually. In the present chapter I wish to examine his view of the significance of determinism for ethics. Here again I shall oppose the theory that he reveals an inner conflict between intellectual and emotional conviction. Contrary to the opinion of certain commentators, I shall argue that according to Diderot himself a consistent deterministic doctrine does not constitute a danger for morality or render ethical discourse meaningless, that he sees its practical consequences as rather limited and not at all distressing and in fact regards it as the only sound theoretical basis for ethics.

Diderot himself was well aware of the common opinion that to deny free-will is to sap the whole foundation of ethics and to jeopardize public morality. That is the reaction he ascribes to Mlle de l'Espinasse in _Le Rêve de d'Alembert_, when Bordeu declares that no human action is free and that a human being could never act at a given moment otherwise than he in fact does. The lady exclaims in horror:

> Mais, docteur, et le vice et la vertu? La vertu, ce mot si saint dans toutes les langues, cette idée si sacrée chez toutes les nations![1]

This scandalized attitude was clearly that of most people in Diderot's day. Consider, for instance, the following passage from the article "Liberté":

> Encore une fois, ôtez la liberté, vous ne laissez sur la terre ni vice, ni vertu, ni mérite; les récompenses sont ridicules et les châtiments sont injustes: chacun ne fait que ce qu'il doit puisqu'il agit selon la nécessité; il ne doit, ni éviter ce qui est inévitable, ni vaincre ce qui est invincible. Tout est dans l'ordre, car l'ordre est que tout cède à la nécessité. La ruine de la liberté renverse avec elle tout ordre et toute police, confond le vice et la vertu, autorise toute infamie monstrueuse, éteint toute pudeur et tout remords, dégrade et défigure sans ressource tout le genre humain. Une doctrine si énorme ne doit point être examinée dans l'école, mais punie par les magistrats.[2]

This passage, which I do not consider to have been written by Diderot,[3] sums up, admittedly in a somewhat truculent manner, the traditional common-sense view that belief in determinism destroys the basis of morality and encourages vice and crime. It is in fact still the view of most people today and we find it expressed or implied by some of Diderot's recent commentators. Thus many scholars point to what they call the "contradiction" between Diderot's ethical system in writings where his determinism

[1] AT, II, 176.

[2] AT, XV, 501.

[3] See above, p. 23, note 3, concerning the authorship of "Liberté".

is explicit and his attitude in works like the Entretiens sur le Fils naturel, where, without mentioning the problem of free-will and determinism, he extols virtue and vituperates vice.[1] According to Georges May, Diderot is aware that there is an irreconcilable contradiction between his ethical views and his determinism. He can only escape from the latter, says May, "par un manque de rigueur dans sa dialectique, par la pirouette de Bordeu substituant aux notions de bien et de mal celles de bienfaisance et de malfaisance."[2] Unfortunately, May does not specify on what grounds he criticizes the rigour of Diderot's logic.

Contrary to such opinions, I shall attempt to demonstrate that Diderot's position is, in fact, logically consistent; that between the unorthodox ethical conclusions which he derives from his determinism and the moralizing stance he often adopts the conflict is only apparent; that he professes, quite consciously, a "double doctrine", and that the acceptability of his exoteric moral position to timorous minds is due not only to prudent concessions to orthodoxy, but also very often to a deliberate use

[1] Cf. the following remark of Charly Guyot: "Quoi que Diderot puisse dire, il est difficile de ne pas voir une inconséquence entre son matérialisme théorique et sa 'pratique' moralisatrice." (Diderot par lui-même, Paris, 1953, p. 59.) It is determinism which Guyot has particularly in mind when he refers here to Diderot's materialism. See also Lefebvre, op. cit., p. 284.

[2] Quatre visages de Denis Diderot, p. 149. May presumably uses the words bien and mal in the same sense as Diderot uses vice and vertu, i.e. implying free-will.

of traditional modes of expression which are calculated to deceive the uninitiated, while at the same time they convey a message not inconsistent with his esoteric doctrine.

In order that the reader may judge whether my analysis of Diderot's views on the ethical consequences of determinism is correct, I will begin by quoting in full, and without commentary, the most important texts relevant to this question:

1) Le Rêve de d'Alembert, AT, II, 176.

In answer to Mademoiselle de l'Espinasse's query as to what becomes of the word "virtue", Bordeu replies:

> Il faut le transformer en celui de bienfaisance, et son opposé en celui de malfaisance. On est heureusement ou malheureusement né; on est irresistiblement entraîné par le torrent général qui conduit l'un à la gloire, l'autre à l'ignominie.
>
> Mademoiselle de l'Espinasse: Et l'estime de soi, et la honte, et le remords?
>
> Bordeu: Puérilité fondée sur l'ignorance et la vanité d'un être qui s'impute à lui-même le mérite ou le démérite d'un instant nécessaire.
>
> Mademoiselle de l'Espinasse: Et les récompenses, et les châtiments?
>
> Bordeu: Des moyens de corriger l'être modifiable qu'on appelle méchant, et d'encourager celui qu'on appelle bon.

2) Jacques le fataliste, AT, VI, 180-81.

> Jacques ne connaissait ni le nom de vice, ni le nom de vertu; il prétendait qu'on était heureusement ou

malheureusement né. Quand il entendait prononcer les mots récompenses ou châtiments, il haussait les épaules. Selon lui la récompense était l'encouragement des bons; le châtiment, l'effroi des méchants. Qu'est-ce autre chose, disait-il, s'il n'y a point de liberté, et que notre destinée soit écrite là-haut? Il croyait qu'un homme s'acheminait aussi nécessairement à la gloire ou à l'ignominie, qu'une boule qui aurait la conscience d'elle-même suit la pente d'une montagne; et que, si l'enchaînement des causes et des effets qui forment la vie d'un homme depuis le premier instant de sa naissance jusqu'à son dernier soupir nous était connu, nous resterions convaincus qu'il n'a fait que ce qu'il était nécessaire de faire. . . . D'après ce système, on pourrait imaginer que Jacques ne se réjouissait, ne s'affligeait de rien; cela n'était pourtant pas vrai. Il se conduisait à peu près comme vous et moi. Il remerciait son bienfaiteur, pour qu'il lui fît encore du bien. Il se mettait en colère contre l'homme injuste; et quand on lui objectait qu'il ressemblait alors au chien qui mord la pierre qui l'a frappé: "Nenni, disait-il, la pierre mordue par le chien ne se corrige pas; l'homme injuste est modifié par le bâton."

3) Art. "Malfaisant", AT, XVI, 57.

MALFAISANT, ad. (Gram. et Morale), qui nuit, qui fait du mal. Si l'homme est libre, c'est-à-dire si l'âme a une activité qui lui soit propre, et en vertu de laquelle elle puisse se déterminer à faire ou ne pas faire une action, quelles que soient ses habitudes ou celles du corps, ses idées, ses passions, le tempérament, l'âge, les préjugés, etc., il y a certainement des hommes vertueux et des hommes vicieux; s'il n'y a point de liberté, il n'y a plus que des hommes bienfaisants et des hommes malfaisants; mais les hommes n'en sont pas moins modifiables en bien et en mal; les bons exemples, les bons discours, les châtiments, les récompenses, le blâme, la louange, les lois ont toujours leur effet: l'homme malfaisant est malheureusement né.

4) Art. "Liberté", AT, XV, 482-83.

Il n'y a donc plus de vicieux et de vertueux? non, si vous le voulez; mais il y a des êtres heureux ou malheureux, bienfaisants et malfaisants. Et les

> récompenses et les châtiments? Il faut bannir ces mots de la morale; on ne récompense point, mais on encourage à bien faire; on ne châtie point, mais on étouffe, on effraye. Et les lois, et les bons exemples, et les exhortations, à quoi servent-elles? Elles sont d'autant plus utiles, qu'elles ont nécessairement leurs effets. Mais pourquoi distinguez-vous, par votre indignation et par votre colère, l'homme qui vous offense, de la tuile qui vous blesse? c'est que je suis déraisonnable, et qu'alors je ressemble au chien qui mord la pierre qui l'a frappé. Mais cette idée de liberté que nous avons, d'où vient-elle? De la même source qu'une infinité d'autres idées fausses que nous avons! En un mot, concluent-ils [the Spinozists], ne vous effarouchez pas à contre-temps. Ce système qui vous paraît si dangereux, ne l'est point; il ne change rien au bon ordre de la société. Les choses qui corrompent les hommes seront toujours à supprimer; les choses qui les améliorent seront toujours à multiplier et à fortifier. C'est une dispute de gens oisifs, qui ne mérite point la moindre animadversion de la part du législateur. Seulement notre système de la nécessité assure à toute cause bonne, ou conforme à l'ordre établi, son bon effet; à toute cause mauvaise ou contraire à l'ordre établi, son mauvais effet; et en nous prêchant l'indulgence et la commisération pour ceux qui sont malheureusement nés, nous empêche d'être si vains de ne pas leur ressembler; c'est un bonheur qui n'a dépendu de nous en aucune façon.

5) To these texts should be added a passage from Diderot's letter to Landois, dated June 29, 1756.[1] Since I shall find it necessary to quote this passage later in the present chapter when commenting on the significance of the letter, considered as a whole, the reader is referred to pp. 73-74 below for this text.

Perhaps the most striking feature of these passages is the paradoxical and provocative way in which Diderot chooses to express himself. It is as if he has deliberately set out to shock. Vice and virtue, he declares, do not exist; nothing

[1] Roth, I, 213-14.

deserves praise or blame; self-esteem, shame and remorse are puerilities. Immediately the reader feels his values threatened. His equanimity is not restored despite the assurance that adequate substitutes are at hand to replace what has been rejected, and that the question of free-will and determinism is a "dispute for idle people", the issue of which is of little practical importance.

Let us try to analyse dispassionately the ideas which Diderot clothes in this paradoxical form. First we must note that he does not deny the distinction between good and bad acts. These qualities are defined by the effect produced, on the agent himself and on other people. Nor is there here any denial that there is a valid distinction to be made between those men who are commonly said to manifest vice and those who are commonly said to manifest virtue. What Diderot objects to is the use of the terms "vice" and "virtue"; and this is because of the special connotations which accompany them. The point is made clear in a passage which Diderot added to de Jaucourt's article "Vice":

> L'usage a mis de la différence entre un <u>défaut</u> et un <u>vice</u>; tout vice est défaut, mais tout défaut n'est pas vice. On suppose à l'homme qui a un vice, une liberté qui le rend coupable à nos yeux; le défaut tombe communément sur le compte de la nature; on excuse l'homme, on accuse la nature.[1]

Diderot substitutes the terms "bienfaisance" and "malfaisance"

[1] <u>Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une société de gens de lettres</u>, Paris, 1751-65, vol. XVII.

for those of "vice" and "vertu" because the new words are free from certain connotations which he feels to be indissociable from the old ones. "Bienfaisance" and "malfaisance" characterize actions solely by reference to the effects which the agent can expect them to produce. The words "vice" and "vertu" normally imply the free-will of the agent and the idea that we ought to punish the doer of a harmful act simply because he has done it and could have freely chosen to do otherwise. That is a reaction akin to vengeance. It is quite different from saying that we take such action against the doer of a harmful act as will tend to prevent or deter him from repeating it or deter others from acting similarly. This is Diderot's view; it is a dispassionate approach, unlike the emotional attitude normally inherent in the traditional reaction to "vice" and "virtue"; for one never pronounces the words "vertueux" and "vicieux", says Diderot, without either love or hatred.[1]

Similarly, when Diderot says that according to the deterministic view there is nothing in human behaviour which deserves praise or blame, he does not mean that we are behaving foolishly when we express approval or disapproval of a person's actions. The point Diderot is making is that, in so far as the terms "praise", "blame" and "deserve" imply free-will on the part of the agent, they are philosophically unjustifiable. But, with determinism, just as punishment is rejected in the form of retribution only

[1] Loc. cit.

to reappear in the form of deterrence, so praise and blame reappear in the guise of example, exhortation and moral training. These, like the more extreme measures which the laws prescribe, cannot fail to have their effect, because no cause can operate upon a human being without producing an effect in him, since he is part of the physical world and subject to the laws which govern it. "Et les lois, et les bons exemples, et les exhortations, à quoi servent-elles?" asks Diderot in "Liberté", and he answers: "Elles sont d'autant plus utiles, qu'elles ont nécessairement leurs effets."[1] In the article "Modification", he writes: "Moins un être est libre, plus on est sûr de le modifier, et plus la modification lui est nécessairement attachée."[2] Moreover, the effect which we produce in a person by our exhortations, reprimands, encouragements and deterrents, cannot cease operating in him: "Les modifications qui nous ont été imprimées nous changent sans ressource, et pour le moment et pour toute la suite de la vie, parce qu'il ne se peut jamais faire que ce qui a été une fois tel, n'ait pas été tel."[3] Far from justifying despondency, the deterministic doctrine should make us more hopeful of the security and progress of the social order; for, if we believe in free-will, we can have no certainty that any measures we take to influence the will of the potential criminal will have any effect, since, if we could be sure they would, this

[1] AT, XV, 482.

[2] AT, XVI, 120.

[3] Loc. cit.

would imply the denial of the freedom of his will; and to the extent that we think the measures we take can influence, without determining, his will, to that extent we in effect assume the freedom of his will to be limited. On the other hand, according to Diderot's view, although the measures we take may be insufficient or inappropriate to deter the potential criminal, their effectiveness depends entirely upon their nature and upon his nature, and not on a capricious and unpredictable decision of his will, arising out of nothing at all.

On one point the passages from "Liberté" and Jacques le fataliste are contradictory, but the question is not a fundamental one. In "Liberté" we read: "Mais pourquoi distinguez-vous, par votre indignation et par votre colère, l'homme qui vous offense, de la tuile qui vous blesse? c'est que je suis déraisonnable, et qu'alors je ressemble au chien qui mord la pierre qui l'a frappé."[1] Diderot is, in fact, well aware that indignation is justifiable, at least as regards its outward manifestation, because it has the practical usefulness of contributing to the preservation of the individual. Jacques points out that anger against a man who wrongs you is not similar to a dog biting the stone which has struck it, because "la pierre mordue par le chien ne se corrige pas," whereas "l'homme injuste est modifié par le bâton."[2] We shall see, in a later chapter,[3]

[1] AT, XV, 482.

[2] AT, VI, 181.

[3] See below, pp. 226, 229.

that Diderot lays great stress on instinctive resentment of injustice. When a determinist reacts spontaneously to other people's actions, without seeking to justify his reactions in the light of his philosophy, he reacts emotionally, with pleasure or anger, just as men always have. Reflecting on his reactions, he can see that they serve a useful purpose: he has therefore no reason to try to bring about a radical change in them. In this connection, it is noteworthy that Diderot rejects the Stoic ideal of ataraxia. He cites the following remark of Seneca: "Le sage n'entrera pas en colère, si l'on égorge son père, si l'on enlève sa femme, si l'on viole sa fille sous ses yeux,"[1] and replies that not only is such an attitude impossible, but the attempt to attain it would produce harmful results: "L'indignation contre le méchant, la bienveillance pour l'homme de bien, sont deux sortes d'enthousiasme également dignes d'éloge."[2]

Probably the most disquieting part of the whole doctrine is the treatment of the feelings of the agent towards his own actions. Bordeu classes self-esteem, shame and remorse as puerilities. This seems particularly paradoxical, because it appears to imply that it would be better if people never experienced these feelings, whereas it is admitted, even in Diderot's system, that men who do not experience them tend to be maleficent. He is aware of the useful effects of self-esteem, shame and remorse, for the experience

[1] Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron, AT, III, 282.
[2] Ibid., p. 283.

of these feelings is part of that continuing process of moral decision in the individual, which he describes in his letter to Landois.[1] I conclude that Diderot would have been able, if he had so wished, to make Bordeu express substantially the same views on shame and remorse in a manner less calculated to scandalize. Why then does Bordeu say that self-esteem, shame and remorse are puerilities? I think the reason is that these feelings have traditionally been given a supposedly rational justification implying free-will. The orthodox attitude is: "You have done wrong and could have done right. Therefore you ought to feel shame and remorse." Diderot, on the other hand, would say: "Whether or not you feel shame or remorse for the harm you have done cannot depend on a free decision of your will; it depends on the end-result of your various motivational conflicts. I could, if I so wished, attempt to sway this balance in favour of remorse by exhorting you; but I think it more useful to concern myself with your future actions than your past ones. I will therefore try to motivate you to beneficent conduct in the future by convincing you that if you wish to be happy -- which you do -- the best way is to be beneficent." I shall consider in greater detail later in this thesis[2] Diderot's attempts to demonstrate the validity of the position which I have just attributed to him. For the moment, I wish only to show that, far from conflicting

[1] See below, pp. 74-76, the quotation from Roth, I, 211-13.

[2] See below, pp. 239-52.

with his determinism, his attempt to justify beneficence on the grounds that it is to the advantage of the person who practises it is part and parcel of the same basic position.

Not only does determinism imply no harmful change in practical attitudes and behaviour, but it in no way invalidates the exhortatory function of the moralist. There is an interesting letter from Diderot to his brother the abbé, in which he replies to a letter which is not extant, but in which it is evident that the abbé has attacked his philosophy, in particular his determinism, as a negation of morality. Diderot replies in a sarcastic tone, but he nevertheless clearly expresses the way in which, according to the deterministic doctrine, moral relations between men operate, particularly with regard to the efficacy and justification of moral exhortation or reprimand:

> Ne parlez jamais philosophie, parce que vous n'y entendez pas plus qu'un talapoin. Hé, mon Dieu, oui, je sais bien que tu serais bon, doux, honnête, tolérant si tu le pouvais par toi-même. Mais je sais bien qu'il y a quelque différence entre la tuile et l'homme qui me blessent; et cette différence est que la tuile ne se modifie pas, et que l'être sensible est modifiable. Je te donne du bout du couteau sur le nez, comme on fait au chien gourmand. Qui sait ce que ma lettre fera sur toi? C'est une cause qui aura nécessairement son effet. Si par hasard elle te rendait bon, de méchant que tu es; doux, du plus acariâtre des hommes que tu es; honnête, d'insolent; tolérant, de fanatique à toute outrance; est-ce que j'en devrais être surpris? Nullement. Tant que tu vivras, tu ne seras pas sans ressource; et sur ce, tâche de te taire sur une doctrine dont tu ne sais pas la première lettre de l'alphabet.[1]

We cannot suppose that Diderot really thought that his letter

[1] Roth, XII, 169-70 (Nov. 13, 1772).

would have any salutary effect on his brother; in this particular case he knew that the resistance was too great, so he does not even attempt to go about things in the manner most likely to be efficacious. In any case, the real intention of the letter is simply to annoy his brother. Yet the theory which Diderot uses here is to be taken quite seriously. The following detached note refers to the same idea:

> Après avoir lu Sénèque, suis-je le même que j'étais avant que de le lire? Cela n'est pas, cela ne se peut.[1]

Diderot thus answers in advance the charge that a determinist must, logically, admit the futility of demonstrating that true happiness can only be enjoyed by the good man. Such objections ignore the fact that the determinism which governs men's thoughts and actions comprises not only their organic constitution, but also all the influences which have been exerted on them up to the moment at which they act. These influences include those resulting from their reading of the works of moralists.[2]

Since Diderot minimizes the consequences of determinism for practical morality, one may well ask why he lays so much stress

[1] Eléments de physiologie, ed. Mayer, Appendice II, p. 331.

[2] There is no great originality in the way Diderot reconciles the possibility that moral exhortation can be efficacious with his denial of free-will. Voltaire uses the same argument in Le Philosophe ignorant (1766), a work in which he rejects free-will: "Vous me demandez à quoi bon tout ce sermon, si l'homme n'est pas libre? D'abord je ne vous ai point dit que l'homme n'est pas libre; je vous ai dit que sa liberté consiste dans son pouvoir d'agir, et non pas dans le pouvoir chimérique de vouloir vouloir. Ensuite je vous dirai que tout étant lié dans la nature, la Providence éternelle me prédestinait à écrire ces rêveries, et prédestinait cinq ou six lecteurs à en faire leur profit, et cinq à six autres à les dédaigner et à les laisser dans la foule immense des écrits inutiles." (Ed. J. L. Carr, London, 1965, section LI, p. 92.)

in some works on the deterministic account of moral phenomena. It would be correct, but insufficient, to answer that he wishes to rectify a philosophical error. What disturbs Diderot and the 'philosophes' generally is not error in itself, but its harmful consequences. Belief in free-will has, in his opinion, certain harmful practical effects which determinism, properly understood, helps to combat. The public attitude towards law-breakers was, he felt, imbued with a vindictiveness for which a supposed justification was provided by the doctrine of free-will. He claims that determinism, on the other hand, will make anyone who embraces it more humane in his attitude to the behaviour of others, less inclined to be revengeful and less prone to the pride and self-righteousness which lead to excessive severity. Since Diderot's day we have grown more accustomed to legal systems which take account of the extenuating circumstances of crime, which consider the criminal, not as deliberately perverse, but as suffering from social maladjustment. Diderot justifies in advance this newer attitude:

> Plus on accorde à l'organisation, à l'éducation, aux moeurs nationales, au climat, aux circonstances qui ont disposé de notre vie, depuis l'instant où nous sommes tombés du sein de la nature, jusqu'à celui où nous existons, moins on est vain des bonnes qualités qu'on possède, et qu'on se doit si peu à soi-même, plus on est indulgent pour les défauts et les vices des autres; plus on est circonspect dans l'emploi des mots vicieux et vertueux, qu'on ne prononce jamais sans amour ou sans haine, plus on a de penchant à leur substituer ceux de malheureusement et d'heureusement nés, qu'un sentiment de commisération accompagne toujours. Vous avez pitié d'un aveugle; et qu'est-ce qu'un méchant,

> sinon un homme qui a la vue courte, et qui ne voit pas au-delà du moment où il agit?[1]

Diderot himself more than once expresses the view that poverty should be considered as in some measure attenuating crimes of theft. This is the grain of truth which is contained in this remark of Rameau's nephew: "La voix de la conscience et de l'honneur est bien faible, lorsque les boyaux crient."[2] In commenting on legal penalties in his Observations sur le Nakaz, his principles are strictly utilitarian and he rejects all vindictiveness:

> Il m'a semblé que les hommes, en général, risquaient plus volontiers leur honneur que leur vie, et leur vie que leur fortune. L'honneur n'est le ressort que d'un petit nombre d'hommes, et la vie n'est rien si elle n'est pas heureuse; en conséquence, de toutes les peines afflictives, les peines pécuniaires devraient être les plus fréquentes. Rarement des peines infamantes: l'infâme est condamné à la méchanceté; peu de peines capitales; parce qu'un homme a été tué, il n'en faut pas tuer un second; l'assassin qui est mort n'est plus bon à rien; et il y a tant de travaux publics auxquels il peut être condamné! Beaucoup de peines pécuniaires dont partie serait appliquable à l'offensé.[3]

In her Instruction[4] to the legislative assembly which deliberated, without tangible result, in 1767-68, Catherine II refers to the death penalty as an "espèce de talion qui fait que la société

[1] From Diderot's addition to de Jaucourt's article "Vice", Encyclopédie, vol. XVII.

[2] Le Neveu de Rameau, AT, V, 422.

[3] In Oeuvres politiques, ed. Vernière, Paris, 1963, pp. 373-74.

[4] Instruction de S. M. I. pour la commission chargée de dresser le projet d'un nouveau code de lois, Saint-Petersburg, 1769. This work is often referred to by the Russian name Nakaz.

refuse la sûreté à un citoyen qui en a privé ou a voulu en priver un autre."[1] Diderot's remarks are intended in part as a refutation of the Empress's view. His humanitarianism, however, is tempered by a broad utilitarianism which balances pity for the criminal against the need to protect the public. This can be seen in his reflections on Beccaria's Traité des délits et des peines.[2] While affirming his sympathy with the humanitarian sentiments which inspire this work, he refuses to reject the death penalty on principle if it can be shown to be a truly effective and necessary deterrent.

The second, and probably more important, reason why Diderot is so insistent, in certain texts, on denying free-will and drawing the ethical conclusions which we have discussed, is that the ideas of free-will and of merit and demerit are fundamental to the Church's doctrine of punishments after death. Now the Church's precepts contain much that Diderot detests. The peculiarly Christian ethical values, as he understands them, are not derived rationally from positive reality, but are arbitrary. If one discounts the theory of an innate moral conscience, as Diderot constantly does, general obedience to arbitrary moral precepts can only be obtained through compulsion by the authority of custom or by threats of supernatural or temporal punishment.

[1] Quoted by Vernière, Oeuvres politiques, p. 374, note 1.

[2] AT, IV, 61-62.

For Diderot, the authority of custom and positive law is acceptable and necessary as long as it enforces principles of conduct justified by the natural needs of man. Beyond this limit, it is the cause of much human misery. The Church, as an institution exercising oppressive authority over men's lives, is abhorrent to Diderot,[1] and his stand on free-will should be seen as part of his efforts to undermine the doctrinal foundations of ecclesiastical power, and thus to promote the freedom and happiness of man.

The control exercised by Church and State was too stringent to allow the battle for men's minds to be waged openly. Out of mere prudence Diderot limits the frank expression of deterministic views to writings not intended for publication, at least during his life-time, though he often allowed his manuscripts to circulate in a restricted circle of kindred spirits. This does not mean, however, that the works addressed to the general public were merely a vehicle for hypocritical attitudes designed to placate the authorities and strengthen the allegiance of the unenlightened to the established order. The occasional bows to dogma and revelation are no doubt insincere, but the moralizing is genuine. In works like Le Fils naturel or the Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron, on every page of which the words "vice" and "virtue" appear, Diderot is sincere.

[1] Cf. Réfutation d'Helvétius, AT, II, 288-89; Discours d'un philosophe à un roi, AT, IV, 33-36; Plan d'une université pour le gouvernement de Russie, AT, III, 510-11.

Like Pythagoras,[1] Diderot professed a "double doctrine", comprising an exoteric and an esoteric form. The exoteric doctrine is not simply a camouflage designed to deceive the curious, to ward off the hostility of public opinion or to allay the suspicions of the authorities; it is a satisfactory practical doctrine, the theoretical basis of which is defective and makes concessions to speculative error, but which the philosopher considers suitable for the majority of men, who would not understand the strict theory aright and would tend to draw from it erroneous and harmful practical conclusions. For this reason, Pythagoras insisted on his disciples spending several years studying and practising the exoteric doctrine before being initiated into his system in its entirety.[2] There are in the writings of Rousseau interesting echoes of Diderot's distinction between his openly professed views and his esoteric doctrine.

[1] See Diderot's article "Pythagorisme", AT, XVI, 495-96.

[2] The following frequently quoted passage from a letter to d'Alembert concerning the three dialogues centred around Le Rêve de d'Alembert both confirms and is illuminated by the view that Diderot consciously professes a double doctrine: ". . . mais je le supplie par votre bouche de ne me juger qu'après m'avoir médité, de ne prendre aucun extrait de cette informe et dangereuse production dont la publicité disposerait sans ressource de mon repos, de ma fortune, de ma vie et de mon honneur, ou de la juste opinion qu'on a conçue de mes moeurs, de se rappeler la différence d'une morale illicite et d'une morale criminelle, et de ne pas oublier que l'homme de bien ne fait rien de criminel, ni le bon citoyen d'illicite; qu'il est une doctrine spéculative qui n'est ni pour la multitude, ni pour la pratique; et que si, sans être faux, on n'écrit pas tout ce que l'on fait, sans être inconséquent on ne fait pas tout ce qu'on écrit." (Roth, IX, 157-58 [Sept., 1769].)

In the Rêveries du promeneur solitaire, Jean-Jacques refers disparagingly to the double morality of the philosophes:

> Cette morale sans racine et sans fruit qu'ils étalent pompeusement dans des livres ou dans quelque action d'éclat sur le théâtre sans qu'il en pénètre jamais rien dans le coeur ni dans la raison; [et] cette autre morale secrète et cruelle, doctrine intérieure de tous leurs initiés à laquelle l'autre ne sert que de masque, qu'ils suivent seule dans leur conduite et qu'ils ont si habilement pratiquée à mon égard."[1]

In the Confessions, Rousseau refers to the principle that "l'unique devoir de l'homme est de suivre en tout les penchants de son coeur", claiming that this is "la doctrine intérieure dont Diderot m'a tant parlé, mais qu'il ne m'a jamais expliquée."[2] Fortunately for the reputation of Diderot and the other philosophes, the opinion of Rousseau on the nature of their esoteric and exoteric doctrines and on the relation between the two is in no way authoritative. The whole of the present thesis can be considered as an attempt to show that, in Diderot, at least, the two doctrines, when rightly interpreted, are compatible.

To conclude the present chapter, I shall discuss a text in which Diderot himself illustrates the fundamental equivalence of the exoteric and esoteric forms of his ethics, namely his letter

[1] Oeuvres complètes, Pléiade edition, Paris, 1959, I, 1022.

[2] Oeuvres complètes, ed. cit., I, 468. For further information on Rousseau's references to the double morality of the philosophes, see ibid., I, p. 468, note 2, and p. 1022, note 1.

to Landois, In the following passage he expounds the ethical consequences of determinism:

> Regardez-y de près, et vous verrez que le mot liberté est un mot vide de sens; qu'il n'y a point, et qu'il ne peut y avoir d'êtres libres; que nous ne sommes que ce qui convient à l'ordre général, à l'organisation, à l'éducation, et à la chaîne des événements. Voilà ce qui dispose de nous invinciblement. On ne conçoit non plus qu'un être agisse sans motif, qu'un des bras d'une balance agisse sans l'action d'un poids; et le motif nous est toujours extérieur, étranger, attaché ou par une nature ou par une cause quelconque qui n'est pas nous.[1] Ce qui nous trompe, c'est la prodigieuse variété de nos actions, jointe à l'habitude que nous avons prise tout en naissant de confondre le volontaire avec le libre. Nous avons tant loué, tant repris, nous l'avons été tant de fois, que c'est un préjugé bien vieux que celui de croire que nous et les autres voulons, agissons librement. Mais s'il n'y a point de liberté, il n'y a point d'action qui mérite la louange ou le blâme. Il n'y a ni vice, ni vertu, rien dont il faille récompenser ou châtier.

[1] Diderot's position on this point may appear to contradict that adopted in later writings. See, for example, the passages from Le Rêve de d'Alembert and Jacques le fataliste, quoted above, p. 23. In these texts it is clear that the cause of a man's actions is not external to himself: it is himself. Each of his acts is the result of the totality of his being at that moment, and this is in its turn the result of the interaction between tendencies internal to his physical organisation and influences of external origin. Diderot's position in the letter to Landois can, however, scarcely be fundamentally different from this, since here too he includes the physical organisation of the body among the forces which "dispose[nt] de nous invinciblement". The human individual participates in the "ordre général", in the "chaîne des événements", in two ways, one of which Diderot denotes by the word "organisation", the other by the word "éducation". I think, therefore, that when he says that the motive which causes our acts is always exterior to ourselves, and is not ourselves, we must assume that the word "nous" has another sense than in the passage from Le Rêve de d'Alembert. In the present passage "nous" does not denote our total being, but the self as Descartes conceives it, in other words, an immaterial principle which the partisans of free-will postulate and presume to be the origin of free decisions. Diderot not only denies that our motives originate from such a principle, but -- though he does not explicitly say so here -- he denies that it even exists. What gives rise to the common supposition that a self, so conceived, exists, is, in Diderot's opinion, simply our consciousness of some of the processes which take place in our body, in particular in our brain.

> Qu'est-ce qui distingue donc les hommes? La bienfaisance et la malfaisance. Le malfaisant est un homme qu'il faut détruire et non punir; la bienfaisance est une bonne fortune, et non une vertu.
>
> Mais quoique l'homme bien ou malfaisant ne soit pas libre, l'homme n'en est pas moins un être qu'on modifie; c'est par cette raison qu'il faut détruire le malfaisant sur une place publique. De là les bons effets de l'exemple, des discours, de l'éducation, du plaisir, de la douleur, des grandeurs, de la misère, etc.; de là une sorte de philosophie pleine de commisération, qui attache fortement aux bons, qui n'irrite non plus contre le méchant que contre un ouragan qui nous remplit les yeux de poussière.
>
> Il n'y a qu'une sorte de causes, à proprement parler; ce sont les causes physiques. Il n'y a qu'une sorte de nécessité; c'est la même pour tous les êtres, quelque distinction qu'il nous plaise d'établir entre eux, ou qui y soit réellement.[1]

More often than not, the letter to Landois is quoted only for this exposition of materialistic and deterministic views.[2] But it is important to note that, immediately preceding these remarks, there is a passage in which Diderot adopts an attitude very similar to that which we find in his moralistic writings:

> Aux yeux du peuple, votre morale est détestable. C'est de la petite morale, moitié vraie, moitié fausse, moitié étroite aux yeux du philosophe. Si j'étais un homme à sermons et à messes, je vous dirais: Ma vertu ne détruit point mes passions; elle les tempère seulement et les empêche de franchir les lois de la droite raison. Je connais tous les avantages prétendus d'un sophisme et d'un mauvais procédé, d'un sophisme bien délicat, d'un procédé bien obscur, bien ténébreux; mais je trouve en moi une égale répugnance à mal raisonner et à mal faire. Je suis entre deux puissances, dont l'une me montre le bien et l'autre m'incline vers le mal. Il faut prendre parti.

[1] Roth, I, 213-14.

[2] Pierre Hermand, for instance, cites only the explicitly deterministic passage just quoted. (Op. cit., passim.)

Dans les commencements, le moment du combat est cruel; mais la peine s'affaiblit avec le temps. Il en vient un où le sacrifice de la passion ne coûte plus rien. Je puis même assurer par expérience qu'il est doux; on en prend à ses propres yeux tant de grandeur et de dignité! La vertu est une maîtresse à laquelle on s'attache autant par ce qu'on fait pour elle, que par les charmes qu'on lui croit. Malheur à vous si la pratique du bien ne vous est pas assez familière, et si vous n'êtes pas assez en fonds de bonnes actions pour en être vain, pour vous en complimenter sans cesse, pour vous enivrer de cette vapeur, et pour en être fanatique.

Nous recevons, dites-vous, la vertu comme le malade reçoit un remède auquel il préférerait, s'il en était cru, toute autre chose qui flatterait son appétit. Cela est vrai d'un malade insensé. Malgré cela, si le malade avait eu le mérite de découvrir lui-même sa maladie; celui d'en avoir trouvé, préparé le remède, croyez-vous qu'il balançât à le prendre, quelque amer qu'il fût, et qu'il ne se fît pas un honneur de sa pénétration et de son courage?

Qu'est-ce qu'un homme vertueux? C'est un homme vain de cette espèce de vanité, et rien de plus. Tout ce que nous faisons, c'est pour nous. Nous avons l'air de nous sacrifier, lorsque nous ne faisons que nous satisfaire. Reste à savoir si nous donnerons le nom de sages ou d'insensés à ceux qui se sont fait une manière d'être heureux aussi bizarre en apparence que celle de s'immoler. Pourquoi les appellerions-nous insensés, puisqu'ils sont heureux, et que leur bonheur est si conforme au bonheur des autres? Certainement ils sont heureux; car quoi qu'il leur en coûte, ils sont toujours ce qui leur coûte le moins.

Mais si vous voulez bien peser les avantages qu'ils se procurent, et surtout les inconvénients qu'ils évitent, vous aurez bien de la peine à prouver qu'ils sont déraisonnables. Si jamais vous l'entreprenez, n'oubliez pas d'apprécier la considération des autres et celle de soi-même tout ce qu'elles valent. N'oubliez pas non plus qu'une mauvaise action n'est jamais impunie; je dis jamais, parce que la première que l'on commet dispose à une seconde, celle-ci à une troisième, et que c'est ainsi qu'on s'avance peu à peu vers le mépris de ses semblables, le plus grand de tous les maux.

Déshonoré dans une société, dira-t-on, je passerai dans une autre où je saurai bien me procurer les

> honneurs de la vertu: erreur. Est-ce qu'on cesse d'être méchant à volonté? Après s'être rendu tel, ne s'agit-il que d'aller à cent lieues pour être bon, ou que de s'être dit: Je veux l'être? Le pli est pris; il faut que l'étoffe le garde.[1]

Perhaps the reason why commentators have generally neglected this passage is that Diderot introduces his remarks with the words "Si j'étais un homme à sermons et à messes, je vous dirais . . . ." But the moral position he proceeds to take has, in fact, none of the specific characteristics which he rejects in the traditional religious ethic; it is not tainted with authoritarianism, nor does it preach the arbitrary and anti-natural moral code which Diderot condemns in the Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville and many other texts. What Diderot's viewpoint here has in common with that of religious moralists is rather that he considers moral decisions introspectively, analysing them in terms of moral sentiments, passions, desires, psychical pleasures and pains. His purpose is to refute certain remarks contained in a manuscript which Landois had communicated to him and which is not extant. From Diderot's letter, it would appear that Landois had doubted that men ever love virtue for itself, but only for the advantages that may be derived from it. Diderot quotes him as saying that "Nous recevons la vertu comme le malade reçoit un remède," that is to say, as something which we would sooner do without if we could. Now Diderot himself is an ethical hedonist, but the conception of pleasure on which his hedonism is based is very broad. In fact his hedonism is, in the final

[1] Roth, I, 211-13.

analysis, truistic: he is able to claim that the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain are the only possible motives of human actions because, in effect, he defines pleasure as the satisfaction derived from doing what we most want to do.[1] Thus, in the passage under consideration, he analyses the motivation of the virtuous man, that is to say, the man who apparently makes painful sacrifices in order to remain just or to act beneficently, and he asserts that such a man never ceases to act in the way which will cause him the least personal dissatisfaction. This is not to deny the reality of the virtuous man's sacrifices;[2] on balance he makes what for him is the least sacrifice possible.

It should be noted that this exposition of the process of motivation in the virtuous man implies as total an exclusion of free-will as does the overtly deterministic passage. There is, it is true, sufficient imprecision in the language used at the beginning of the passage to permit of an interpretation in which free-will plays a part; and one might well assume that this was the true implication, were it not for the context in which these lines are placed. But when one reads the paragraph beginning "Qu'est-ce qu'un homme vertueux?" it becomes clear that the "parti" which has to be taken cannot be the result of an undetermined

[1] Diderot's doctrine is really ethical egoism clothed in the terminology of ethical hedonism. For a more detailed discussion of his theory of motivation, see below, p. 271.

[2] See below pp. 214-15.

choice, but is the inevitable result of one's nature. A man either is, or is not, sufficiently virtuous, by nature or by upbringing, to win the battle against the evil to which he is prompted by his passions and his self-interest, superficially understood. The theory of motivation which Diderot uses is, though expressed in subjective terms, completely mechanistic. It is based on that refined sort of hedonism of which I have already spoken: "Tout ce que nous faisons, c'est pour nous. Nous avons l'air de nous sacrifier, lorsque nous ne faisons que nous satisfaire."[1] Indeed, when, having completed his defence of the good man's love of virtue, Diderot discards the preacher's manner for that of the philosopher[2] and declares that "le mot de <u>liberté</u> est un mot vide de sens," he is not contradicting the position he has just taken; he is merely translating it from subjective into objective terms. Thus the disciple, having mastered the exoteric doctrine, is led into the circle of the initiated, where he may view the total truth now divested of the garb of metaphor and ambiguity in which it had been clothed.

At the close of this second chapter, we have reached an

[1] Roth, I, 212.

[2] In the letter, the link between the two passages I have quoted is provided by the following sentence: "C'est ici, mon cher, que je vais quitter le ton de prédicateur pour prendre, si je peux, celui de philosophe." (Roth, I, 213.)

appropriate point at which to take stock of the discussion so far. My outline of Diderot's conception of the psycho-physiological nature of man will, I think, provide the initial orientation necessary for a correct understanding of his views on morality. I hope, further, to have successfully attacked the common misconception that Diderot was divided within himself with regard to determinism, a misreading which has served to bolster many incorrect interpretations of his ethics. His denial of free-will helps, in a negative way, to define his ethical position, since it sets the latter apart from theories which treat the notion of free-will as a necessary part of any meaningful concept of moral obligation. If the reader accepts the interpretation of Diderot's concept of moral obligation which I propose in the last two chapters of this study, he will concede, I think, that it does not depend on the notion of free-will. The reader must decide for himself whether such a concept of moral obligation is philosophically adequate.

An investigation of these questions, important as they are, can be considered introductory to the principal object of my enquiry. In the following chapters I shall approach directly Diderot's specific views regarding the form of society which men should strive to achieve and the kind of individual behaviour which they should permit or encourage.

CHAPTER III

MAN THE VICTIM OF AN UNNATURAL MORALITY

The very notion of society, in the sense of a structure of cooperative relations embracing in its entirely the mode of life of a group of human beings, implies the conformity of individual conduct to certain prescriptions and restrictions, the precise nature of which will depend, in each particular society, on the ends towards which its activity is directed. Since, for Diderot, there is no other acceptable goal for human society than the greatest general happiness of man in this world, and since he considers human happiness to result from the satisfaction of human needs, the only morality he will subscribe to is that which is founded on the needs which Nature has inscribed in man. He holds the Church responsible for the inculcation and imposition of an arbitrary and unnatural ethic which places unjustifiable restrictions on the satisfaction of basic human needs.

The arbitrariness of the religious approach to rules of conduct is, in Diderot's view, revealed with the greatest clarity in the absurd observances which constitute the religious cult itself. Although such ritual practices, at least in Christianity, do not in themselves have an adverse effect on the welfare of others, Diderot believes that, because of the excessive importance

which, in his opinion, is often accorded them, they result in a falsification of the natural scale of moral values:

> Madame la maréchale, demandez au vicaire de votre paroisse, de ces deux crimes, pisser dans un vase sacré, ou noircir la réputation d'une femme honnête, quel est le plus atroce? Il frémira d'horreur au premier, criera au sacrilège; et la loi civile, qui prend à peine connaissance de la calomnie, tandis qu'elle punit le sacrilège par le feu, achèvera de brouiller les idées et de corrompre les esprits.[1]

While the importance attached to religious observances is both a cause and a symptom of the perversion of moral values, the principal evils arise from other aspects of the religious ethic. These are, first, asceticism in its broadest connotation and, secondly, a particular kind of asceticism constituted by the peculiar ideal of sexual abstinence or sexual fidelity to a single partner. It is appropriate to begin by examining Diderot's attitude to asceticism in general.

Diderot is willing to admit the acceptability of many of the ethical precepts contained in the gospels and preached from the pulpits. But he insists that this part of Christian morality, namely the part which proclaims the ideals of justice and beneficence, is not specifically religious. The specifically religious part consists in the mortification of the body in this life in the hope of thereby pleasing God and meriting happiness in a future life. It is this ascetic ideal which Diderot finds unacceptable. Even if God does exist, why should He be pleased

[1] Entretien d'un philosophe avec la maréchale de . . . , AT, II, 518.

by the sufferings of his creatures? Diderot's answer to this question is very much in keeping with the new wave of thinking in his century which sought to rehabilitate the passions and justify the pursuit of man's happiness on this earth.

Diderot's rejection of asceticism does not mean, however, that he approves of a frantic hedonism. Moderation here is necessary. In La Promenade du Sceptique (1747), an allegory in which three different ways of life are represented by three paths, the right path to choose is that of philosophic moderation (called the path of the chestnut-trees); the path of thorns, i.e. Christian asceticism, and the path of flowers, i.e. the life of immoderate pleasure, ruinous to health, both lead to unhappiness.[1]

Diderot's rejection of the self-inflicted discomfort of long prayer and fasting is expressed in letters to his father and his sister Denise. He pleads with them not to ruin their health in this fruitless manner; it is far better for them to take good care of themselves and express their piety by helping unfortunate people in a tangible way.[2]

It is in the monasteries, however, that he finds the most terrible instances of senseless self-mortification:

[1] La Promenade du Sceptique consists of a "Discours préliminaire" followed by three sections: "L'allée des épines" (AT, I, 189-214); "L'allée des marronniers" (AT, I, 215-35); "L'allée des fleurs" (AT, I, 236-50).

[2] Roth, I, 180-82 (To his relations and friends in Langres; Jan. 6, 1755); Roth, XI, 201-02 (To his sister Denise; Oct. 14, 1771); Correspondance inédite, ed. André Babelon, Paris, 1931, pp. 140-41 (To his sister Denise; Nov. 29, 1778).

> Quelles voix! quels cris! quels gémissements! Qui a renfermé dans ces cachots tous ces cadavres plaintifs? Quels crimes ont commis tous ces malheureux? Les uns se frappent la poitrine avec des cailloux; d'autres se déchirent le corps avec des ongles de fer; tous ont les regrets, la douleur et la mort dans les yeux. Qui les condamne à ces tourments?[1]

The question of monastic life brings us to the problem of sexuality. The novel La Religieuse is more than a protest against forced vocations; it is a warning against the evil psychological effects which often result from the denial of normal social and sexual life which monasticism entails. The young people who become monks or nuns are frequently unaware of the extent of the sacrifice which they have undertaken. They often mistake their awakening sexuality for a spiritual vocation:

> C'est une ferveur passagère qui tient quelquefois à l'ennui d'un tempérament qui fait effort pour se développer dans l'un et dans l'autre sexe, ou qui, s'étant développé, porte à de nouveaux besoins dont on ignore l'objet, ou qu'on ne saurait satisfaire, qui entraîne tant de jeunes et malheureuses victimes de leur inexpérience au fond des cloîtres où elles se croit appelées par la grâce, et où elles ne rencontrent que la douleur et le désespoir.[2]

Not only in the particular case of monasticism, but with respect to the whole structure of the institutions regulating sexual life, Diderot voices persistent and eloquent protests

[1] Pensées philosophiques (1746), AT, I, 129.

[2] Art. "Passager", AT, XVI, 206.

against restraints which he considers destructive of human happiness. Many texts could be quoted to illustrate this point, but the most important is the Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville. Here Diderot portrays a society in which most of the taboos and restrictions which limit the expression of sexuality in European society are unknown. In Tahiti, marriages are only as permanent as the partners desire. No legal formalities are involved in unions of this type and the structure of society is such that neither the separated parents nor their offspring suffer unduly from a divorce. The children simply follow one or other parent, according to certain customary rules, into their new unions. The concept of incest is unknown. Marriages between brothers and sisters are approved of, and sexual relations between father and daughter or mother and son, though uncommon because of the discrepancy in age, are in no way taboo. Most important, the idea that there is anything intrinsically shameful in the sexual act would be entirely absent from the Tahitian mentality, were it not that the chaplain of Bougainville's expedition has succeeded already in instilling this notion into some of the young islanders.[1] For the Tahitian Orou, the sexual act is "un plaisir innocent, auquel nature, la souveraine maîtresse, nous invite tous."[2] Tahitian marriages do not imply a promise of sexual exclusiveness between husband and wife. Orou is proud of being frequently called upon

[1] AT, II, 216.

[2] Ibid., p. 220.

to father the children of Tahitian maids: "Il y a dix mille hommes ici plus grands, aussi robustes; mais pas un plus brave que moi; aussi les mères me désignent-elles souvent à leurs filles."[1]

Freedom from sexual exclusivity is not the prerogative of males alone. Part of Orou's hospitality to the chaplain consists in offering him the favours not only of his three daughters, but also of his wife, a proceeding in which the women participate without reluctance. When Orou hears of the sexual fidelity which is required of marriage partners in Europe, he is shocked. Such precepts are contrary to nature, for they imply that a being endowed with feelings, thought and liberty can become the property of another. This is to confuse human beings with inanimate objects:

> Ne vois-tu pas qu'on a confondu, dans ton pays, la chose qui n'a ni sensibilité, ni pensée, ni désir, ni volonté; qu'on quitte, qu'on prend, qu'on garde, qu'on échange sans qu'elle souffre et sans qu'elle se plaigne, avec la chose qui ne s'échange point, ne s'acquiert point; qui a liberté, volonté, désir; qui peut se donner ou se refuser pour un moment; se donner ou se refuser pour toujours; qui se plaint et qui souffre; et qui ne saurait devenir un effet de commerce, sans qu'on oublie son caractère, et qu'on fasse violence à la nature?[2]

The fundamental tyranny exercised over mankind by the traditional sexual ethic consists, says Diderot, in arbitrarily

[1] Ibid., p. 232.

[2] Ibid., p. 224.

attaching notions of right and wrong to actions which are in themselves morally indifferent[1] and which are urged upon all human beings by their own ineradicable nature. Such prohibitions can never succeed in changing human nature, but in the meantime man is torn apart by the conflict between the demands of his nature and the warning of dire consequences attendant on disobedience to the artificial morality to which he has been subjected. His suffering is even greater because the prohibitions have become interiorized and man's conflict is within himself. Diderot symbolizes this process by the image of the war in the cavern:

> Voulez-vous savoir l'histoire abrégée de presque toute notre misère? La voici. Il existait un homme naturel: on a introduit au dedans de cet homme un homme artificiel; et il s'est élevé dans la caverne une guerre civile qui dure toute la vie. Tantôt l'homme naturel est le plus fort; tantôt il est terrassé par l'homme moral et artificiel; et, dans l'un et l'autre cas, le triste monstre est tiraillé, tenaillé, tourmenté, étendu sur la roue; sans cesse gémissant, sans cesse malheureux, soit qu'un faux enthousiasme de gloire le transporte et l'enivre, ou qu'une fausse ignominie le courbe et l'abatte.[2]

It must be stressed that the antagonists in this internal struggle are not, on the one hand, impulses which are intrinsically harmful to others, as tendencies to cruelty or domination would be, and, on the other hand, prohibitions intended to ensure that behaviour is compatible with social life; instead, it is a

[1] Cf. the subtitle of the Supplément: "Dialogue entre A. et B. sur l'inconvénient d'attacher des idées morales à certaines actions physiques qui n'en comportent pas."

[2] Ibid., p. 246.

battle between intrinsically harmless tendencies and arbitrary prohibitions unnecessary to the maintenance of a satisfactory society. In the expression "l'homme moral et artificiel" we must take the word "moral" to refer specifically to an arbitrary and unjustifiable morality, in short, to an artificial morality, and not to the essential distinction between right and wrong conduct; this distinction Diderot never denied, and indeed he frequently proclaims it with great eloquence. It is important to note that, in the Tahiti of the Supplément, there are, in fact, certain prohibitions regarding sexual conduct, particularly with respect to sexually immature or sterile persons, and some individuals are occasionally guilty of infringing them.[1] Orou admits, moreover, that though rivalry for a sexual partner between men is, in practice, almost always terminated by the woman's choice, if one of her suitors were to use violence against her, this would be a serious offense.[2]

The imposition of the unnatural and harmful sexual morality which has afflicted the inhabitants of Europe from time immemorial

[1] Ibid., p. 235.

[2] Ibid., p. 236: "La violence d'un homme serait une faute grave; mais il faut une plainte publique, et il est presque inouï qu'une fille ou qu'une femme se soit plainte." It may be objected that this statement of Orou is contradicted by some later remarks of B: "On a consacré la résistance de la femme; on a attaché l'ignominie à la violence de l'homme; violence qui ne serait qu'une injure légère dans Tahiti, et qui devient un crime dans nos cités." Pp. 244-45.) However the cases are different. Orou refers to the violence of a man who possesses by force a woman who has chosen another man. B, on the other hand, refers to a man's violence towards a woman who has no objection to him personally, but is afraid of the consequences of the sexual act; his violence forces her to do what her senses already prompt her to do.

is attributed by Diderot to the action of the civil and religious authorities, whose end is not the general welfare of society but their own private advantage. To shackle man with all these prohibitions and to make him, so to speak, his own jailer by injecting them into his very conscience is the means by which a small group of individuals have gained domination over their fellow-men:

> . . . ce n'est pas pour vous, mais pour eux, que ces sages législateurs vous ont pétri et maniéré comme vous l'êtes. J'en appelle à toutes les institutions politiques, civiles et religieuses: examinez-les profondément; et je me trompe fort, ou vous verrez l'espèce humaine pliée de siècle en siècle au joug qu'une poignée de fripons se promettait de lui imposer. Méfiez-vous de celui qui veut mettre de l'ordre. Ordonner, c'est toujours se rendre le maître des autres en les gênant.[1]

I have confined my discussion so far to the views on sexual morality which Diderot expresses in the Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville. Now it must be admitted that in certain other texts he takes a position which appears to be completely opposed to the radical principles expounded in this work. It seems astonishing that the same writer who evokes approvingly the young Tahitians' unabashed performance of the sexual act[2] should be able to write

[1] Ibid., p. 247.

[2] Ibid., p. 216.

the following lines:

> On a dit que la plus belle couleur qu'il y eût au monde, était cette rougeur aimable dont l'innocence, la jeunesse, la santé, la modestie et la pudeur coloraient les joues d'une jeune fille; et l'on a dit une chose qui n'était pas seulement fine, touchante et délicate, mais vraie . . . .[1]

It is thus not too surprising that many critics have considered Diderot's position on sexual morality to be yet another example of the basic dichotomy of his ethics. However, the attitudes they adopt towards this contradiction vary. His detractors accuse him of immorality in his radical views and of hypocrisy in the orthodox preachings of works like Le Fils naturel. Critics more favourably disposed often prefer to view these different positions as, respectively, genuine and superficial. Diderot's genuine position, they claim, is the radical one, as it is grounded in his deeper, truer nature; his orthodox pronouncements are the result either of prudence, or of a superficial, rationalized conformism; they arise not from hypocrisy, but from self-deception.

I think that this second interpretation is closer to the truth, but that it is inaccurate on two counts. First, it supposes Diderot to be less aware of the true nature of his own thought than I believe to be the case; secondly, it fails to recognize that his love of virtue is as passionate and as deep as his love of liberty.

The view I take in this study is that there is no real

[1] Essai sur la peinture, AT, X, 471.

contradiction in Diderot's position on sexual morality. I will, of course, concede that his attitude is marked by a considerable degree of moral relativism, a point which can be illustrated by various passages from the correspondence. In several letters he remarks on the talents, charm and dignity of a young girl of the Volland circle, Jeanne Chevalier. He is disgusted when the villainous Villeneuve declares that he sees no reason why a man should not "instruct" this young innocent: "Je la regardais, et je pensais au fond de mon coeur que c'était un ange et qu'il faudrait être plus méchant que Satan pour en approcher avec une pensée déshonnête."[1] On the other hand, he criticizes Mme Le Gendre, Sophie Volland's sister, not for having a sentimental liaison, but for imprudently exchanging letters with her inamorato and for keeping him dangling on a string without ever satisfying his hopes for the physical consummation of their relationship.[2]

This same moral relativism can be seen in the widely different advice on sexual conduct which Diderot gives to his daughter and to the young actress Mlle Jodin. He explains to Angélique that when a man declares his love to a young lady, what he is really saying is:

> Mademoiselle voudriez-vous bien, par complaisance pour moi, vous déshonorer, perdre tout état, vous bannir de la société, vous renfermer à jamais dans

[1] Roth, III, 68 (To Sophie Volland; Sept. 15, 1760).

[2] Roth, II, 290-91 (To Sophie Volland; Oct. 20, 1759). Cf. Roth, VII, 190-92 (To Viallet; 1767).

> un couvent et faire mourir de douleur votre père et votre mère?[1]

On the other hand, to Mlle Jodin his advice is less exacting:

> Présentez toujours mon respect à Monsieur le Comte. Cultivez vos talents. Je ne vous demande pas les moeurs d'une vestale, mais celles dont il n'est permis à personne de se passer: un peu de respect pour soi-même. Il faut mettre les vertus d'un galant homme à la place des préjugés auxquels les femmes sont assujetties.[2]

The count, who is the "galant homme" in question, is the actress's lover. In an earlier letter Diderot had written:

> On reproche rarement à une femme son attachement pour un homme d'un mérite reconnu. Si vous n'osez avouer celui que vous aurez préféré, c'est que vous vous en mépriserez vous-même, et quand on a du mépris pour soi, il est rare qu'on échappe au mépris des autres. Vous voyez que, pour un homme qu'on compte entre les philosophes, mes principes ne sont pas austères: c'est qu'il serait ridicule de proposer à une femme de théâtre la morale des Capucines du Marais.[3]

He stresses quite explicitly the moral relativism on which he bases his advice:

> Je ne suis pas un pédant; je me garderai bien de vous demander une sorte de vertus presque incompatibles avec l'état que vous avez choisi, et que des femmes du monde, que je n'en estime ni ne méprise davantage pour cela, conservent rarement au sein de l'opulence et loin des séductions de toute espèce dont vous êtes environnée. Le vice vient au devant de vous; elles vont au devant du vice. Mais songez qu'une femme n'acquiert le droit de se défaire des lisières que l'opinion attache à son sexe que par des talents

[1] Roth, VIII, 231 (To Sophie Volland; Nov. 22, 1768).

[2] Roth, IX, 41 (March 24, 1769).

[3] Roth, V, 101 (To Mlle Jodin; Aug. 21, 1765).

> supérieurs et les qualités d'esprit et de coeur les plus distinguées. Il faut mille vertus réelles pour couvrir un vice imaginaire. Plus vous accorderez à vos goûts, plus vous devez être attentive sur le choix des objets.[1]

It is clear that underlying Diderot's relativism with respect to sexual behaviour there is a constant moral principle, namely, that one should do no real harm either to oneself or to another person. The particular kind of behaviour which is in fact harmful varies according to the social position and psychological state of the individuals concerned. Public opinion, reputation and social acceptance are of great, though varying, importance. In eighteenth-century France, a married woman who did not love her husband and who had enough experience of life and of society to understand what she stood to lose or to gain risked far less by having an affair than did a young innocent who fell prey to a seducer. Similarly, in Diderot's day, an actress, provided she was successful in her profession, could live on the fringes of polite society. Though she could scarcely ever aspire to full acceptance, she might win that degree of respect which could be accorded to one of her profession. Diderot's point of view is that if a young lady has chosen to be an actress and is content with this social position, she can allow herself to flout conventions to a point which would bring total ostracism to a young _bourgeoise_. The universal standard which Diderot applies, and

[1] _Ibid._, p. 101.

which limits his moral relativism, is the actual happiness of the individual.

The effect of one's actions on another person depends on that person's psychological needs. These needs may be unnatural, i.e. not essential to human nature. They may even be a probable source of unhappiness because they are likely to be unfulfilled. Normally, they include the desire for acceptance by the social group to which the individual belongs; but the conditions which this social group attaches to the granting of its acceptance may be purely conventional, prejudiced, arbitrary and, indeed, even contrary to individual happiness. However, the virtuous man, i.e. the man who wishes to avoid harming others, will not consider himself justified in ignoring these psychological and social needs of the individuals with whom he has dealings, but will admit that, however unnatural and, in principle, harmful these needs may be, they are none the less real, and that failure to respect them can cause real suffering. This is the meaning of the practical conclusions on sexual morality which B formulates at the end of the Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville:

> Nous parlerons contre les lois insensées jusqu'à ce qu'on les réforme; et, en attendant, nous nous y soumettrons. . . . Disons-nous à nous-mêmes, crions incessamment qu'on a attaché la honte, le châtiment et l'ignominie à des actions innocentes en elles-mêmes; mais ne les commettons pas, parce que la honte, le châtiment et l'ignominie sont les plus grands de tous les maux. Imitons le bon aumônier, moine en France, sauvage dans Tahiti. . . . Et surtout être honnête et sincère jusqu'au scrupule avec des êtres fragiles

> qui ne peuvent faire notre bonheur, sans renoncer aux avantages les plus précieux de nos sociétés.[1]

The closing pages of the Supplément also contain an interesting reference to several characters from two of Diderot's short fictional works:

> B: . . . Tant que les appétits naturels seront sophistiqués, comptez sur des femmes méchantes.
>
> A: Comme la Reymer.
>
> B: Sur des hommes atroces.
>
> A: Comme Gardeil.
>
> B: Et sur des infortunés à propos de rien.
>
> A: Comme Tanié, mademoiselle de La Chaux, le chevalier Desroches et madame de La Carlière. Il est certain qu'on chercherait inutilement dans Tahiti des exemples de la dépravation des deux premiers, et du malheur des trois derniers.[2]

The two speakers cite these characters as examples of the evil produced in civilized European society by the sophistication of natural desires, a process resulting, at least as far as sexuality is concerned, from the attachment of arbitrary moral ideas to actions which are in themselves morally indifferent. The sophisticated appetites, it should be understood, are those of the "infortunés" as well as those of the two harmful characters. The sophisticated appetites of the latter concern matters other than sexuality, in Mme Reymer greed for wealth and in Gardeil ambition; with respect to their sexual behaviour, they are much closer to the natural character of man than are their victims.

[1] AT, II, 249.

[2] Ibid., pp. 248-49. Tanié, Mme Reymer, Gardeil and Mlle de La Chaux appear in Ceci n'est pas un conte (AT, V, 311-32); Desroches and Mme de La Carlière, in Sur l'inconséquence du jugement public de nos actions particulières (AT, V, 335-57).

In the four unhappy characters the sophistication of natural appetites takes the form of a need for fidelity and exclusivity in love relationships. In the Tahiti of the Supplément, where the tendency for liaisons to be impermanent is generally accepted, Tanié would not feel the need to devote himself exclusively to a woman who treats him shabbily, nor Mlle de La Chaux to sacrifice herself to a man by whom she is exploited and then abandoned. In Tahiti, therefore, Mme Reymer and Gardeil would have been unable to take advantage of them.[1] Tanié and Mlle de La Chaux are, in fact, people who have taken to heart the unnatural morality of the Christian European tradition, while Mme Reymer and Gardeil are only superficially affected by it. In the Introduction to his edition of the "contes", Jacques Proust writes: "En apparence, Mlle de La Chaux est une femme naturelle, qui n'hésite pas à sacrifier ses biens, sa réputation, sa santé, pour le bonheur de l'homme qu'elle aime."[2] On the contrary, Mlle de La Chaux is not even apparently a natural woman: her appetites are sophisticated. But the point is that they are none the less real. Gardeil is wrong in supposing that they are merely superficial. Not having experienced that kind of love himself, he supposes, when she faints on hearing him brutally confirm the end of their liaison, that it is pure sham or at least no more than superficial autosuggestion. Here again I think that

[1] It is also reasonable to assume that in Tahiti Mme Reymer and Gardeil would never have developed the greed and ambition which motivate their conduct towards their victims.

[2] Quatre Contes, ed. J. Proust, Geneva, 1964, p. lxvi.

M. Proust has mistaken the point. Mlle de La Chaux's behaviour during this scene is, he claims, merely

> une attitude théâtrale, conventionnelle. . . . C'est Gardeil qui est chargé de la démystification salutaire. A Diderot qui s'empresse autour de la jeune femme spectaculairement pâmée il répond avec un beau cynisme, en souriant et haussant les épaules: "Les femmes ne meurent pas pour si peu; cela n'est rien, cela se passera. Vous ne les connaissez pas, elles font de leur corps tout ce qu'elles veulent." Cela vaut le: "Elles pleurent toutes quand elles veulent" de l'interlocuteur fictif, au sujet de la pantomime désespérée de Mme Reymer. De Mme Reymer à Mlle de La Chaux, il n'y a pas de différence de nature. L'une et l'autre ont des appétits sophistiqués, mais la première en a admis une fois pour toutes le principe et en joue délibérément, alors que la seconde souffre de les avoir et ne peut en tolérer la manifestation chez les autres.[1]

But surely there is a big difference between Mme Reymer's feelings for Tanié and those of Mlle de La Chaux for Gardeil. Tanié no doubt attracts and satisfies Mme Reymer sexually, but so do other men; she does not feel any exclusive need for his love. Her despair is pure play-acting. Mlle de La Chaux, on the other hand, has a real, even if unnatural need for the exclusive possession of Gardeil. No one else can replace him for her, as is shown by the fact that she will not accept Dr Le Camus as a substitute, even though she has, apparently, everything to gain by the exchange. Gardeil is wrong in thinking that her fainting fit is not genuine or that it is merely a superficial effect of calculated auto-suggestion. Mlle de La Chaux probably hopes that the spectacle of her suffering will have the effect of softening Gardeil's heart, but she does not need to simulate

[1] Ibid., pp. lxiii-lxiv.

grief or shock. As for Gardeil, he stands condemned not for the waning of his passion for her, but for his ingratitude and his failure to fulfil the obligations of friendship.

In effect, Mme Reymer and Gardeil practise the sexual morality which is natural to man, the morality of Tahiti, in a society where artificial moral attitudes have resulted in the development, in many people, of unnatural psychological needs, and where, as a result, the practice of natural morality does real harm.

Mme de La Carlière is another example of the sophistication of sexual needs, with this difference, that even stronger in her than her need for Desroches's exclusive love is her desire to maintain a certain kind of public reputation. Her dominant motivation is not so much her desire for emotional security as it is her pride in appearing to the public as a woman who refuses to submit passively to a man's deception. She could simply forgive Desroches and all would be well, for he is no Gardeil and not only remains faithful to his friendship for her, but never ceases to love her in spite of his episodic sexual experience with another woman. Mme de La Carlière certainly suffers because of her "appétits sophistiqués": she is not another Mme Reymer. Yet she is not simply a victim, like Mlle de La Chaux, but is unjust and vindictive towards Desroches.

The case of Mme de La Pommeraye in <u>Jacques le fataliste</u> is rather similar to that of Mme de La Carlière. Again, her sexuality

is dominated by "appétits sophistiqués", and, again, she is much concerned with maintaining her public image and salving her vanity. But her vindictiveness is even greater than that of Mme de La Carlière. The latter is content to shame Desroches by denouncing his infidelity in public and by breaking off her relations with him. Mme de la Pommeraye goes as far as to contrive and implement a lengthy and complicated plot whereby she succeeds in marrying the marquis des Arcis to a prostitute masquerading as a virtuous young lady.

Desglands is another of these characters who have an unnatural need for the exclusive and permanent possession of another person. Like Mme de La Carlière and Mme de La Pommeraye, he is not the kind of person to submit passively when the chosen object of his love fails to live up to these high demands. However, in his case, it is not on the woman who has ceased to love him that he takes vengeance, but on his rival. The "veuve galante" who is the object of Desglands's passion is an example of purely natural morality; she accepts the fact that her sexual passion changes its object at intervals. She does not, however, seek to exploit her sexual partners, as do Mme Reymer and Gardeil, and she distinguishes between her sexual passion of the moment and the permanent obligations of friendship and gratitude.

Diderot sometimes comments bitterly on the institution of marriage, "ce maudit lien conjugal."[1] But, admitting that European

[1] Salon de 1767, AT, XI, 265. Cf. Roth, IV, 122 (To Sophie Volland; Aug. 29, 1762); Roth, VI, 25-26 (To Sophie Volland; Jan. 18, 1766); Salon de 1769, AT, XI, 436.

society is in fact based upon it and that no amount of wishing will make it suddenly disappear, he gives considerable thought to the best ways of minimizing its disadvantages. If it were ensured that there was at least an initial compatibility of character between marriage partners, much unhappiness would be avoided. Diderot opposes the practice of forcing children against their will to marry persons of their parents' choice. It is impossible that there should be compatibility where from the beginning there is a marked dislike. However, he does not advocate simply that parents should abdicate their authority over their children with respect to the choice of a marriage partner. It often happens that because of their inexperience young people make a foolish choice. Diderot thinks that it is not only a parent's right, but his duty to guide his child's choice and, if necessary for the child's happiness, to forbid a choice which he considers disastrous. With regard to the marriage of his own daughter Angélique, he explains his principles as follows:

> Je suis le maître de mon enfant; mais c'est à condition que j'userai de mon autorité pour faire son bonheur; et puis dans le cas dont il s'agit, l'autorité des pères est tout à fait subordonnée aux droits naturels des enfants. Il ne faut pas que ma fille prenne un époux dont elle ne voudrait pas. Il ne faut pas qu'elle prenne un époux dont je ne voudrais pas. Il faut qu'elle, sa mère et moi, nous soyons d'accord. D'après ces principes, tout va bien.[1]

There will, of course, always be cases when a parent has a difficult and painful decision to make, when, for example, a son

[1] Roth, X, 30-31 (To his sister Denise; March 5, 1770).

wishes to marry a woman who seems very suitable as far as character and education are concerned, but where disparity in fortune and social standing threaten grave consequences. Such cases cannot be solved by a general rule of thumb. It is the lonely responsibility of the parent to make his decision in the light of all the evidence available to him, carefully estimating the probable consequences of the marriage and the probable reaction of the young couple to these consequences. The dilemma of a parent in this position is illustrated in Le Père de famille. The fact that Sophie turns out to be a rich heiress means that the father's fears are unfounded, but that does not alter in the slightest the moral issue with which the play is concerned. The father can and must base his decision only on the knowledge which he possesses. Diderot is not taking sides here on the general question whether or to what extent parents should restrict the liberty of their children with respect to the choice of a marriage partner. He assumes, as we have seen, that parents have a right and a duty to exercise their legal authority over their children where they consider that their children's happiness is at stake, but this is a very generalized principle. He offers no solution in Le Père de famille as to the precise circumstances which justify the exercise of this right. Each case must be evaluated separately. I do not think one is justified in supposing that Diderot favours either the son or the father in their disagreement. Although the circumstances of his own marriage

can scarcely have failed to be in his mind when he conceived and wrote the play, this does not give us any grounds for supposing that he is advocating either the total submission of children to parental authority or the total freedom of children to marry whomever they choose. Nor have we any reason for seeing in this play a pièce à thèse simply because the son's arguments are based on a criticism of social prejudices which Diderot himself condemned.[1] The father too is well aware that they are prejudices and deplores their existence, but he thinks that to flout them may have grave consequences for one's happiness. This view is similar to those which we have seen that Diderot takes regarding the practical application of his radical principles with respect to sexual morality. On the other hand, we cannot assume that Diderot considers that the father's decision to forbid the marriage is the right one. The happy and unexpected ending of the play dispenses Diderot from giving any indication as to how the marriage of these two young people against the father's will would have fared. Diderot is not proposing a solution to the problem: his aim is to portray the agonizing cas de conscience with which the father is faced.[2] It is ironical that in the case

[1] Cf. the end of the article "Convenance", AT, XIV, 222.

[2] My interpretation of Le Père de famille differs considerably from that proposed by Roger Lewinter in his article "L'exaltation de la vertu dans le théâtre de Diderot", Diderot Studies, VIII, 1966, pp. 141-51. In his opinion, Diderot favours the position of the father, who represents social order. Having taken this view, M. Lewinter is obliged to consider the dénouement unsatisfactory because it does not resolve the conflict in the way he supposes Diderot's thesis to require.

of Diderot's own marriage, his father's opposition proved to be justified, though not for the reasons which his father gave: it was not his wife's lack of fortune which made her an unsuitable partner, but her lack of education, the difference in their religious attitudes and a general incompatibility of character. Thus the outcome of the marriage proved both Diderot and his father wrong.

My account of Diderot's radical criticism of the accepted norms of sexual morality must be completed by an examination of the opinions which he lends to Bordeu regarding various acts generally classed as perversions. Bordeu contends that masturbation, homosexuality and bestiality cannot be condemned if one considers them in the light of purely utilitarian principles. He prefaces his remarks to Mlle de l'Espinasse on these delicate topics with the following caution:

> Nous sommes seuls, vous n'êtes pas une bégueule, vous n'imaginerez pas que je veuille manquer au respect que je vous dois; et, quel que soit le jugement que vous portiez de mes idées, j'espère de mon côté que vous n'en conclurez rien contre l'honnêteté de mes moeurs.[1]

Later, referring to his liberal opinions concerning masturbation, he remarks:

[1] Suite de l'Entretien, AT, II, 183.

> Je n'ôterais pas mon chapeau dans la rue à l'homme suspecté de pratiquer ma doctrine; il me suffirait qu'on l'appelât un infâme. Mais nous causons sans témoins et sans conséquence; et je vous dirai de ma philosophie ce que Diogène tout nu disait au jeune et pudique Athénien contre lequel il se préparait à lutter: "Mon fils, ne crains rien, je ne suis pas si méchant que celui-là."[1]

Bordeu's circumspection is easily explained. He fears the loss of public esteem which he would incur if it were thought that he personally practised his radical doctrine; he is also aware that, even if he were not suspected of practising it himself, he would be blamed for propagating immoral opinions. He would incur the penalties which society attaches to the offence of flouting what it considers to be seemly conduct. This is what he means when he says: ". . . ce serait fouler aux pieds toute décence, attirer sur soi les soupçons les plus odieux, et commettre un crime de lèse-société que de divulguer ces principes."[2] Bordeu does not mean that there is anything deeply immoral in divulging a doctrine which, after all, he does not think is itself immoral. Nor does he think there is anything sacred in the prejudices of society. What he means is that these prejudices are so strong that a man would do himself great harm by publicly criticizing them. The prejudices would not thereby be destroyed, probably hardly even weakened, but the critic would suffer

[1] Ibid., p. 186.

[2] Ibid., p. 186.

ostracism or worse.[1] It is quite natural that even while conversing so frankly with Mlle de l'Espinasse, Bordeu should be careful to allay any suspicions she might have that he actually practises any of the perversions which he mentions. He would no doubt be similarly cautious even if he were not sincere in claiming that his actual conduct makes no concessions to his theoretical opinions. The question is beside the point and need not concern us.[2]

Before we leave the subject of Diderot's views on sexual morality, it will be useful to examine more closely the distinction he makes between the ideal natural morality which is universally suited to the human species and the practical morality which constitutes beneficence in the social order prevailing in the Europe of his day.

Georges May contends that Diderot never intended the ideas

[1] We shall see later (see below, p. 238) that Diderot defines duty in terms of the happiness of the agent. From this point of view, by risking ostracism through the public expression of his opinions, Bordeu would be neglecting a duty.

[2] A point of detail worth mentioning before we leave this topic is that when Bordeu has declared masturbation not to be contrary to utilitarian morality, Mlle de l'Espinasse exclaims: "Voilà une doctrine qui n'est pas bonne à prêcher aux enfants." (AT, II, 185.) Bordeu replies: "Ni aux autres." Reading between the lines, one can see that whereas Mlle de l'Espinasse thinks it would be a bad thing in itself if the practice became more widespread among children as a result of the divulgation of Bordeu's doctrine, Bordeu's reply may not mean simply that he agrees and thinks the spread of masturbation would be a bad thing among older people too, but rather that the person who disseminated this doctrine would have much to fear from these older people.

on free love in the Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville or Bordeu's views on perversions to be taken as his carefully considered opinions. They are just the results of the logical application of his materialism to human behaviour, "la pointe extrême où l'entraîne une métaphysique matérialiste qui, toute sincère qu'elle est, tourne à l'absurde lorsqu'on l'applique au domaine éthique."[1] According to May, Diderot in fact rejects these unorthodox conclusions: his materialism "s'arrête au seuil de la morale. A partir de là, le philosophe devient un sentimental."[2] In the light of our discussion so far, this opinion seems to me to be quite unwarranted. What is true, is that Diderot does not advocate the immediate translation of his theoretical views into libertarian practice. Bordeu is quite explicit about this, as we have seen. He gives few indications of what practical changes in sexual morality his radical theory might justify. He is less guarded with respect to masturbation than to homosexuality and bestiality. But here he simply reflects the greater leniency of public opinion towards the first of these three practices. Diderot is not campaigning for toleration of sexual deviations so much as objecting to the irrational motives for which they are condemned. These acts are, he claims, not intrinsically evil. If they are to be punished or otherwise discouraged, it should be because they have harmful effects.

[1] Quatre visages de Denis Diderot, p. 144.

[2] Loc. cit.

Diderot is inclined to see in them primarily symptoms of the unsatisfactory sexual life which society has imposed on man. They are substitutes for the natural sexual enjoyment which Tahitian mores allow and which is so restricted in Europe.

Other critics have seen in Diderot the tendency to admit that for a privileged few there is a special moral code. Thus Daniel Mornet remarks that "la morale sociale de Diderot s'achèverait, s'il avait pris soin d'être plus explicite, en une morale qui réserve les droits des inadaptés et même en une morale des chefs."[1] In an earlier chapter[2] I quoted a letter to d'Alembert referring to a revised version of the three dialogues of 1769. In this text Diderot speaks of "une doctrine spéculative qui n'est ni pour la multitude ni pour la pratique."[3] Having quoted this passage, Paul Vernière remarks: "La morale de Diderot, on le voit, comportait une casuistique qui n'allait pas sans danger."[4] Perhaps so, but one could wish Vernière were more explicit. What exactly is this casuistry and what and for whom is the danger? One can well understand that the reference to a speculative doctrine unsuitable for the multitude might be misunderstood. A hasty reader might, for example, suppose that Diderot thinks it permissible for certain people to practise

[1] Diderot l'homme et l'oeuvre, p. 65.

[2] See above, p. 71, note 2.

[3] Roth, IX, 15 (Sept. 1769).

[4] Oeuvres philosophiques, p. 373, note 1.

behaviour the generalization of which would be undesirable. This would make Diderot a sort of moral elitist and would be the complete negation of a universal morality. But it is quite clear that he means, in fact, that the speculative doctrine is to be divulged only to a few wise men, who would not be inclined to use it as a pretext for maleficent conduct, and not to be put into direct practice by anyone. The "doctrine spéculative" concerning sexual morality is part of the esoteric doctrine to which I referred in an earlier chapter.[1]

We have seen that, although Diderot criticizes very radically the accepted norms of sexual morality, he stresses that the individual who considers the happiness of others will refrain from flouting these norms as long as they are in force. But the principle of obeying senseless laws while protesting against them does not preclude their eventual abrogation. It is clear that Diderot would favour certain reforms in the institutions and attitudes in which the oppressive sexual ethic is embodied. It is not, however, a simple matter to assess the extent of the reforms which he would consider possible and desirable over a fairly long term. He leaves unexamined the various possibilities which lie between the standards of the Tahitian utopia, which he probably considered forever beyond the reach of advanced societies, and the few timid reforms which he wanted to see immediately applied in eighteenth-century France.

[1] See above, p. 71.

Any reform would not only have to overcome the resistance of powerful institutions such as the Church, but would also be faced with the great difficulty of changing the deeply rooted prejudices of the general public. Towards the end of the Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville, B defines the most desirable system of morality as one founded on the common needs of man. He thinks that this would be easily attained if most societies were not in fact already dominated by irrational moral attitudes:

> B: . . . je croirais volontiers le peuple le plus sauvage de la terre, le Tahitien qui s'en est tenu scrupuleusement à la loi de nature, plus voisin d'une bonne législation qu'aucun peuple civilisé.
>
> A: Parce qu'il lui est plus facile de se défaire de son trop de rusticité, qu'à nous de revenir sur nos pas et de réformer nos abus.
>
> B: Surtout ceux qui tiennent à l'union de l'homme avec la femme.[1]

The only hope, Diderot implies, is for slow and gradual reform made possible by a progressive change in the climate of public opinion.

The key factor in the reform of sexual morality is thus the struggle for influence over the minds of men. The campaign against the Church was a necessary preliminary to any reforms in sexual legislation and custom. People's attitudes would not change until the authority of the chief source of their prejudices was undermined.

Diderot wrote at a time when the main task was to change the

[1] AT, II, 241.

attitudes of men sufficiently for them even to begin to recognize the need for a reform of sexual morality. It is understandable that he should not have addressed himself to detailed questions regarding precisely what kind of reforms should be undertaken, how much progress should be attempted at a given time, and so on. These are all questions which must depend on the actual state of public opinion and on the psychological attitudes generally prevailing. It is not surprising, therefore, that Diderot should formulate few precise demands for legislative reform in the domain of sexuality. The only related proposal which he does make is that divorce should be legalized, that it should be granted by civil courts, and that divorced persons should be permitted to remarry. He admits that making suitable provision for the upbringing of the children of divorced parents presents a difficult problem. It is noteworthy that these proposals are not found in the Encyclopédie or in any work which might come to the notice of the French authorities, but rather in writings intended for the private scrutiny of Catherine II.[1]

If we sum up our findings regarding Diderot's position on sexual morality, we see, first that his most radical statements on an appropriate sexual ethic are intended to be taken as literally

[1] Cf. Mémoires pour Catherine II, ed. Vernière, pp. 204-05 (Memoir XL, "Du divorce"); Observations sur le Nakaz, ed. cit., pp. 435-36.

true. He really believes that mankind would be happier if European society were so structured that sexual morality followed Tahitian lines. Such a system would not eliminate all restrictions on individual sexual behaviour, but all unnecessary and harmful constraints would be abandoned. However, Diderot does not propose this ideal for immediate practical application. The traditional sexual ethic has become so entrenched both in institutions and legislation and in individual feelings that artificial, but real, needs exist which cannot be ignored. Any reform programme would therefore have to be both cautious and unhurried. Men must be content for the most part with a practical sexual ethic relative to varying individual needs and susceptibilities and so to prevailing social structure, legislation and custom. Diderot's exaltation of the "natural" sexual ethic is a polemical weapon which he uses to criticize the prevailing orthodoxy in the interests of preparing public opinion for certain reforms of a fairly moderate sort. He is too practical a thinker to see any point in campaigning for acceptance of Tahitian mores even as a distant goal for European society. The resistance from all quarters would be so great as to make this a futile venture. But much improvement can be made by eliminating the worst abuses, such as forced and premature religious vocations and marriages of convenience, by propagating more comprehensive attitudes towards sexual misconduct and by facilitating divorce. Even if it were to prove ultimately possible, it is doubtful whether Diderot would have approved of

the complete abandonment of all aspects of "artificial" sexual morality. He sees the development of the need for life-long sexual partnership as a source of good as well as of evil. It has caused suffering by making men and women emotionally vulnerable; but it has also produced, in certain people, a degree of altruism, or of cooperative conduct, a sensitivity to the needs of others, a delicacy of conscience, which do credit to mankind and which might not otherwise have been attained:

> Voulez-vous que je vous dise une vérité qui vous frappera, quoique diamétralement opposée à vos idées? C'est que le sens moral s'est perfectionné parmi nous, à un point qui passe de beaucoup la portée du commun des individus; ils ont, ces êtres en qui le sens moral s'est perfectionné, une langue que la multitude n'entend pas; ils font des distinctions dont le grand nombre se moque; ils se font des scrupules auxquels la plupart n'entendent rien. Les hommes charnels appellent cela du Céladonisme en amour, du Jansénisme en amitié, de la sottise en affaires, de la pédanterie en vertu ou en probité.[1]

The establishment and progress of civilized society, Diderot claims, have produced many vices and crimes; but the suffering these have caused has been compensated for by the development of many moral qualities which have enriched human relationships.[2]

[1] Commentaire sur Hemsterhuis, pp. 509-11. Diderot does not intend the expression sens moral to be taken literally as referring to an innate moral faculty. See below, pp. 254-55. Cf. the following passage from the Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron: "J'oserais assurer que la pureté de la morale a suivi les progrès des vêtements depuis la peau de la bête jusqu'à l'étoffe de soie. Combien de vertus délicates que l'esclave et le sauvage ignorent! Si l'on croyait que ces vertus, fruits du temps et des lumières, sont de convention, l'on se tromperait; elles tiennent à la science des moeurs comme la feuille tient à l'arbre qu'elle embellit." (AT, III, 430.)

[2] Cf. Commentaire sur Hemsterhuis, p. 507.

With respect to sexual morality, as in other domains, mankind's advance towards civilization has had advantages and drawbacks. It seems that, in Diderot's view, wisdom lies in seeking a compromise solution which would eliminate the worst evils and yet preserve the most valuable benefits; to hope to achieve a perfectly happy state for mankind is chimerical.

CHAPTER IV

GOVERNMENT AND THE GOVERNED

From our study of Diderot's ideas regarding the system of morality ideally appropriate to the human species, we may conclude that he believed that the society of his day infringed upon what he considers to be an essential prerogative of man, namely the right to behave in accordance with human nature. Diderot's charge that European society exerts upon its members pressures which conflict with some of the fundamental requisites for human happiness must now be placed in the context of his general doctrine concerning the structure of society. We shall see later[1] that he approves in theory of an anarchical but harmonious society; he does not, however, believe that such a system is a practical possibility. Consequently, he reduces the question of the structure of society mainly to the problem of the relations between government and the governed.

The most explicit formulations of his conception of the nature and function of government are found in the articles "Autorité politique", "Cité" and "Citoyen". In the two last-mentioned articles, the concept of the <u>contract</u>, though not explicitly mentioned, is clearly implied. In the political state, "les actes de la volonté et l'usage des forces sont résignés à une personne physique ou à un être moral, pour la sûreté, la

[1] See below, pp. 158-63.

tranquillité intérieure et extérieure, et tous les autres avantages de la vie."[1] Diderot stipulates, however, that though this resignation of individual wills to the sovereign authority is total in degree, it only concerns certain activities, and not all aspects of human life:

> L'être moral souverain étant par rapport au citoyen ce que la personne physique despotique est par rapport au sujet, et l'esclave le plus parfait ne transférant pas tout son être à son souverain; à plus forte raison le citoyen a-t-il des droits qu'il se réserve, et dont il ne se départ jamais.[2]

A distinction is also made between the government (whether it be a moral or a physical person) as the public sovereign power and the government as a private corporate power possessing domains and other material interests. In this second sense, it is not superior to the private individual citizen and should not receive preference over him and before the law.[3]

In the article "Autorité politique" it is explicitly stated that all legitimate political authority has its source in the consent of those who have submitted to it by virtue of a contract, formal or tacit, between themselves and the person to whom they have granted it.[4] The authority which the prince thus receives from his subjects is always limited by natural law and the fundamental laws of the State:

[1] "Cité", AT, XIV, 187.

[2] "Citoyen", AT, XIV, 193.

[3] Loc. cit.

[4] AT, XIII, 392.

> La puissance qui vient du consentement des peuples suppose nécessairement des conditions qui en rendent l'usage légitime, utile à la société, avantageux à la république, et qui la fixent et la restreignent entre des limites; car l'homme ne doit ni ne peut se donner entièrement et sans réserve à un autre homme . . .[1]

These general considerations on the nature of government evoke an ideal of society characterized by harmony and cooperation in the pursuit of general well-being. Diderot contrasts this ideal with the sad reality:

> Le mot de société fait concevoir un état de réunion, de paix, de concours des volontés de tous les individus vers un but commun, le bonheur général. La chose est exactement le contraire. C'est un état de guerre; guerre du souverain contre ses sujets; guerre des sujets les uns contre les autres.[2]

This state of war has two origins. In the first place, it is due to the failure of government to enact and apply legislation safeguarding civil liberty. An essential requisite of a satisfactory society is to assure the civil liberty of all citizens, which means the freedom of their persons and of their property.[3]

Of these two parts of civil liberty, the more fundamental is personal freedom, the right to dispose of one's person without compulsion from anyone else. "La première propriété est la personnelle."[4] This right is the inalienable prerogative of man,[5]

[1] AT, XIII, 392-93.

[2] Observations sur le Nakaz, in Oeuvres politiques, ed. Vernière, p. 401.

[3] Cf. Plan d'une université, AT, III, 518, and Observations sur le Nakaz, ed. cit. p. 403.

[4] Observations sur le Nakaz, ed. cit., p. 406.

[5] La Religieuse, AT, V, 88.

and the idea that one person should ever be the property of another is unthinkable:

> . . . jamais un homme ne peut être la propriété d'un souverain, un enfant la propriété d'un père, une femme la propriété d'un mari, un domestique la propriété d'un maître, un nègre la propriété d'un colon.[1]

Consistent with this general principle, Diderot condemns the institution of slavery. He deplores the fact that in the European colonies human beings are reduced to the condition of beasts of burden.[2] Diderot's additions to the third edition (1781) of Raynal's Histoire des deux Indes denounce not only the slave trade and the institution of slavery, but the whole notion of colonization in areas where indigenous populations are already established.[3] This is also the point of view adopted in the Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville. "Nous sommes libres;" the old Tahitian tells the departing Bougainville, "et voilà que tu as enfoui dans notre terre le titre de notre futur esclavage. Tu n'es ni un dieu, ni un démon: qui es-tu donc, pour faire des esclaves? . . . Tu n'es pas esclave: tu souffrirais la mort plutôt que de l'être, et tu veux nous asservir!"[4]

In the Observations sur le Nakaz, Diderot insists that the Russian serfs should be given their liberty. He bitterly criticizes

[1] Fragments échappés du portefeuille d'un philosophe, AT, VI, 450. Cf. also Commentaire sur Hemsterhuis, p. 345.

[2] Suite de l'Entretien, AT, II, 190. Cf. also Roth, IX, 196-97 (To Mme de Maux; Nov., 1769).

[3] See Yves Benot, "Diderot, Pechmeja, Raynal et l'anticolonialisme," Europe, Jan. - Feb., 1963, pp. 149-53.

[4] AT, II, 214.

the Empress's projected code, which neglects to make any provision for this reform.[1]

Second only in importance to personal liberty is the security of property. Although Diderot occasionally speaks of the ideal state of society as one in which there would be no personal property and everything would be held in common,[2] he implies at the same time that such a system would require a degree of cooperation or of natural abundance which is, in practice, unattainable. Nature demands that to earn their livelihood men shall engage with her in a constant struggle,[3] and it is to ensure that the individual shall enjoy the fruits of his own labour that property must be held sacred. Diderot follows Locke in basing the right to property on labour.[4] If property is not secure, there can be neither laws nor justice.[5] Diderot praises the physiocrat Mercier de la Rivière for having demonstrated that "toute législation bonne ou mauvaise se résolvait en dernier lieu par favoriser et attaquer la propriété. Grand critérium de toute loi."[6]

[1] Ed. cit., pp. 386 and 457.

[2] See below, pp. 158-61.

[3] Observations sur le Nakaz, ed. cit., p. 402.

[4] Cf. The Second Treatise of Government, ed. T. Peardon, New York, 1952, p. 17; Entretien d'un père avec ses enfants, AT, V, 297; Mémoires pour Catherine II, ed. Vernière, p. 239.

[5] Roth, XI, 122 (Réponse au neuvième chef d'accusation de M. Luneau.)

[6] Roth, VII, 76 (To Damilaville; June or July 1767).

It would be incorrect to suppose that Diderot defends the principle of the security of property in order to champion the propertied classes against the landless masses. For one thing, he considers the peasants as the true owners of their land despite the official legal position according to which the proprietor was the "seigneur". But in any case, Diderot is not defending a particular distribution of property; he is concerned instead with the security of all property from attack either by individuals or by the government. This position leads him, it is true, to defend the sanctity of property against certain proposals tending towards the equalization of wealth. Thus he rejects Helvétius's suggestion that, when a family diminishes in number, it should be required to give up some of its property to neighbouring families of greater size. Diderot points out that "cette cession forcée disposant du fruit de mon industrie blesse le droit de propriété."[1] He does admit, however, that there are limits to the sanctity of property. Morellet, in his refutation of Galiani's work on the corn trade, claims that the exportation of corn surpluses abroad must not be interfered with, since, however much this corn is needed within the country, it is the property of the producers to dispose of as they please. Diderot is horrified by such callousness:

> Ce principe est un principe de tartare, de cannibale, et non d'un homme policé. Est-ce que le sentiment

[1] Réfutation d'Helvétius, AT, II, 441.

> d'humanité n'est pas plus sacré que le droit de propriété qu'on enfreint en paix, en guerre, en une infinité de circonstances, et pour lequel M. l'abbé [Morellet] nous prêche le respect jusqu'à nous exposer à nous tuer, à nous égorger, à mourir de faim?[1]

Diderot makes an illuminating distinction between the sanctity of property rights from infringement by individuals and the precedence of the public interest over individual property rights:

> Le droit de propriété est sacré de particulier à particulier, et s'il n'est pas sacré, il faut que la société se dissolve. C'est le contraire de ce droit de particulier relativement à la société. Ce n'est rien, car si c'était quelque chose, il ne se ferait rien de grand, d'utile à la société; la propriété de quelques particuliers croisant sans cesse les vues générales, elle tendrait à sa ruine, parce que le droit de propriété de quelques particuliers croiserait sans cesse les moyens de son opulence, de sa force et de sa sûreté.[2]

There can be no civil liberty, no security of person or property, unless there is equality before the law. Diderot stresses this point to Catherine II:

> Mais surtout des lois, des lois si générales qu'elles n'exceptent personne.
>
> La généralité de la loi est un des plus grands principes de l'égalité des sujets.
>
> Que personne ne puisse impunément en frapper, en maltraiter, en injurier grièvement un autre.
>
> L'homme le plus vil prend de la hauteur, du courage, de la fermeté, quand il sait qu'il a un défenseur dans la loi.
>
> Employez surtout votre commission à établir cette sorte d'égalité légale; elle est si naturelle, si

[1] Apologie de l'abbé Galiani, in Oeuvres politiques, ed. Vernière, p. 118. Cf. also ibid., pp. 85 and 90-91.

[2] Ibid., p. 99.

> humaine, qu'il n'y aurait que des bêtes féroces qui pussent s'y refuser.[1]

Similarly there must be equality before taxation. The nobility should enjoy no exemptions:

> Qu'on attache de grands honoraires aux fonctions de la noblesse; qu'on lui accorde des rangs de préséance, des marques honorifiques, des statues, etc., mais aucun de ces privilèges qui distinguent les nobles aux pieds des tribunaux, ou qui les affranchissent de l'impôt. La loi et le fisc ne doivent faire exception de personne, pas même du prince du sang. Il n'y a que ce moyen de remédier à la noblesse héréditaire.[2]

Diderot is adamant in his condemnation of privileges of all kinds, whether the beneficiaries are the nobility, the clergy, the magistracy, or the trade guilds.[3] He condemns the hunting rights of the nobles, by virtue of which the peasants are forbidden to shoot any game which despoils their crops.[4] He also protests against the right of the _seigneurs_ to levy dues from their peasants for the maintenance of community bakeries. In most areas the peasants were now equipped with their own ovens and the institution of the "four banal" had outlived its original justification and become a mere pretext for a burdensome tax. "Tous les paysans de ma province," Diderot observes, "ont des fours. Les fours banaux sont des servitudes et des fléaux."[5]

[1] _Mémoires pour Catherine II_, ed. Vernière, p. 63.

[2] _Observations sur le Nakaz_, _ed. cit._, pp. 429-30.

[3] Cf. _Mémoires pour Catherine II_, ed. Vernière, p. 5 and pp. 149-54; _Observations sur le Nakaz_, _ed. cit._, p. 366.

[4] _Apologie de Galiani_, ed. Vernière, 92; art. "Chasse", AT, XIV, 111.

[5] _Apologie de Galiani_, _ed. cit._, p. 97.

Although the importance he attaches to the security of property implies acceptance of a certain inequality in wealth, Diderot disapproves of excessive inequality. He protests against the exactions of the fermiers généraux and expresses disgust at their vulgar display of ill-gotten wealth.[1] Meanwhile, he points out, the peasants are often reduced to dire poverty. A poor painting by Halle elicits the following aside:

> Les jambes des rameurs grêles à faire peur; à effacer avec la langue. Dans nos campagnes les mieux ravagées par l'intendance et la ferme, dans la plus misérable de nos provinces, la Champagne pouilleuse; là, où l'impôt et la corvée ont exercé toute leur rage; là, où le pasteur, réduit à la portion congrue, n'a pas un liard à donner à ses pauvres; à la porte de l'église ou du presbytère, sous la chaumière où le malheureux manque de pain pour vivre, et de paille pour se coucher, l'artiste aurait trouvé de meilleurs modèles.[2]

Many eighteenth-century writers reacted to this situation by condemning luxury. The general prevalence of poverty was due, they thought, to the frittering away of resources by the opulent few. Other writers replied by defending luxury on the grounds that it gave employment to large numbers of people and thus was a way of redistributing wealth. This is the view put forward by Mandeville in The Fable of the Bees and adopted by Voltaire in Le Mondain. Diderot's position differs from both these views. He distinguishes between two kinds of luxury. There can be a good kind of luxury, based on a general opulence which enables

[1] Roth, VIII, 183-84 (To Sophie Volland; Oct. 1, 1768).

[2] Salon de 1767, AT, XI, 29.

people, once they have satisfied their essential needs, to devote resources to inessential pleasures, "tous ces vices charmants qui font le bonheur de l'homme dans ce monde-ci et sa damnation éternelle dans l'autre."[1] But, in reality, instead of this happy state of general opulence, a few people are very rich and most are very poor. Besides which, the system of government is such that merit and virtue lead nowhere, whereas wealth without either leads everywhere. The only way to obtain public respect is to display one's wealth, or, at least to simulate wealth. Thus luxury becomes in many cases a mask which conceals a real indigence. Ostentatious expenditure is preferred to the satisfaction of essential needs:

> Toute la société est pleine d'avares fastueux. On loue une première loge à l'Opéra et l'on emprunte le livret. On garde deux ou trois équipages et l'on néglige l'éducation de ses enfants. On a un bon cocher, un excellent cuisinier et un mauvais précepteur. On veut que la table soit somptueuse et l'on ne marie pas ses filles.[2]

Diderot's position on this whole question is aptly summed up in the following passage from the Mémoires pour Catherine II:

> Il s'établit, par mille funestes moyens qu'il est inutile d'exposer, une incroyable inégalité de fortune entre des concitoyens.
>
> Il s'y forme un centre d'opulence réelle; autour de ce centre d'opulence réelle, il existe une immense et vaste misère.

[1] Mémoires pour Catherine II, ed. Vernière, p. 156.

[2] Ibid., pp. 148-49. Cf. Salon de 1767, AT, XI, 89: ". . . il y a deux sortes de luxe: l'un qui naît de la richesse et de l'aisance générale, l'autre de l'ostentation et de la misère . . ."

> Chez cette nation, par un concours de mille circonstances, le mérite, la bonne éducation, les lumières et la vertu ne mènent à rien.
>
> L'or mène à tout. L'or qui mène à tout est devenu le Dieu de la nation.
>
> Il n'y a qu'un vice, c'est la pauvreté. Il n'y a qu'une vertu, c'est la richesse. Il faut être riche ou méprisé.
>
> Si l'on est effectivement riche, on montre sa richesse par tous les moyens imaginables. Si l'on n'est pas riche, on veut le devenir par toutes les voies imaginables. Il n'y en a point de déshonnête.
>
> Si l'on n'est pas riche, il n'y a rien qu'on ne fasse pour cacher son indigence.[1]

Inequality in wealth would not cause great harm, Diderot thinks, if it could be ensured that money gave access only to material and aesthetic satisfactions and not to political power or to privilege before the law. The best way to achieve this would be to abolish the sale of offices and institute instead public competitions to fill posts in the government and administration:

> . . . nulle récompense au talent et à la vertu, nulle ressource pour ôter à l'or son attrait et sa puissance sans le concours, même aux places les plus importantes.[2]

In another of the memoirs he wrote for Catherine II, Diderot, imagining himself crowned King Denis, proposes various reforms and is optimistic about their effect:

> Que doit-il arriver sous mon règne, si, après avoir relevé et enrichi ma nation, je prends quelque précaution pour que l'or ne soit pas le dieu de mon pays, et que, par le concours aux places, j'assure quelque récompense au mérite et à la vertu? Ne puis-

[1] Ed. Vernière, pp. 145-46. Note the similarity with the satire of society in Le Neveu de Rameau. Cf. AT, V, 471-72.

[2] Mémoires pour Catherine II, ed. Vernière, p. 127. Cf. also ibid., pp. 48-49; Commentaire sur Hemsterhuis, pp. 433, 435.

> je me flatter, ainsi qu'Henri IV, que mes paysans de Brie auront le dimanche une poule dans leur pot?[1]

If the various measures which Diderot proposes were adopted, there would exist that equality before the law which is necessary to protect the civil liberty and property of each individual against the aggression of others. But the individual must also be rendered secure from the oppressive exactions of government itself. Governments tend constantly to exceed the limits of the power conceded to them by the individuals from whom they derive all their authority. It will be clear from my earlier remarks on the articles "Cité" and "Citoyen"[2] that Diderot's conception of the relations between government and governed in no way justifies a totalitarian state. Government is oppressive whenever it exceeds the minimum of activity and interference necessary for the performance of its essential functions. These concern "la sûreté générale et la tranquillité intérieure, le soin des armées, l'entretien des forteresses, l'observation des lois,"[3] -- in other words, national defence and the application of civil and criminal law (in order that individuals may be protected from one another). In this way the general security of the whole community is assured, and the persons and property of individuals are protected. But, insists Diderot, each individual possesses a portion of the total wealth over which

[1] Mémoires pour Catherine II, ed. Vernière, pp. 154-55.

[2] See above, pp. 113-14.

[3] Fragments échappés, AT, VI, 449.

he has a right of use and abuse and with which the government must not interfere, even in the individual's own interest. The necessary governmental function of protecting the nation from foreign invasion or internal disorder already provides the executive authority with too frequent an excuse for curtailing the liberty of citizens; economic efficiency should not, Diderot pleads, become a further pretext for government intervention:

> Partout où vous verrez chez les nations l'autorité souveraine s'étendre au delà de cette partie de police, dites qu'elles sont mal gouvernées. Partout où vous verrez cette partie de police exposer le citoyen à une surcharge d'impôts, en sorte qu'il n'y ait aucun réviseur national du livre de recette et de dépense de l'intendant ou souverain, dites que la nation est exposée à la déprédation. O redoutable notion de l'utilité publique! Parcourez les temps et les nations, et cette grande et belle idée d'utilité publique se présentera à votre imagination sous l'image symbolique d'un Hercule qui assomme une partie du peuple aux cris de joie et aux acclamations de l'autre partie, qui ne sent pas qu'incessamment elle tombera écrasée sous la même massue aux cris de joie et aux acclamations des individus actuellement vexés.[1]

In this spirit of minimum government, King Denis announces an extensive programme for the restriction of royal expenditure, with a view to lightening the burden of taxation.[2]

A major cause of oppressive taxation, and one which Diderot frequently denounces, is aggressive militarism. This has the further harmful consequence of giving the monarch an excuse for maintaining a standing army, which he can then use to repress internal dissent. A typical example of such militarism is provided

[1] Fragments échappés, AT, VI, 449-50.

[2] Mémoires pour Catherine II, ed. Vernière, pp. 149-54.

by the government of Frederick II,[1] whom Diderot characterizes as "un politique ambitieux, sans foi, pour qui il n'y a rien de sacré, un prince sacrifiant tout, même le bonheur de ses sujets, à sa puissance actuelle, l'éternel boute-feu de l'Europe."[2] The remedy Diderot proposes for such militarism is that standing armies be abolished and their essential role of defending the national territory against foreign invasion be fulfilled by a citizen army. He admits that there is little chance that any monarch would ever willingly enact such a measure. Indeed, he envisages the citizen army as a defence as much against internal tyranny as against foreign invasion:

> Sous quelque gouvernement que ce fût, le seul moyen d'être libre ce serait d'être tous soldats; il faudrait que dans chaque condition le citoyen eût deux habits, l'habit de son état et l'habit militaire. Aucun souverain n'établira cette éducation. . . . Il n'y a de bonnes remontrances que celles qui se feraient la baïonnette au bout du fusil.[3]

I have considered so far Diderot's conception of the ideal relationship between government and the governed, and his criticisms

[1] Cf. Pages contre un tyran, in Oeuvres politiques, ed. Vernière pp. 147-48.

[2] Mémoires pour Catherine II, ed. Vernière, p. 36.

[3] Politique des souverains, in Oeuvres politiques, ed. Vernière, p. 173. Cf. Observations sur le Nakaz, ed. cit., pp. 442-43, and the apostrophe to the American insurgents included in the Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron (1778), AT, III, 324-25.

of the relation actually prevailing in the states of eighteenth-century Europe. These criticisms and proposed reforms are not specifically related to particular forms of government, except in so far as tyranny is excluded as being essentially incompatible with individual freedom. However, Diderot gave considerable thought to the best practical form of government, and during his career his views on this question show a certain evolution.

In the Réfutation d'Helvétius, Diderot admits that democracy is the best form of government, but doubts whether it is a practical possibility in states large enough to be secure from foreign attack:

> . . . le gouvernement démocratique supposant le concert des volontés, et le concert des volontés supposant les hommes rassemblés dans un espace assez étroit, je crois qu'il ne peut y avoir que de petites républiques, et que la sûreté de la seule espèce de société qui puisse être heureuse sera toujours précaire.[1]

It should be noted that this conception of democracy, like that of Rousseau,[2] demands direct participation of all citizens in decisions affecting the general interest. What are nowadays called democracies would no doubt be classed by Diderot as elective aristocracies.[3] For practical purposes, Diderot grants that

[1] AT, II, 390.

[2] Cf. Le Contrat social, III, chap. 4, in Oeuvres complètes (Pléiade), Paris, 1964, pp. 404-06.

[3] Cf. d'Holbach's article "Représentants", AT, XVII, 12: "Dans un Etat purement démocratique, la nation, à proprement parler, n'est point représentée; le peuple entier se réserve le droit de faire connaître ses volontés dans les assemblées générales, composées de tous les citoyens; mais dès que le peuple a choisi des magistrats qu'il a rendus dépositaires de son autorité, ces magistrats deviennent ses représentants; et suivant le plus ou le moins de pouvoir que le peuple s'est réservé, le gouvernement devient ou une aristocratie, ou demeure une démocratie."

there must be a distinction between the general body of citizens and those persons who hold political authority. His reflections on systems of government are always concerned with the best way to ensure that the personnel of government carry out their necessary functions without allowing their personal interests to take precedence over the general interest.

In the opinion of Jacques Proust, during the period when he was mainly occupied with the Encyclopédie, i.e. 1750-65, Diderot's preference was for absolute monarchy.[1] It may, perhaps, be true that at this time Diderot, like Voltaire, espoused the thèse royale and saw in the various corps intermédiaires (which Montesquieu advocated especially as checks on the power of the executive) not the noble guardians of the interests of the people, but the representatives of the selfish interests of privileged groups. It is difficult, however, to be certain of Diderot's preferences regarding practical political arrangements judging only on the basis of what he writes in his Encyclopédie articles. The three which I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, "Autorité politique", "Cité" and "Citoyen", deal mainly in general terms with the political structure of societies, without clearly expressing any preference for one or other particular form of government. Where there is a more specific reference to particular political arrangements, one has to make considerable allowance for prudence and, perhaps, irony. Take, for example, the allusion

[1] Diderot et l'Encyclopédie, p. 348.

to kings near the end of the article "Droit naturel":

> . . . puisque des deux volontés, l'une générale et l'autre particulière, la volonté générale n'erre jamais, il n'est pas difficile de voir à laquelle il faudrait, pour le bonheur du genre humain, que la puissance législative appartînt, et quelle vénération l'on doit aux mortels augustes dont la volonté particulière réunit et l'autorité et l'infaillibilité de la volonté générale.[1]

The final remark is ambiguous, since it can be taken to imply either that kings do in fact represent the general will, or that, when they do, they deserve veneration. Diderot himself never believed that any monarch necessarily expressed the general will, but for a considerable part of his career he seems to have hoped that, when informed by enlightened public opinion, they would conform their policies to the general interest. This hope finds expression, for example, in his evocation of the popular king Henri IV in "Autorité politique".[2]

During the later 1750's and the 1760's Diderot seems gradually to have lost whatever confidence he may have had in the French monarchy, considering Louis XV and the future Louis XVI as personally incompetent and the régime as in constant danger of degenerating into despotism. In the early 1770's he remarks in a memoir to Catherine II:

> Notre monarque est bien caduc. Les dernières années d'un long règne d'un grand roi ont souvent gâté les premières; jamais les dernières années d'un long

[1] AT, XIV, 300-01. On Diderot's views on the general will, see below, pp. 228-29.

[2] AT, XIII, 396-99.

> règne d'un roi ordinaire, pour ne rien dire de pis, n'ont réparé les désastres des années précédentes. Ainsi nous avons peut-être encore du chemin à faire vers la décadence. Mais qui sait notre sort sous le règne suivant? Moi, personnellement, j'en pense mal. Puissé-je me tromper! Puisse-t-il ne pas toujours chasser sans voir goutte![1]

In 1771 Diderot writes to John Wilkes announcing the decadence and approaching ruin of the French state.[2] In his "Essai historique sur la police de la France", he traces the decline of political liberty in France since the Middle Ages. Since the reign of Louis XIV, the royal power has been in effect absolute, but while the Parlements remained in existence a certain exterior appearance of liberty was preserved. Now, with Maupeou's coup d'état abolishing these bodies, the great spider's web bearing an image of liberty revered by the multitude has been torn apart and tyranny revealed for all to see.[3] Although Diderot had no great liking for the actual political attitudes of the former Parlements, he now realizes that there must be constitutional checks on royal power and that one cannot rely on the benevolence of the monarch to ensure that he respects the fundamental laws of the State and the general will of the people. His earlier ideal of the popular monarch able to impose his will in order to make the

[1] Mémoires pour Catherine II, ed. Vernière, pp. 40-41. Diderot alludes successively to Louis XIV, Louis XV and the future Louis XVI, who was passionately fond of hunting, but short-sighted.

[2] Roth, XI, 210-11 (Oct. 19, 1771) and p. 223 (Nov. 14, 1771).

[3] Mémoires pour Catherine II, ed. Vernière, p. 20.

general interest triumph over the selfish interests of individuals and groups is, at least in theory, hard to distinguish from enlightened despotism; but since then he has witnessed both the practical failure of the French monarchy to promote the public interest by introducing essential reforms and the militaristic policies of the "enlightened" Frederick II. He now thinks of absolute power as potential, if not actual, tyranny. He had supposed that, provided the monarch were well enough informed concerning the state of national affairs and public needs, if he were constantly confronted with what the Physiocrats called "l'évidence", he could be relied upon to pursue wise policies. As late as 1767, he had praised Mercier de la Rivière for proclaiming that "l'évidence" was the sole counterforce to tyranny.[1] Now he has lost this confidence; he writes shortly after the death of Louis XV:

> L'évidence n'empêche ni le jeu de l'intérêt ni celui des passions; un commerçant déréglé voit évidemment qu'il se ruine, et ne se ruine pas moins. Un souverain sentira qu'il tyrannise ou par lui-même ou par ses ministres, et n'en tyrannisera pas moins. Est-ce l'évidence qui a manqué en France sous le règne passé?[2]

To hold tyranny in check, one must apply the physical counterforce of a political body, such as the English parliament.[3]

In answer to contemporary thinkers like Helvétius, who considered that absolutism was an evil only if it was unenlightened,

[1] Roth, VII, 76 (To Damilaville; June or July 1767).

[2] Observations sur le Nakaz, ed. cit., p. 359.

[3] Ibid., p. 359.

Diderot criticizes the very notion of enlightened despotism. Catherine II, in her Instruction to the legislative assembly of 1767-68,[1] defines absolutism in such a way as to imply that the pursuit of the general interest is an essential aspect of it:

> Quel est l'objet d'un gouvernement absolu? Ce n'est certainement point de priver les hommes de leur liberté naturelle, mais de diriger leurs actions vers le plus grand de tous les biens.[2]

Diderot replies that the important question is not what is the "object" of absolute government, but what is its effect: "Son effet est de mettre toute liberté et toute propriété dans l'absolue dépendance d'un seul."[3] Enlightenment and benevolence cannot be part of the essence of absolutism as a political system; they must always depend on the personality of the reigning monarch. Even if he personally pursues wise and just policies, he leaves his successor free to undo all the good he has done. An hereditary ruler combining to an equal degree the qualities of justice, enlightenment and strength of character is a rarity. But even when chance places such a person on the throne, it does not follow that he should be given a free hand. The nation must not lose the habitual courage to question royal policies and to consent only to their rationality and not to authority per se. Even Diderot's much-admired Seneca disappoints him in one passage, where the Roman philosopher declares that there is no point in a

[1] See above, p. 68, note 4.

[2] Quoted in Oeuvres politiques, ed Vernière, p. 354, note 1.

[3] Observations sur le Nakaz, ed. cit., p. 354.

ruler giving reasons to justify his edicts, since the subject needs only to obey. Diderot protests that "une société d'hommes n'est pas un troupeau de bêtes: les traiter de la même manière, c'est insulter à l'espèce humaine."[1] Arbitrary rule has a corrupting effect on the spirit of the nation:

> A mesure qu'un peuple perd le sentiment de la liberté et de la propriété, il se corrompt, il s'avilit, il penche vers la servitude. Quand il est esclave, il est perdu; il ne se croit plus même propriétaire de sa vie. Il n'a plus de notion précise de juste et d'injuste. Sans le fanatisme qui lui inspire la haine pour les autres contrées, il n'aurait plus de patrie. Partout où ce fanatisme ne subsiste plus, les grands songent à s'expatrier; et les petits ne sont retenus que par la stupidité qui les engourdit; ils ressemblent aux chiens malheureux qui vont cherchant la maison où ils sont battus et mal nourris.[2]

Even when despotism is enlightened and benevolent, this process of degradation still takes place. Thus, paradoxically, a succession of benevolent despots would be a great evil, for it would sap the nation's belief in its rights and its courage to defend them, leaving it a passive victim to the blatant tyranny which must sooner or later befall it. Diderot warns Catherine II of the misfortune which a succession of three enlightened despots would spell for Russia:

> . . . ces trois despotes excellents accoutumeraient la nation à l'obéissance aveugle; sous leurs règnes les peuples oublieraient leurs droits inaliénables; ils tomberaient dans une sécurité et une apathie funestes; ils n'éprouveraient plus cette alarme continuelle, la conservatrice nécessaire de la liberté.

[1] Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron, AT, III, 264.

[2] Observations sur le Nakaz, ed. cit., p. 440.

> Ce pouvoir absolu qui, placé dans la main d'un bon maître, faisait tant de bien, le dernier de ces bons maîtres le transmettrait à un méchant, et le lui transmettrait scellé par le temps et par l'usage; et tout serait perdu.[1]

The only real, permanent, good which could possibly ensue from the rule of an enlightened despot would be his abdication of arbitrary power and the institution of a system of government in which the powers of the ruler and the rights of the ruled were laid down in a written constitution. For this initial establishment of the guarantees of political liberty the absolute ruler is at a great advantage, if only he makes a firm resolve to take such a step. In this respect the Russian empress sadly disappointed Diderot:

> Je vois dans l'Instruction de Sa Majesté Impériale un projet d'un code excellent; mais pas un mot sur le moyen d'assurer la stabilité de ce code. J'y vois le nom de despote abdiqué; mais la chose conservée, mais le despotisme appelé monarchie.[2]

Diderot's attitude to Catherine II in no way constitutes an abandonment of his hatred of despotism. He seems to have felt gratitude towards his benefactress and admiration for her intelligence and strength of character without approving of the nature of her power. He long cherished the belief, or at least the hope, that she would ultimately institute a limited monarchy. Both in the memoirs which he periodically submitted to her during his

[1] Observations sur le Nakaz, ed. cit., pp. 354-55. Cf. also Mémoires pour Catherine II, ed. Vernière, pp. 117-18; Réfutation d'Helvétius, AT, II, 381-82.

[2] Observations sur le Nakaz, ed. cit., p. 457.

stay in Russia and in the Observations sur le Nakaz, he freely expresses his condemnation of absolutism, his belief in the sovereignty of the people and his approval of limited monarchy.[1] In the memoirs, he is careful to avoid offending the susceptibility of an authoritarian woman, but behind the apparent ingenuousness of remarks like the following, there is a challenge to the inner conscience of the Empress:

> Que si l'on proposait à Sa Majesté Impériale de voir subitement la constitution de l'empire russe transformée dans la constitution anglaise, je doute fort qu'elle le refusât. Libre pour le bien qu'elle veut, liée pour le mal qu'elle ne veut pas, en effet, qu'y perdrait-elle?[2]

In the Observations sur le Nakaz, which remained in the author's possession until his death, when they were sent to Russia with his library and manuscripts, it is apparent that Diderot has retained few illusions regarding Catherine. Does she, he asks, or does she not, intend to give up the despotic power which she certainly possesses at present? If she does, let it be clearly written into the Constitution, and let her devise, in consultation with the nation, means of preventing any future ruler from usurping absolute power. The Empress should examine her conscience:

> Si en lisant ce que je viens d'écrire et en écoutant sa conscience, son coeur tressaillit de joie, elle ne veut plus d'esclaves; si elle frémit, si son sang se

[1] The first article of the Observations sur le Nakaz (ed. cit., pp. 343-44) is particularly outspoken on these points.

[2] Mémoires pour Catherine II, ed. Vernière, p. 123.

> retire, si elle pâlit, elle s'est crue meilleure qu'elle n'était.[1]

Small wonder Catherine II was annoyed[2] when she finally read the Observations sur le Nakaz after the author's death, for she had failed to carry out her announced intention of providing Russia with a written Constitution.

The relation between the propaganda of the philosophes and the French Revolution has been the subject of much dispute among historians for over a century and a half. I do not intend to add to this debate, but the question of Diderot's attitude to various possible forms of régime raises the related matter of his views on the popular overthrow of an established government.[3]

Diderot's writings contain no precise statements as to the course which he would like political events to take in France if the existing government failed to institute reforms. He suggests that the situation is so bad that piecemeal reforms cannot remedy it: "Les mauvais usages multipliés sans fin et invétérés sont

[1] Observations sur le Nakaz, ed. cit., p. 345. "Tressaillit" is an obsolete form of the present tense often used by eighteenth-century writers.

[2] Cf. Vernière's remarks in Oeuvres politiques, pp. 333-34.

[3] The poem Les Eleuthéromanes could be treated in this section, since it contains a warning to tyrants that their excesses are likely to provoke violent popular rebellion. I have preferred, however, to discuss this text in the following chapter (pp. 165-71) because it has sometimes provided specious support for the view that Diderot is at heart an anarchist who doubts the value of social order.

devenus respectables par leur durée et irréformables par leur nombre."[1] In a similar vein, he writes to Catherine II:

> Qu'un peuple est heureux, lorsqu'il n'y a rien de fait chez lui! Les mauvaises et surtout les vieilles institutions sont un obstacle presque invincible aux bonnes.[2]

In several passages he evokes the myth of Medea. Lamenting, in a letter to John Wilkes, the cultural decadence of France, he remarks:

> On me demandait un jour comment on rendait la vigueur à une nation qui l'avait perdue. Je répondis: comme Médée rendit la jeunesse à son père, en le dépeçant et en le faisant bouillir.[3]

The sanguinary character of this myth may suggest that Diderot has in mind a frenzy of blood-letting, but we must not allow our knowledge of the actual course taken by the French Revolution to colour our understanding of pre-revolutionary writings. In all probability, Diderot hopes that the crisis will take the form of an abrupt and radical change in national policy, implemented perhaps by the existing government and bringing about a sudden redistribution of wealth and power; this would cause hardship to many people, but would in the long run do much good. This interpretation is supported by the following passage:

> Notre droit coutumier est immense. Il est lié avec l'état et la fortune de tous les particuliers. Celui qui projetterait le renversement de ce colosse ébranlerait

[1] Roth, IV, 108 (To Sophie Volland; Aug. 19, 1762).

[2] Mémoires pour Catherine II, ed. Vernière, p. 4.

[3] Roth, XI, 223 (Nov. 14, 1771).

> toutes les propriétés. Il n'achèverait pas son entreprise sans commettre une foule d'injustices criantes. Il soulèverait infailliblement tous les différents ordres de l'Etat. Je le ferais pourtant, car je pense qu'il faut faire un grand mal d'un moment pour un plus grand bien qui dure.[1]

With regard to revolution in the form of a popular uprising, it is true that Diderot claims that an oppressed nation has the right to rebel against a tyrannical government:

> S'il n'est point de gouvernement où des circonstances urgentes n'exigent l'infraction des lois naturelles, la violation des droits de l'homme et l'oubli des prérogatives des sujets, il n'y en a point où certaines conjonctures n'autorisent la résistance de ceux-ci; d'où naît l'extrême difficulté de définir et de circonscrire avec exactitude le crime de haute trahison. Qui est-ce qui se rendit coupable de lèse-majesté? fut-ce les Romains ou Néron?[2]

But this was not a startlingly novel point of view. It had already been propounded by Locke[3] and others. Besides, Diderot is very cautious in defining the conditions justifying the exercise of this right. One must, however, allow for caution in a published work, and there is little reason to doubt that Diderot was favourably disposed to revolutionary action by the people against a tyrannical government provided such action proved effective. In the first edition of his Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron, published in 1778, he acclaims the American Revolution enthusiastically.[4]

[1] Mémoires pour Catherine II, ed. Vernière, p. 3.

[2] Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron, AT, III, 102-03.

[3] Cf. The Second Treatise of Government, chap. XIX, "Of the dissolution of government," ed. cit., pp. 119-39.

[4] Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron, AT, III, 324-25.

Yet although he thinks that popular rebellion can be instrumental in momentarily overthrowing tyranny, he has no faith in the ability of the common people to bring about any durable reform. He despises the "peuple" for its ignorance, its prejudices, its lack of any firm principles, of all nobility of spirit: "L'homme peuple est le plus sot et le plus méchant des hommes: se dépopulariser, ou se rendre meilleur, c'est la même chose."[1] This attitude does not imply class snobbery; any lowly born man who has risen above the popular level, not in wealth, but in intellectual and moral qualities, is worthy of esteem. Such a man is, by definition, no longer a member of the "peuple", in the pejorative sense which Diderot sometimes gives the term.[2] But the masses, as they in fact are, cannot be relied upon to bring about any amelioration in their lot or that of mankind. If their unrest should provide the crisis which Diderot thinks is necessary to shake French society from its torpor, it will inevitably be up to the intellectuals, the philosophes, to propose practical means of achieving a freer and more just social and political system. There have been many rebellions, and much bloodshed, over the centuries, but no good has ever come of such turmoil because no constructive policy for reform guided these movements of revolt:

> Les hommes, las d'être mal, ont quelquefois assommé avec leurs chaînes le maître cruel qui a trop abusé

[1] Ibid., p. 263. Cf. also ibid., p. 164 and the article "Multitude", AT, XVI, 137.

[2] Diderot's views on the "peuple" are clarified in an excellent article by Roland Mortier, "Diderot et la notion de 'peuple'," Europe, Jan.-Feb., 1963, pp. 78-88.

> de son autorité et de leur patience, mais il n'en est résulté aucun bien ni pour eux ni pour leurs descendants, parce qu'ils ignoraient ce que le philosophe prétend leur apprendre d'avance, ce qu'ils ont à faire pour être mieux.[1]

When eventually the really fruitful revolution comes, it will be because there is a sufficient body of enlightened opinion to give a rational, constructive direction to policies and events. The philosophic movement will have brought about that "révolution dans les esprits" which Diderot hoped would be the result of the Encyclopédie.[2] The mission of the philosopher is to inform men of their inalienable rights, to denounce religious fanaticism and militarism: "Il prépare aux révolutions, qui surviennent toujours à l'extrémité du malheur, des suites qui compensent le sang répandu."[3]

Diderot's analysis of the political situation in France in the 1760's and 70's appears to distinguish two divergent trends. He becomes more and more convinced that the French monarchy is irremediably tyrannical; but at the same time he asserts that the spirit of liberty is awake and, indeed, is typical of the times in which he lives. The authorities, he suggests, should not be surprised at this when they allow the publication in France of a work such as the Lettres d'un fermier de Pennsylvanie aux habitants

[1] Mémoires pour Catherine II, ed. Vernière, p. 235. Cf. Roth, VIII, 113 (To Falconet; Sept. 6, 1768).

[2] Roth, IV, 172 (To Sophie Volland; Sept. 26, 1762).

[3] Mémoires pour Catherine II, ed. Vernière, p. 235.

de l'Amérique septentrionale (1769):

> On nous permet la lecture de ces choses-là, et l'on est étonné de nous trouver, au bout d'une dizaine d'années, d'autres hommes. Est-ce qu'on ne sent pas avec quelle facilité des âmes un peu généreuses doivent boire ces principes et s'en enivrer? Ah! mon ami, heureusement les tyrans sont encore plus imbéciles qu'ils ne sont méchants; ils disparaissent; les leçons des grands hommes fructifient, et l'esprit d'une nation s'agrandit.[1]

In another review article written at about the same time, he denounces a writer who has pronounced the eighteenth century morally corrupt and in all respects inferior to the seventeenth. Diderot defends his century on the grounds of its scientific and cultural advances, the rise in the general level of enlightenment, and, above all, for the spirit of liberty which pervades the nation:

> Maudit soit l'impertinent qui rend la nation responsable des désordres qui cesseront avec la race des bélîtres qui la gouvernent. . . . Maudit soit l'impertinent qui ne voit pas que les Français n'ont jamais respiré un sentiment plus profond et plus réfléchi de la liberté.[2]

In a letter to Princess Dashkoff, he sums up the political situation during the struggle between Maupeou and the Parlements. If the royal authorities give way, the forces opposing despotism will feel their strength and this could lead to the total overthrow of the absolute power of the monarchy. If, however, all the Parlements are dissolved and replaced by small tribunals composed of creatures of the ministry, there will no longer be any barrier

[1] AT, IV, 89.

[2] AT, VI, 373.

to oppose to total despotism. We have seen how Diderot subsequently confirms this view of the significance of Maupeou's coup d'état;[1] at the time of this letter he is still hopeful that the spirit of liberty which has struck so many blows against the power and influence of the Church will also prevail against secular oppression:

> Chaque siècle a son esprit qui le caractérise. L'esprit du nôtre semble être celui de la liberté. La première attaque contre la superstition a été violente, sans mesure. Une fois que les hommes ont osé d'une manière quelconque donner l'assaut à la barrière de la religion, cette barrière, la plus formidable qui existe comme la plus respectée, il est impossible de s'arrêter. Dès qu'ils ont tourné des regards menaçants contre la majesté du ciel, ils ne manqueront pas, le moment d'après, de les diriger contre la souveraineté de la terre. Le câble qui tient et comprime l'humanité est formé de deux cordes; l'une ne peut céder sans que l'autre vienne à rompre.[2]

Both the conquest of liberty in the face of oppression and its maintenance under good government depend upon the free expression of opinion. It is this basic freedom which permits the formulation of the will of the people, of which, in satisfactory political systems, it is essential that the government be informed. Frederick II having declared that men's duty is always to respect the form of government of their country, Diderot remarks that it is one thing to obey the laws, but quite another to remain silent

[1] See above p. 130.

[2] Roth, XI, 20 (April 3, 1771).

when the laws are bad: ". . . comment le législateur reconnaîtra-t-il le vice de son administration, le défaut de ses lois, si personne n'ose élever la voix?"[1] On the other hand, when governments become oppressive and neglect the general interest, the expression of public opinion is the means whereby the spirit of liberty and of resistance to tyranny is kept alive. When governments effectively silence writers, oppression reaches its culmination, for the people lose even their will to resist it.[2]

It was probably in his dealings with the royal and ecclesiastical censorship that Diderot was personally most aware of the heavy hand of absolutism. His imprisonment at Vincennes and the long battle which he fought against the ecclesiastical authorities to bring the Encyclopédie before the public are well known. It is hard to imagine what his writings and those of the other philosophes would have been like if they had been free to publish whatever they pleased. He himself was conscious that the necessity of circumspection in published writings not only obliged authors to edulcorate their opinions, but tended in the long run to result in a drying-up of the well of new and bold ideas; one could avoid this danger in some measure by writing only for posthumous publication:

La contrainte des gouvernements despotiques rétrécit

[1] Pages contre un tyran, in Oeuvres politiques, ed. Vernière, p. 144.

[2] Cf. Mémoires pour Catherine II, ed. Vernière, p. 100.

> l'esprit sans qu'on s'en aperçoive: machinalement on s'interdit une certaine classe d'idées fortes, comme on s'éloigne d'un obstacle qui nous blesserait; et lorsqu'on s'est accoutumé à cette marche pusillanime et circonspect, on revient difficilement à une marche audacieuse et franche. On ne pense, on ne parle avec force que du fond de son tombeau; c'est là qu'il faut se placer, c'est de là qu'il faut s'adresser aux hommes. Celui qui conseilla au philosophe de laisser un testament de mort, eut une idée utile et grande.[1]

It might seem at this point that we have reached the end of our discussion of Diderot's position regarding the structure of society and the relations between government and the governed. However, certain of his writings have sometimes been construed as implying on his part a profound tendency to prefer to a harmonious society based on the principle of the restriction of individual action a state of anarchy in which individuals could satisfy their desires within the limits of their personal strength.[2] I find it therefore necessary to devote a further chapter to an examination of the texts which have been mainly responsible for suggesting this, in my view, erroneous interpretation.

[1] Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron, AT, III, 219. Cf. this similar remark in Mémoires pour Catherine II, ed. Vernière, p. 235: "Quelle différence entre la pensée d'un homme dans son pays et la pensée d'un homme à neuf cents lieues de sa cour! Aucune des choses que j'ai écrites à Pétersbourg ne me serait venue à Paris. Combien la crainte retient le coeur et la tête! Quel singulier effet de la liberté et de la sécurité!"

[2] See, for example, Jean Fabre's edition of Le Neveu de Rameau, Geneva, 1950, Introduction, pp. lxxvi-lxxxi.

CHAPTER V

LIBERTY AND LICENCE

The most important criticism which has been levelled against Diderot as an ethical thinker is that the two most strongly marked tendencies of his moral thought, his exaltation of individual freedom and his stress on the need for social cooperation, remain in unresolved contradiction.[1] Some critics[2] would have us believe that the practical message which Diderot consciously strove to communicate to mankind consists solely of his social ethic, whereas the individualistic doctrine is an expression of anti-social, or at least amoral, tendencies, which, though suppressed in his everyday life and in most of his writings, well up to the surface of his consciousness at odd moments. His moderation regarding proposals for practical reform or the correct conduct for the individual in the present state of public morality has been viewed as only a mask of prudent conformism or perhaps a veneer of self-deception, beneath which lies his true self, impatient of all social or moral restraints imposed upon the spontaneous impulses of his nature. Diderot thus is made to appear superficially good, but dull, and, at a profounder level, delightfully wicked.

In the course of the preceding chapters, I have had occasion

[1] Cf. J. Reinach, Diderot, Paris, 1894, pp. 172-75.

[2] E.g. L. Ducros, Diderot, l'homme et l'écrivain, Paris, 1894, pp. 325-31.

to question this interpretation with respect to several particular aspects of Diderot's thought.[1] My exposition of his theory of the relations between the individual and government and of his views on sexual morality will, I hope, already have shown that in his ethical thought the claims of the individual and of society are assigned their respective limits. But the criticism to which I refer has been made, sometimes categorically, sometimes in an attenuated form, by so many students of Diderot's thought, and it is such a fundamental question, that I propose to devote the present chapter to a more systematic refutation, paying special attention to those works which lend themselves most readily to this kind of misinterpretation.

The writings with which we shall be mainly concerned are those in which Diderot exploits themes derived from the current of primitivism so influential in his day. Although not all these texts explicitly refer to the state of nature, they all bear a close relation to this ill-defined and variable notion. It will therefore be useful, first of all, to examine briefly the main forms which this concept takes in the literature with which Diderot was familiar.

For the purposes of our discussion, it is especially important to distinguish two different conceptions of the state of nature which may be termed the <u>juristic</u> and the <u>cultural</u> senses. By the juristic sense I mean the hypothetical state of human existence

[1] See, for example, pp. 89, 106.

in which men are conceived as unbound by the reciprocal principles of conduct which constitute the social bond. By the cultural sense I mean the state of society in which the arts and sciences have made relatively little progress.[1] The distinction between these two conceptions of the state of nature will prove useful in our discussion, but it will also be necessary to place those themes which refer strictly to one or other of these notions in a wider context, namely the general category embracing all conceptions of a state of human existence, whether treated as fictional, historical or hypothetical, which is opposed in one or several ways to the state of civilization found in Europe and other advanced parts of the world. This broader category would include the various utopias, such as those described in Diderot's day by Morellet in Le Code de la Nature and by Dom Deschamps in Le Vrai Système. It also includes descriptions of primitive societies given by travellers or to be found in the writers of antiquity.

The reason why we shall find it useful to enlarge the field of discussion in this way is that, while the juristic concept of the state of nature did serve as an aid to logical analysis of the structure and functions of society and social groups, probably an even more important function of the state of nature for many

[1] I am indebted for this distinction, and the terms used, to an article by the late A. O. Lovejoy in his Essays in the History of Ideas, New York, 1960, p. 15. My definition of the juristic state of nature is, however, a little different from his, since I refer to the pre-social state, whereas he refers to a state preceding the establishment of government.

writers was as a source of contrasting premises from which either to justify or to criticize the prevailing form of society. Hobbes's intention, for instance, in describing the state of nature as a war of all against all in which human existence was "nasty, brutish and short", is to denounce the sort of anarchy which he had experienced during the English Civil War, an anarchy which had made reality approach this state, and to justify the absolutist form of government which he considered to be the best bulwark against such anarchy. Voltaire's vision of the state of nature in Le Mondain, while peaceful enough, is made to seem unattractive by its lack of material comfort and its cultural barrenness, for Voltaire is defending the refined culture of his day against the attacks of the opponents of luxury. Needless to say, all the utopias are intended to criticize actual society in one way or another and this is the case too with Diderot's use of primitivistic or utopian themes. For this reason it will be necessary to treat both these types of theme together, whether or not they refer explicitly to the state of nature. It is true that Diderot moves from one concept of the state of nature to another in a confusing way and does not clearly distinguish between his primitivistic and utopian visions. For our present purposes, however, it will not be necessary to untangle this skein except in the few instances where such confusion might affect the issue of our enquiry. Our immediate aim is to see whether or not Diderot's use of all or any of these themes implies

an individualism which contradicts the principles on which he himself founds the existence and maintenance of society.

The most important example of Diderot's use of primitivistic themes is the Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville. It must be noted at the outset that the Tahitian society which he depicts, though much simpler than European society, is not characterized by individual licence, but by the rule of law. Indeed, in Tahiti obedience to law attains a degree of consistency unknown in Europe. It will perhaps be objected that in Tahiti it is natural law which is obeyed, and that this, unlike the laws of civilized societies, places no restraints on the individual. However, this is not true. The laws which govern the conduct of the Tahitians, being strictly founded on natural law, place no unnecessary or arbitrary restraints on them, and, indeed, restrict them as little as possible, but nevertheless they do impose certain restrictions. This fact emerges quite clearly from Orou's description of Tahitian society.[1] Orou also expounds the general principles of natural law in such a way as to leave no doubt that it does not condone individual licence:

[1] E.g. "L'aumônier: Vous avez donc aussi vos libertines? J'en suis bien aise. Orou: Nous en avons même de plus d'une sorte. . . ." (AT, II, 232.) Orou goes on to explain that sexual relations are forbidden to sterile women, who must wear a black veil, to women at the time of menstruation, when they wear a grey veil, and to the sexually immature of both sexes. There are some individuals who infringe these rules, ". . . car, partout où il y a défense, il faut qu'on soit tenté de faire la chose défendue et qu'on la fasse." (AT, II, 235.)

> Veux-tu savoir, en tous temps et en tous lieux, ce qui est bon et mauvais? Attache-toi à la nature des choses et des actions; à tes rapports avec ton semblable; à l'influence de ta conduite sur ton utilité particulière et le bien général. Tu es en délire, si tu crois qu'il y ait rien, soit en haut, soit en bas, dans l'univers, qui puisse ajouter ou retrancher aux lois de la nature. Sa volonté éternelle est que le bien soit préféré au mal, et le bien général au bien particulier. Tu ordonneras le contraire; mais tu ne seras pas obéi. Tu multiplieras les malfaiteurs et les malheureux par la crainte, par les châtiments et par les remords; tu dépraveras les consciences; tu corrompras les esprits; ils ne sauront plus ce qu'ils ont à faire ou à éviter. Troublés dans l'état d'innocence, tranquilles dans le forfait, ils auront perdu l'étoile polaire dans leur chemin.[1]

The intention behind the portrait of Tahitian society in the Supplément is, then, not to proclaim and exalt individual liberty in the face of social order, but to protest against certain failings of civilized society. These defects are primarily its laws and customs concerning sexuality. This question has already been discussed in chapter III, where we observed how Diderot reconciles his radical theoretical thought in the area of sexuality with a practical doctrine of a fairly moderate kind. The portrayal of Tahitian society in the Supplément is also the vehicle for criticism of the role of property in European society. But, as I remarked in the last chapter,[2] this point is made in a rather half-hearted way, compared with the vehemence of the criticism of European sexual institutions. I have already pointed out[3] Diderot's

[1] Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville, AT, II, 225.

[2] See above, p. 117.

[3] See above, pp. 117-19.

emphasis on the importance of the security of private property. His position is that if, as is the case in all advanced societies, the happiness of the individual is dependent on his possessing a certain property, this possession must be rendered secure. When, in certain writings, Diderot toys with the other solution, that of communal ownership, he is not contradicting his usual stress on the security of property: where there is no individual property, there is no need to secure it. In the Supplément little space is, in fact, devoted to this question. The old Tahitian, in the harangue he delivers as Bougainville's expedition departs, declares: "Ici tout est à tous; et tu nous as prêché je ne sais quelle distinction du tien et du mien."[1] We learn later that "les travaux et les récoltes s'y faisaient en commun. L'acception du mot propriété y était très étroite."[2] This presumably means that there was some form of personal property, perhaps clothing and movable objects, and that dwellings were the property of individual families, but that there was little or no personal or family property in the form of land.[3] But, for our present discussion, it is above all important to note that there is no indication here of a purely individualistic ethic. On the contrary, such a system could not function without the obedience

[1] AT, II, 214.

[2] AT, II, 240.

[3] I of course refer to Diderot's version of Tahiti and not to what might have been the historical facts of the case. Cf. Vernière's remarks in Oeuvres philosophiques, p. 466, note 2.

of all individuals to a system of rules regulating the organisation of agricultural work and the distribution of the harvests. The interlocutor B goes so far as to suggest that only in Tahiti has there ever prevailed that general obedience to laws which Diderot calls moeurs.[1]

There is, then, no evidence, either in the Tahitian system of communal ownership or in the laws governing sexual morality, of unfettered individual licence or anarchy. The Tahitian way of life corresponds not to the juristic concept of the state of nature, but to a cultural concept. The Tahitians are described as

> un peuple assez sage pour s'être arrêté de lui-même à la médiocrité, ou assez heureux pour habiter un climat dont la fertilité lui assurait un long engourdissement, assez actif pour s'être mis à l'abri des besoins absolus de la vie, et assez indolent pour que son innocence, son repos et sa félicité n'eussent rien à redouter d'un progrès trop rapide de ses lumières.[2]

However, in the discussion between A and B at the end of the work, the juristic concept makes its appearance. Condemnation of the conventional sexual morality which prevails in Europe leads B to illustrate the resulting psychological suffering by the image of the constant struggle of natural man to throw off the domination of "l'homme moral et artificiel."[3] Now this image fits in logically

[1] AT, II, 240. For a similar definition of moeurs, see Observations sur le Nakaz, ed. cit., p. 372.

[2] AT, II, 240.

[3] AT, II, 246. The passage is quoted above, p. 86.

with Diderot's message in the Supplément regarding sexual morality; and when A asks B whether it would be better to "civiliser l'homme, ou l'abandonner à son instinct,"[1] we expect B to remain within the context of sexual morality in his reply. He does not do so, however, but quickly enlarges the whole discussion to include not only laws regulating sexual relations, but all laws regulating any kind of inter-personal relations. In fact, B suggests that the whole institution of society may very well be less conducive to human happiness than total anarchy. In doing so, he invokes the juristic concept of the state of nature: "Je considère les hommes non civilisés comme une multitude de ressorts épars et isolés."[2] Society, on the other hand, is a machine in which these springs have been made to act and react against each other, so that they are constantly weakening and breaking.

Now, clearly, this anarchical state of individual isolation, which B suggests is preferable to society, is not at all the model according to which Tahitian society functions. The latter, as we have seen, is not an anarchical but rather a well-ordered society, which differs from European society in being culturally less advanced and at the same time free from the bad legislation governing sexuality and property in Europe. Yet it appears that B is not aware that the contrast to which he points between

[1] AT, II, 246.

[2] AT, II, 247.

pre-social anarchy and advanced societies is of a different nature from that, stressed throughout the work, between Tahiti and Europe.

After the comparison between pre-social anarchy and society, the discussion deviates once again, this time to a comparison between primitive existence and advanced civilization in the cultural sense. A tries to get B to admit clearly that he thinks men are "d'autant plus méchants et plus malheureux qu'ils sont plus civilisés."[1] B, true to his strategy of suggesting without categorically affirming, replies:

> Je ne parcourrai pas toutes les contrées de l'univers; mais je vous avertis seulement que vous ne trouverez la condition de l'homme heureuse que dans Tahiti, et supportable que dans un recoin de l'Europe.[2]

This corner of Europe is Venice, where the common people are kept in extreme ignorance by the ruling aristocracy, but where sexual morality is comparatively free from artificial constraints. Here, the main theme of the Supplément, sexual morality, emerges once again.

It can be seen from the preceding analysis that in the closing pages of the Supplément, while at first glance it seems that the two interlocutors are discussing a single topic, namely the comparison between primitivism and civilization, on closer inspection this apparent simplicity of theme dissolves into a confusing variety of comparisons between different pairs of concepts. Rather than jump to the conclusion that Diderot has

[1] AT, II, 248.

[2] AT, II, 248.

simply lost command of his subject at this point, let us consider whether some useful artistic results may have been derived by the writer from this confusion. We cannot assume that what either interlocutor says is the soberly held opinion of Diderot himself. B is propounding a paradox which, Diderot would probably admit, is partly true and partly false. In refusing to affirm, but giving reasons to support, his paradox, B uses precisely the method which Diderot recommends for writers who wish to make paradoxical ideas acceptable to their readers. Helvétius's De l'Esprit is, he says, too methodical and as a result the paradoxes it contains are revealed as blatant untruths:

> . . . il n'y a rien qui veuille être prouvé avec moins d'affectation, plus dérobé, moins annoncé qu'un paradoxe. Un auteur paradoxal ne doit jamais dire son mot, mais toujours ses preuves: il doit entrer furtivement dans l'âme de son lecteur, et non de vive force. C'est le grand art de Montaigne, qui ne veut jamais prouver, et qui va toujours prouvant, et me ballottant du blanc au noir, et du noir au blanc.[1]

It may well be that the way the discussion between A and B slips from one conception of the state of nature to another is a deliberate means by which the author hopes to make B's paradox appear more acceptable. Too great an analytical rigour here might be a literary fault.

The question arises, of course, why Diderot should be interested in propounding a paradoxical opinion which he did not, in the final analysis, consider valid. I suggest that he wishes

[1] Réflexions sur le livre de l'Esprit, AT, II, 272.

to make his readers concede that such a preference for primitive ways of life and even pre-social anarchy over the material comforts and cultural refinements which they enjoyed and valued was at least worthy of serious consideration. His aim is to disturb their complacency and perhaps to make them more ready to question those aspects of their own society which left so much to be desired. The eighteenth-century wealthy classes, conscious and proud of their refined culture and of the advances which were constantly being made in the level of civilization, would at first find such a suggestion preposterous. Yet many of them were already becoming sufficiently blasé about their highly artificial way of life to appreciate, on reflection, the element of truth contained in such a paradox. In another text, Diderot remarks how the mansions of the rich, in themselves the very antithesis of the primitive life, are deliberately surrounded by specially planted trees, so as to simulate man's primeval forest environment, while the walls of their richly decorated rooms are hung with paintings depicting scenes of pastoral life.[1] Diderot is personally more concerned with defects of modern civilization such as oppressive sexual regulations and political and social injustice, rather than with the boredom and emotional aridity of the rich, evils which, after all, they can remedy if they choose.[2] But he wishes to take advantage of his readers' readiness

[1] Salon de 1767, AT, XI, 112.

[2] Cf. Réfutation d'Helvétius, AT, II, 427-32.

to listen to the primitivistic paradox in order to bring these deeper evils to their attention.

The comparison between the advantages and disadvantages of the primitive and civilized states occurs frequently in other writings of Diderot. He often puts forward as his own view the opinion voiced by A in the Supplément, that there is a fixed limit to the degree of happiness of the human race (as opposed to that of particular individuals, some of whom may, of course, be happier than others), so that every benefit derived from a step towards civilization is offset by an equivalent loss. Sometimes he concludes that the balance leans in favour of the primitive life, but more often he gives the verdict to civilization. Sometimes he suggests, as he does in the Supplément, that a half-way stage might be the best for human happiness.[1] I am not suggesting that Diderot did not seriously ponder over this question[2] or that his asking it was never anything but a way of provoking his reader's thought. But such reflections do not express in Diderot a positive attraction for primitive, uncultured, existence or unbridled individualism; rather they are symptoms of his despondency at the misery and oppression which accompany too often the civilized values he loved so much. Whatever stand he takes regarding the minimum extent of complication desirable in

[1] Cf. Réfutation d'Helvétius, AT, II, 431-32.

[2] In the Réfutation d'Helvétius, among examples of problems which, despite his persistent efforts, have proved beyond his capacity to solve, Diderot cites the question "L'état sauvage est-il préférable à l'état policé?" (AT, II, 346.)

social structure and in culture, it cannot be argued that he positively favours an anarchical way of life in which individuals are laws unto themselves. His true position derives from his criticism of the defects of existing societies. If the actual system of institutions and legislation reaches a certain degree of injustice and oppression, it becomes contradictory to the very essence of law and social order, which is to secure the happiness and the liberty of the individual. In such extreme cases it may well be true that total anarchy would be preferable. This is what Diderot means when he writes:

> Il n'y a point de société sans loi. C'est par la loi que le citoyen jouit de sa ville, et le républicain de sa république. Mais si les lois sont mauvaises, l'homme est plus malheureux et plus méchant dans la société que dans la nature.[1]

As I pointed out in dealing with his political and economic ideas,[2] Diderot's ideal of government is one of minimum interference, the laisser-faire State. He considers laws of any sort, or at least their promulgation and enforcement, to be an unfortunate necessity: ". . . la nécessité de faire des lois est toujours une chose fâcheuse; elle suppose des actions ou mauvaises en elles-mêmes ou regardées comme telles, et donne lieu à une infinité d'infractions et de châtiments."[3] He would prefer a world where men lived in harmony without need of coercion. He

[1] Art, "Cyniques", AT, XIV, 261.

[2] See above, pp. 124-25.

[3] Art, "Chasse", AT, XIV, 110.

is delighted with the utopian picture of such a world painted by the Benedictine monk Dom Deschamps:

> Un moine appelé Dom Deschamps m'a fait lire un des ouvrages les plus violents et les plus originaux que je connaisse. C'est l'idée d'un état social où l'on arriverait en partant de l'état sauvage, en passant par l'état policé, au sortir duquel on a l'expérience de la vanité des choses les plus importantes, et où l'on conçoit enfin que l'espèce humaine sera malheureuse tant qu'il y aura des rois, des prêtres, des magistrats, des lois, un tien, un mien, les mots de vices et de vertus. Jugez combien cet ouvrage, tout mal écrit qu'il est, a dû me faire de plaisir, puisque je me suis retrouvé tout à coup dans le monde pour lequel j'étais né.[1]

An examination of the work to which Diderot refers, namely Le Vrai Système,[2] reveals quite clearly that the ideal social state for which he claims to be by nature suited is not one in which every individual pursues his own happiness at the expense of whoever is too weak to resist him, but one in which all men are free from misconceptions and prejudices regarding the nature of their true happiness, and therefore cooperate with their fellow-men. In this ideal world there are no laws because no laws are needed; there are no words for vice and virtue because vice does not exist; there are no kings, priests or magistrates because there is no need for a superior authority to impose obedience to laws; there is no private property because such an institution is not required to ensure that a man shall enjoy the fruits of

[1] Roth, IX, 245 (Fragment; probably 1769). Cf. also AT, VI, 439 (Remarks on Le Temple du bonheur).

[2] Dom Deschamps, Le Vrai Système, ou le mot de l'énigme métaphysique et morale, ed. J. Thomas and F. Venturi, Genève, 1939.

his labour. This vision is certainly anarchistic in the exact sense of the term, but it is not open to the charge of amoralism or unfettered individualism.[1]

It is perhaps surprising that Diderot should be so appreciative of the ideas of Dom Deschamps, since many of them run counter to his own views. He surely cannot have found much satisfaction in the monk's subtle metaphysics. It is, moreover, hard to believe that the author of the Réfutation d'Helvétius would accept the view that individual differences are mainly attributable to social influences and should relish the prospect of everyone being so similar in the "état de moeurs" as to be practically interchangeable. Nor would he have admitted that the destiny of free men could ever be fulfilled without a dynamic culture. Diderot has forgotten all these ideas of Dom Deschamps and has remembered only his attack on the oppressive forces in the actual state of society and his vision of a world in which harmony is achieved without compulsion.

Diderot does not take Dom Deschamps's ideas too seriously. He sees in them "un beau paradoxe". The utopian "état de moeurs" is, he admits, "diablement idéal".[2] Presumably he means that it would be practically impossible to find a way of changing

[1] It is worth noting, perhaps, that the anarchism which Diderot praises here is very different from the theories expounded in the majority of eighteenth-century utopias. Morelly's communistic state, for instance, far from being anarchistic, is a highly regimented society. Cf. Kingsley Martin, The Rise of French Liberal Thought, New York, 1954, pp. 242-46.

[2] AT, VI, 439 (Remarks on Le Temple du bonheur).

from the present state to the way of life advocated by Dom Deschamps, since men have been conditioned by their upbringing to seek their own advantage in every way which the laws do not positively prevent, and have come to associate the possession of private property with freedom and happiness. In other words, the whole psychology of men would have to be changed. Dom Deschamps contends that the abolition of laws, and, in particular, those on which the institution of property is based, would produce this necessary psychological change. But Diderot could never accept such a view, since he thinks that there will always be a certain number of individuals who are so constituted as to be incapable of pursuing their own interest in cooperation with others, and still more people whose passions are too strong for them to control unless their reason is reinforced by fear of punishment. In order that the general welfare may be protected against such people, laws will always have to be promulgated and enforced.[1]

If all men were perfect and could trust each other implicitly, no laws would be necessary, but in practice laws are needed for

[1] To judge from a letter from Dom Deschamps to his friend the marquis de Voyer, it appears that, in his conversations with the Benedictine, Diderot raised such practical objections to the monk's utopian "état de moeurs". Dom Deschamps remarks that Diderot believes man to be "moitié méchant par nature et moitié par état social." Dom Deschamps, who thinks that the evil in man is caused entirely by the structure of society, makes fun of Diderot's attitude on this point: "On dit cet homme athée, mais on a tort. Il se croit méchant par le grand diable d'enfer, dès qu'il se croit méchant par nature; et croire cela c'est croire au grand diable d'enfer. Or, qui croit n'est point athée, et je ne vois pas pourquoi il craint la police à ce titre." (Roth, IX, 106 Aug. 13, 1769 .)

the maintenance of a general standard of morality. Diderot remarks that "si la vertu d'un particulier peut se soutenir sans appui, il n'en est pas de même de la vertu d'un peuple."[1]

There is, in practice, need of a coercive force to compel those who are not sufficiently motivated by love of virtue and a sense of duty to behave in accordance with the general good, and thereby with their own self-interest rightly understood. Another reason for the general enforcement of laws is that, in fact, unless they are generally enforced, it is doubtful whether it will be in the true interest even of an individual who is aware of their justice and conformity with the general good to obey them when other individuals infringe them. In the memoir "De la morale des rois," Diderot explains that, in their relations with each other, sovereigns are still in the juristic state of nature, there being no superior authority to constrain them collectively to just behaviour; so that, while some of them recognize the principle of justice in international affairs, even these are often obliged to disregard this principle in practice because they have no assurance that the other sovereigns will respect it.[2] These two reasons clarify Diderot's remark in the article "Grecs":

> . . . qu'est-ce que la voix de la conscience, sans l'autorité et la menace des lois? Les lois! les lois! voilà la seule barrière qu'on puisse élever contre les passions des hommes; c'est la volonté générale qu'il faut opposer aux volontés particulières: et

[1] Roth, II, 55 (To the Princess de Nassau-Saarbrück; May or June 1758).

[2] Mémoires pour Catherine II, ed. Vernière, pp. 231 and 234.

> sans un glaive qui se meuve également sur la surface d'un peuple, et qui tranche ou fasse baisser les têtes audacieuses qui s'élèvent, le faible demeure exposé à l'injure du plus fort; le tumulte règne, et le crime avec le tumulte; et il vaudrait mieux, pour la sûreté des hommes, qu'ils fussent épars, que d'avoir les mains libres et d'être voisins.[1]

It is clear, in the light of what we have just said, that this passage does not deny the validity of the principle of justice or claim that it originates in positive legislation. It is also evident from this text that Diderot is not advocating anarchy when he refers to a state of isolated existence, but is simply pointing out that such a state would be preferable to a cohesive existence without the enforcement of general laws. In some texts Diderot states categorically that to bring men closer together and to strengthen the bonds between them is always desirable. He writes to Catherine II, for example:

> Dans une société d'hommes quelconque, plus les parties en sont éparses, moins elles sont rapprochées, plus cette société est éloignée de la véritable notion de société; moins elles se soutiennent, moins elles s'entraident, moins elles sont fortes; moins elles luttent avantageusement et contre l'ennemie constante de l'homme, la nature, et contre les ennemies accidentelles, les sociétés adjacentes, plus le tout est voisin de l'état sauvage.[2]

But in texts like this there is the implicit assumption that the society under discussion is a well-ordered society, one which corresponds to the ideal conception of that state. We should not

[1] AT, XV, 57.

[2] Mémoires pour Catherine II, ed. Vernière, p. 176. Some changes have been made in the punctuation.

be misled by Diderot's frequently bitter criticism of his own society and his doubts as to whether it is at all preferable to primitive anarchy: he never for one moment loses sight of the kind of civilized society he desires and towards the creation of which all his efforts as a thinker and propagandist are directed.

The perfect society would not create a new type of human nature, but would preserve and protect those admirable and valuable qualities which are natural to man and would allow some of them to develop to a degree which is impossible in the absence of social bonds. Diderot imagines savage man, living in isolated family groups, to be admirable in his independence and in his sense of dignity and personal value. But man in such conditions is ignorant and must pit his own unaided strength against nature; he can never hope to achieve the cultural advances the germs of which lie dormant in his nature but will only develop if he enjoys leisure and security. These he can never obtain except through cooperating with other men, which means forming a society.[1] The man who is subjected to unjust, tyrannical government is a slave. It would be better for him if he lived the savage life in the pre-social state of nature. But the free citizen, the man who, in obeying laws, is in fact conforming to his own judgment of what conduct is best for him as a member of a cooperative group, preserves the same dignity and pride in his own liberty as the savage possesses. Consider the following portrait of savage man:

[1] Plan d'une université, AT, III, 429-30.

> Un air de fierté mêlé de férocité. Sa tête est droite et relevée; son regard fixe. Il est maître dans sa forêt. Plus je le considère, plus il me rappelle la solitude et la franchise de son domicile.[1]

Republican man is remarkably similar to savage man in his dignity and sense of freedom:

> La république est un état d'égalité. Tout sujet se regarde comme un petit monarque. L'air du républicain sera haut, dur et fier.[2]

In the light of the texts which we have just examined, I propose now to discuss the meaning of a work which some critics[3] have adduced as evidence of a fundamental leaning towards individualistic anarchism, namely Les Eleuthéromanes (1772).

Diderot explains in the "argument" which precedes the poem that he wrote it on the occasion of receiving for the third year in succession the bean which traditionally confers an honorary kingship at Twelfth-night. Treating this trivial circumstance with mock-seriousness, he is caught up by the gravity of the symbolic interpretation which he gives to this offer of a crown, and his justification for immediately abdicating his royal power raises the work from the level of light society verse to that of

[1] Essai sur la peinture, AT, X, 487.

[2] Ibid., AT, X, 487.

[3] E.g. Karl Rosenkranz, Diderot's Leben und Werke, Leipzig, 1866, II, 351; Ernest Seillière, Diderot, Paris, 1944, pp. 93-94.

a philosophical poem. He begins by affirming that absolute power is a very dangerous thing because men who are not corrupted by it are extremely rare. It would be presumptuous, he feels, to suppose that he could himself wield absolute power without succumbing to the temptation of injustice. Supposing he should become another Caligula! The hated name is a signal for the poet to call upon tyrants to behold the danger of revolt which is forever threatening them. Awake and listen, he calls to the oppressor:

> . . . et tu sauras qu'en ton moindre sujet,
> Ni la garde qui t'environne,
> Ni l'imposant hommage qu'on rend à ta personne
> N'ont pu de s'affranchir étouffer le projet.[1]

So far there is nothing here which goes beyond the generalities of Diderot's oft-repeated condemnation of political tyranny. But the next passage, in which the poet evokes natural man impatient of all authority, restive beneath the bonds imposed by society, unwilling either to impose or to submit to laws, is certainly disquieting. Here, if anywhere, one may ask whether Diderot's ideal is a world in which individual freedom reigns so uncontrolled as to leave no basis for right and wrong except the ability of the stronger man to impose his will on the weaker. It will be necessary to quote the whole passage before commenting on it:

> L'enfant de la nature abhorre l'esclavage;
> Implacable ennemi de toute autorité,
> Il s'indigne du joug; la contrainte l'outrage;

[1] AT, IX, 14.

Liberté, c'est son voeu; son cri, c'est Liberté.
Au mépris des liens de la société,
Il réclame en secret son antique apanage.
Des moeurs ou grimaces d'usage
Ont beau servir de voile à sa férocité;
Une hypocrite urbanité,
Les souplesses d'un tigre enchaîné dans sa cage,
Ne trompent point l'oeil du sage;
Et, dans les murs de la cité,
Il reconnaît l'homme sauvage
S'agitant sous les fers dont il est garrotté.
On a pu l'asservir, on ne l'a point dompté.
Un trait de physionomie,
Un vestige de dignité
Dans le fond de son coeur, sur son front est resté;
Et mille fois la tyrannie,
Inquiète où trouver de la sécurité,
A pâli de l'éclair de son oeil irrité.
C'est alors qu'un trône vacille;
Qu'effrayé, tremblant, éperdu,
D'un peuple furieux le despote imbécile
Connaît la vanité du pacte prétendu.
Répondez, souverains: qui l'a dicté, ce pacte?
Qui l'a signé? qui l'a souscrit?
Dans quel bois, dans quel antre en a-t-on dressé l'acte?
Par quelles mains fut-il écrit?
L'a-t-on gravé sur la pierre ou l'écorce?
Qui le maintient? la justice ou la force?
De droit, de fait, il est proscrit.
J'en atteste les temps; j'en appelle à tout âge;
Jamais au public avantage
L'homme n'a franchement sacrifié ses droits;
S'il osait de son coeur n'écouter que la voix,
Changeant tout à coup de langage,
Il nous dirait, comme l'hôte des bois:
"La nature n'a fait ni serviteur ni maître;
"Je ne veux ni donner ni recevoir de lois."
Et ses mains ourdiraient les entrailles du prêtre,
Au défaut d'un cordon pour étrangler les rois.[1]

As Assézat points out, this poem was not published until 1795, so that there is no reason to suppose that it had any influence on the excesses of the French Revolution. Nor need we suppose that the final lines of the passage quoted indicate

[1] Ibid., pp. 15-16. The division into strophe, antistrophe and epode has been omitted, since it seems arbitrarily to interrupt what is in fact a continuous development of ideas.

any lurking bloodthirstiness in Diderot. What he is saying is that if men were not conditioned to behave in an orderly, submissive manner, they would revolt against their oppressors in as savage a way as might their uncivilized ancestors in the forests of yore. As in the Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville, Diderot shows us a natural man languishing enchained in the heart of civilized man, but now the special reference is not to sexual constraints, but to political tyranny. The ferocity of this natural man does not mean that true human nature is indiscriminately aggressive, but simply that when, as in the savage state, man is not inhibited by an acquired reluctance to resort to violence and is not indoctrinated with respect for authorities unworthy of it, he will use force to win or maintain his freedom. Although in civilized man this will to freedom has been mastered, it has not been destroyed and only the physical power of the tyrant can prevent it from breaking loose. The "so-called pact" to which Diderot refers is not the tacit contract by which individual wills are abandoned in favour of an authority which shall execute the general will. Instead, Diderot refers here to the Hobbesian[1]

[1] There is, admittedly, no explicit reference here to Hobbes himself. Leland Thielemann, in "Diderot and Hobbes," Diderot Studies, II, 1952, p. 239, notes the rarity of Diderot's comments on Hobbes's defence of absolute monarchy and on his conception of the political contract, and rightly observes that "of all the contexts in which Diderot referred explicitly to Hobbes, the one in which his convictions differed most completely and most consistently from those of the English philosopher was at the same time the one in which he mentioned Hobbes least often." "Few of [Diderot's] political writings however," Thielemann continues, "even though they did not expressly name Hobbes, failed to make clear the uncompromisable differences between the Hobbesian and the liberal theories of political government." Cf. Thielemann's subsequent remark: "The great liberating concept of the social contract . . . had been

concept of a contract of submission by virtue of which the subjects give up all their rights in exchange for the guarantee by the monarch of the maintenance of public order. This view of government is totally opposed to Diderot's conception of the relations between subjects and sovereign, as he expresses it in the articles "Autorité politique," "Cité" and "Citoyen."[1]

Diderot does not agree with Hobbes that the natural state of man is a war of all against all, and considers such a doctrine to be dangerous because it provides a specious justification for tyranny. When he writes in Les Eleuthéromanes: "Jamais au public avantage / L'homme n'a franchement sacrifié ses droits," Diderot means not that man has never freely abandoned his right to pursue his own personal advantage at the expense of all other men -- Diderot consistently refuses to concede that man ever possessed such a right, even in the state of nature[2] -- but that man has never, in exchange for a "public advantage" consisting solely of the guarantee that society will not lapse into a war of all against all, spontaneously abandoned his right to be free from the injustice which others might wish to exercise towards him. Diderot agrees with Locke[3] that the anarchy of nature, though spoiled by the

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perverted to the uses of ruling despots who were now pretending that their despotism was legal. In the poem Les Eleuthéromanes, Diderot merely echoed the sentiments of Ramsay [See AT, IV, 54.] in challenging the despots to produce the document." (Ibid., p. 244.)

[1] See above, pp. 113-15.

[2] See below, p. 226.

[3] Cf. The Second Treatise of Government, ed. Peardon, chap. II, sect. 13, pp. 9-10.

actions of a certain number of vicious men against whose enterprises the just man has no recourse except to whatever strength he may possess, is not necessarily worse than a form of civilized society in which injustice is written into the laws and institutionalized inequality encourages crime:

> J'oserais presque assurer qu'il se commet plus de crimes en un jour à Paris que dans toutes les forêts des sauvages en un an. D'où il s'ensuivrait qu'une société mal ordonnée est pire que l'état sauvage. Pourquoi non?[1]

Thus Les Eleuthéromanes is not a protest against law in general, but against unjust laws enforced by tyrannical powers. Justice precedes all positive laws, being a principle inseparable from the nature of man.[2] To make one's conduct conform to natural law is not to give up one's freedom, whereas to submit to acts in which another person infringes natural law is to be enslaved. The potential advantage of the social state over the state of nature is that the social state can provide a mechanism for compelling such men as have tendencies towards unjust conduct to respect the freedom of their fellows. What Diderot laments and what makes him at times regret the savage existence where a small number of hideous crimes have to be balanced against the lack of organized oppression and of injustice sanctioned by positive laws, is that in actual fact civilized societies have consecrated the bondage of man by enforcing not natural law, but

[1] Observations sur le Nakaz, ed. cit., p. 401.

[2] See below, p. 233.

an artificial and arbitrary morality and the dominance of small groups of people over the general mass of mankind.

We may sum up the argument put forward in this chapter by saying that Diderot never contests the desirability of a justly ordered society, but condemns only unjust and oppressive social systems. He denies that obedience to just laws and moral principles detracts from the true freedom of man. Indeed, no man is truly free unless he has become the slave of duty. "Il vaut mieux être mort que fripon;" he retorts in a letter to Jean-Jacques, "mais malheur à celui qui vit et qui n'a point de devoir dont il soit esclave!"[1] Many years later, in the Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron, he writes the following imaginary dialogue:

> --Pour être heureux, il faut être libre: le bonheur n'est pas fait pour celui qui a d'autres maîtres que son devoir.
> --Mais le devoir n'est-il pas impérieux? et s'il faut que je serve, qu'importe sous quel maître?
> --Il importe beaucoup: le devoir est un maître dont on ne saurait s'affranchir sans tomber dans le malheur; c'est avec la chaîne du devoir qu'on brise toutes les autres.[2]

[1] Roth, I, 235 (March 14, 1757).

[2] AT, III, 314.

CHAPTER VI

THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

My last three chapters have been concerned with Diderot's plea that morality and the structure of society should be founded on the common nature of mankind, so that the essential needs of men might be satisfied without arbitrary restrictions. I have stressed that this demand for freedom does not apply to men as individuals, but rather as members of a common species, and that the freedom claimed for each member of the social group is limited by the freedom of the other members. However, Diderot is well aware that the nature of each individual combines, on the one hand attributes common to all human beings and, on the other, certain peculiar characteristics. What I now propose to discuss is the degree of freedom which Diderot would accord the individual in the satisfaction of his special needs and the development of his particular potentialities.

Diderot's view of what we might term characterological individuality is founded on his conception of the physical nature of man. Human beings are highly diverse in their general bodily make-up and, what is especially important as regards character, in the structure of their brain and of their "diaphragm", which

Diderot considers to be the centre of a physical system corresponding to emotional sensibility.[1] From these physiological differences there results a great diversity in physical, emotional and intellectual needs and aptitudes, and one would expect that if these needs and aptitudes were not subjected to constraints which tend to produce uniformity, there would be a great range of behaviour and life-styles. But Diderot observes that, within a given social group, men manifest a tedious sameness, in contrast to which he finds any kind of originality refreshing. He loves to portray in his fictional writings characters like Rameau's nephew, who can be relied upon to think and act differently from the next man. We are told that the fatalist Jacques is "un franc original, ce qui arriverait plus souvent parmi les hommes, si l'éducation d'abord, ensuite le grand usage du monde, ne les usaient comme ces pièces d'argent qui, à force de circuler, perdent leur empreinte."[2] This is a favourite image with Diderot. We find it again in the Réfutation d'Helvétius, where Diderot suggests that the great uniformity of spirit and character which foreigners notice in the French is due to their extreme sociability: "ce sont des pièces dont l'empreinte s'est usée par un frottement continu."[3] It may be considered strange that Diderot should decry

[1] Cf. Eléments de physiologie, ed. Mayer, pp. 48 and 138; Réfutation d'Helvétius, AT, II, 333-37 and 365-67.

[2] AT, VI, 192-93.

[3] AT, II, 382.

sociability in this way, since he does not appear to have been troubled by the inaptitude for social relations which made Rousseau's life so wretched. Diderot's letters provide ample evidence of the great enjoyment he found, for example, in the society of the d'Holbach circle. But this contradiction is only apparent. He was, in fact, shy of strangers. He writes to Mme d'Epinay:

> Vous croyez donc que ma sauvagerie est une prétendue sauvagerie; que je n'ai que la peau de l'ours, mais que la personne n'est pas dessous. C'est que vous prenez tous pour un brave celui qui n'est qu'un poltron révolté. Je fais dans l'occasion, comme tout le monde, de nécessité vertu. Mais il n'y a qu'à me regarder dans le premier moment, et l'on verra comment à l'approche d'un inconnu, mes joues tombent et ma huppe se relève. Je suis tout effarouché et j'en ai bien l'air.[1]

The fact is that Diderot really enjoyed social contact only with people whom he knew well enough to be truly himself, who put him at his ease and accepted him for what he was. "Je vous jure," he remarks in the same letter, "que je ne suis nulle part heureux, qu'à la condition de jouir de mon âme, d'être moi, moi tout pur."[2] He was unwilling to undergo those largely unconscious modifications of personality by which people adjust to each other until they all approach what he would have considered to be the same dull common denominator. He was proud of possessing individual characteristics of manners and behaviour which could raise a smile

[1] Roth, VII, 170 (Oct., 1767).

[2] Ibid., p. 171.

from those unused to such deviations from accepted norms. When Garat wrote to him apologizing for having published in the Mercure a somewhat caricatural account of a meeting with the philosopher, Diderot inserted in the text of his Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron a paragraph reassuring the journalist:

> Il y a de la vérité dans le plaisant récit de notre première entrevue; je m'y suis reconnu, et j'ai ri du vernis léger d'ironie poétique qu'il y a répandu, et qui l'a rendu piquant. On sera tenté de me prendre pour une espèce d'original; mais qu'est-ce que cela fait? Est-ce donc un si grand défaut que d'avoir pu conserver, en s'agitant sans cesse dans la société, quelques vestiges de la nature, et de se distinguer par quelques côtes anguleux de la multitude de ces uniformes et plats galets qui foisonnent sur toutes les plages?[1]

To his beloved Sophie he writes:

> Il est vrai que vous êtes un peu baroque; mais c'est que les autres ont eu beau se frotter contre vous, ils n'ont jamais pu émousser tout à fait votre aspérité naturelle, et j'en suis bien aise. J'aime mieux votre surface anguleuse et raboteuse, que le poli maussade et commun de tous ces gens du monde. Au milieu de leur bourdonnement sourd et monotone, si vous jetez un mot dissonant, il frappe et on le remarque.[2]

A different image serves to praise the baroness d'Holbach for similar qualities:

> Cette femme est originale. Elle a des choses très fines, et tout à côté des naïvetés. Peu de monde, mais en revanche rien de cette uniformité si décente et si maussade qui donne à un cercle de femmes du monde l'air d'une douzaine de poupées tirées par des fils d'archal.[3]

[1] AT, III, 392. Garat's pen-portrait is reproduced from the Mercure of Feb. 15, 1779 in AT, I, xxi-xxii.

[2] Roth, III, 265 (Nov. 25, 1760).

[3] Roth, IV, 82 (To Sophie Volland; July 31, 1762).

On learning that Sophie's sister Mme Le Gendre has resolved to acquire social graces, Diderot expresses his disappointment that she should deliberately try to replace her most estimable qualities with superficial charms which would make her indistinguishable from the multitude of well-trained society women:

> Si la résolution qu'elle a prise de s'apprivoiser tient encore, dites-lui de prendre garde de semer des fleurettes sur une belle étoffe pleine et unie. Il faut bien du goût et de l'art pour faire serpenter une guirlande autour d'une colonne sans détruire sa noblesse. Toutes ces petites vertus de société auxquelles elle ne se pliera jamais de bonne grâce ne vont point avec la franchise et la sévérité de son caractère. Madame Le Gendre, mon Uranie, jolie, polie, attentive, prévenante, affable, souriante, souple, révérencieuse? Cela ne se peut. Eh! qu'elle reste comme nature l'a faite: grave, sérieuse, noble et pensante. Nature l'a faite grande et noble; et la voilà qui veut se faire petite et jolie.[1]

In his Essai sur la peinture, Diderot defines true grace as "cette rigoureuse et précise conformité des membres avec la nature de l'action." Quite different is the conventional grace which a dancing master teaches. If the famous Marcel were to find one of his pupils standing in the slouching pose of the classical statue of Antinous, he would insist that the young man adopt an attitude more in keeping with his own pre-conceived rules of deportment:

> . . . lui portant une main sous le menton et l'autre sur les épaules: "Allons donc, grand dadais, lui dirait-il, est-ce qu'on se tient comme cela?" Puis, lui repoussant les genoux avec les siens, et le relevant par-dessous les bras, il ajouterait: "On dirait que

[1] Roth, IV, 95 (To Sophie Volland; Aug. 8, 1762).

> vous êtes de cire, et que vous allez fondre. Allons, nigaud, tendez-moi ce jarret; déployez-moi cette figure; ce nez un peu au vent." Et quand il en aurait fait le plus insipide petit-maître, il commencerait à lui sourire, et à s'applaudir de son ouvrage.[1]

The teacher of deportment here symbolizes the despotism of social pressures, which bring about a break between the deep springs of thought and action in the individual and his actual behaviour, replacing what would be his spontaneous mode of expression by manners modelled on a common pattern, and eventually atrophying the original personality. Diderot disliked the highly stylized type of dancing in vogue in his time and would have preferred a dance which took the form of an imitation of some human activity. He himself, he claims, lacked all aptitude for dancing.[2] But one suspects that this claim may rather have been a symbolic refusal. At any rate, it seems likely that his inability to dance had acquired that value in Diderot's mind. "On apprend à danser à l'ours;" he writes, "mais l'ours qui danse est un animal bien malheureux. On ne m'apprendra jamais à danser."[3]

While the whole of social life exerts this constant pressure towards uniformity, it is in the upbringing of children that the

[1] AT, X, 489.

[2] Réfutation d'Helvétius, AT, II, 333.

[3] Ibid., p. 384.

greatest and most irrevocable damage is done. Children are too strictly regimented, too much trouble is taken to ensure that they are well behaved, according to adult standards, well groomed, always reasonable, never straying from the patterns of expression and conduct acceptable in their parents' social world. Diderot pleads for a freer upbringing, allowing children to develop their originality:

> J'eus le courage de dire hier au soir à Mme Le Gendre qu'elle se donnait bien de la peine pour ne faire de son fils qu'une jolie poupée. Pas trop élever est une maxime qui convient surtout aux garçons. Il faut un peu les abandonner à l'énergie de nature. J'aime qu'ils soient violents, étourdis, capricieux. Une tête ébouriffée me plaît plus qu'une tête bien peignée. Laissons-leur prendre une physionomie qui leur appartienne. Si j'aperçois à travers leurs sottises un trait d'originalité, je suis content. Nos petits ours mal léchés de province me plaisent cent fois plus que tous vos petits épagneuls si curieusement dressés. Quand je vois un enfant qui s'écoute, qui va la tête bien droite, la démarche bien composée, qui craint de déranger un cheveu de sa frisure, un pli de son habit, le père et la mère s'extasient et disent: Le joli enfant que nous avons là! Et moi je dis: Il ne sera jamais qu'un sot.[1]

In a memoir written for Catherine II, Diderot describes the education of the pupils at the Ecole des Cadets, one of the Empress's newly founded educational institutions. Vigorous physical exercises will give the cadets strength of body, courage and a healthy constitution capable of withstanding the rigours of the harsh Russian climate. Their training in the social graces might be considered deficient by people who judge according to

[1] Roth, V, 65 (To Sophie Volland; July 25, 1765).

the standards of fashionable French society. Diderot imagines a conversation between himself and a Parisian "élégant". The French fop doubts whether these young Russians possess "cette politesse qui annonce une jeunesse libéralement élevée et qui plaît même encore lorsqu'elle ne tient pas ce qu'elle promet."[1] The children of the French upper classes, he continues, acquire at an early age the grace and politeness of high society because, instead of being kept continually in the company of their tutors and of companions of their own age, they are introduced early in life to fashionable circles. Their parents instil in them the desire to create a pleasing impression, and they model themselves on the adults who surround them. The Russian cadets, on the other hand, brought up in the rough-and-tumble of their classmates' company, with little opportunity to observe the social behaviour of polite adults, cannot fail to exhibit a rustic gaiety lacking all finesse; they will inevitably rush around like young animals, with loud voices and a bold manner, except when, in unfamiliar company, they become stupidly shy. Diderot, casting himself in the role of a Russian Spartan, retorts to the inhabitant of the new Athens that any disadvantages which the cadets' upbringing may have as regards their adaptation to the demands of polite society are more than compensated by the preservation of their originality:

> Chez nous, Athénien, mon ami, on ne veut pas que les enfants soient polis et maniérés comme tes poupées; et tu crois qu'un homme qui a conservé un peu du goût

[1] Mémoires pour Catherine II, ed. Vernière, p. 215.

> de la véritable nature n'aime pas mieux la franchise, la liberté, les sauts, les cris, l'impétuosité, les tiraillements de ces espèces de petits sauvages-là que les révérences cadencées, les pieds portés en avant ou retirés en arrière de tes insipides petits mannequins? Mets tes jolis précieux marmots dans des boîtes. Les nôtres ne sont pas faits pour cela. Tu recules à l'aspect de leurs cheveux ébouriffés et de leurs vêtements déchirés. C'est ainsi que j'étais quand j'étais plus jeune, et c'est ainsi que je plaisais, même aux femmes et aux filles de ma province. Elles m'aimaient mieux débraillé, sans chapeau, quelquefois sans chaussure, en veste et pieds nus, moi, fils d'un forgeron, que ce petit monsieur bien vêtu, bien poudré, bien frisé, tiré à quatre épingles, le fils de madame la présidente du bailliage; parce que mes bonnes provinciales avaient de la raison, de la simplicité, et un goût naturel pour la santé, pour la liberté, pour les qualités vraiment estimables. Elles voyaient que deux polissons comme moi, lâchés sur une douzaine de petits présidents en miniature, les auraient mis en déroute. Elles voyaient à ma boutonnière la marque de mes progrès dans les études, et un enfant qui montrait son âme par un mot net et franc, et qui savait mieux donner un coup de poing que faire une révérence, leur plaisait plus qu'un mol, lâche, faux et efféminé petit flagorneur. Ce que tu cultives si soigneusement dans tes petits enfants, les nôtres l'apprendront en deux ans dans le monde, avec cette différence que leurs premières années auront été mieux employées, et qu'ils conserveront à jamais l'empreinte de leur originalité propre. Tous vos petits enfants semblent avoir été fondus dans le même joli moule. Nous voulons que les nôtres, sortis divers des mains de la nature, restent divers. Tu prépares des modèles à Boucher, nous en préparons à Van Dyck. Tu élèves des courtisans, nous élevons, nous, des magistrats et des soldats. Fais comme tu voudras, mais ne dédaigne pas sottement ce que les autres font. Tu as ton but et ils en ont un autre, ou plutôt tu n'en as point et ils en ont un. Tu veux avoir des agréables, et ils veulent, eux, avoir des hommes.[1]

Diderot blames not only the usual training in manners, but also the intellectual education given to children in the colleges in his day. This education was based very largely on the study

[1] Mémoires pour Catherine II, ed. Vernière, pp. 216-17.

of Latin. Although himself an excellent Latinist, he considered the almost exclusive study of this ancient tongue to be quite unsuited to the needs and aptitudes of the majority of pupils. They not only failed to reap the benefits this training could offer to the very few who were fitted for it, but whatever natural aptitudes they may have possessed remained undeveloped and atrophied.[1]

It was Helvétius's contention that the way children turn out is entirely the responsibility of their teacher, who has the power, provided he has the required knowledge of his subject and of the pedagogical art, to make of his pupils what he will. To this Diderot replies:

> Je ne connais pas de système plus consolant pour les parents et plus encourageant pour les maîtres. Voilà son avantage. Mais je n'en connais pas de plus désolant pour les enfants qu'on croit également propres à tout; de plus capable de remplir les conditions de la société d'hommes médiocres, et d'égarer le génie qui ne fait bien qu'une chose; ni de plus dangereux par l'opiniâtreté qu'il doit inspirer à des supérieurs qui, après avoir appliqué longtemps et sans fruit une classe d'élèves à des objets pour lesquels ils n'avaient aucune disposition naturelle, les rejetteront dans le monde où ils ne seront plus bons à rien. On ne donne pas du nez à un lévrier, on ne donne pas la vitesse du lévrier à un chien-couchant; vous aurez beau faire, celui-ci gardera son nez, et celui-là gardera ses jambes.[2]

True education is quite a different matter:

> En quoi consiste donc l'importance de l'éducation? Ce n'est point du tout de faire du premier enfant

[1] Plan d'une université pour le gouvernement de la Russie, AT, III, 469-73, 485.

[2] Réfutation d'Helvétius, AT, II, 277.

> communément bien organisé ce qu'il plaît à ses parents d'en faire, mais de l'appliquer constamment à la chose à laquelle il est propre: à l'érudition, s'il est doué d'une grande mémoire; à la géométrie, s'il combine facilement des nombres et des espaces; à la poésie, si on lui reconnaît de la chaleur et de l'imagination; et ainsi des autres sciences: et que le premier chapitre d'un bon traité d'éducation doit être de la manière de connaître les dispositions naturelles de l'enfant.[1]

This refusal of Diderot's to believe with Helvétius that all men are basically the same and that they become what they are, both morally and intellectually, through the sole agency of environmental influences, is more than a disagreement on a point of psychological theory. For Helvétius, this doctrine makes possible a shining hope for the future happiness of the human race: only if one believes that there are in men no ineradicable tendencies militating against the eventual triumph of knowledge and goodness can one have faith that the application of scientific knowledge to the relations between man and his environment and between man and man will some day put an end to ignorance and injustice. Helvétius places his trust in enlightened rulers possessing sufficient knowledge of human psychology and of the art of managing and manipulating men to be able to direct them of necessity to virtuous social behaviour, and thus to happiness. Diderot agrees that an appropriate system of education and legislation would be the best means of improving the general standard of morality, but he denies that original individual dispositions could ever be completely eliminated, and asserts that, even in

[1] Ibid., AT, II, 374-75.

the best organized state, there would always be a certain number of persistently maleficent individuals, just as there will always be some men whose altruism exceeds the duties imposed by laws and social pressures.[1] Diderot seems to suspect that Helvétius's theory might be used to provide a specious pretext for all the kinds of despotism, political, social and educational, which he deplores. He feels also that the attempt to obliterate individual differences would mean a great loss of human potential both for intellectual and artistic achievement and for moral excellence.

The plea that social pressures should not be allowed to destroy individual differences has led some critics to see in Diderot a fundamental contradiction between the importance he attaches to individuality and the social ethic which he so often proclaims. Pierre Hermand expresses this critical position as follows:

> . . . nous n'essayerons pas de nier la contrariété qui existe, irréductible, nous semble-t-il, entre l'individualisme de Diderot et une morale qui sera essentiellement sociale: l'existence même et le maintien de la société ne sont-ils pas liés à ce conformisme, -- résultat de l'éducation et des multiples contraintes collectives, -- à tout cela contre quoi s'insurge Diderot?[2]

[1] Cf. Réfutation d'Helvétius, AT, II, 314-15.

[2] Op. cit., p. 116.

But this judgment is by no means as incontrovertible as Hermand imagines. Diderot does not claim that the original dispositions of the individual should be allowed to develop in an environmental vacuum; indeed, he realizes that this is inconceivable. In Le Neveu de Rameau, both Lui and Moi[1] agree that some kind of moral education is necessary, since it is impossible for man, a social animal, to subsist, either individually or as a member of a group, if the basic physical drives, as they grow more powerful with physical maturity, are not tempered by the development of reason. This is the meaning of Moi's remark regarding Lui's young son:

> Si le petit sauvage était abandonné à lui-même, qu'il conservât toute son imbécillité et qu'il réunît au peu de raison de l'enfant au berceau la violence des passions de l'homme de trente ans, il tordrait le cou à son père et coucherait avec sa mère.[2]

The best form of moral education, as Diderot conceives it, involves placing the child in an environment in which he is obliged by the realities of social relations to temper his own spontaneous impulses in order to obtain the maximum satisfaction compatible

[1] Some explanation is perhaps required regarding my use of the names Lui and Moi. Le Neveu de Rameau takes the form essentially of an interview between Jean-François Rameau, nephew of the composer Jean-Philippe Rameau, and a narrator, whom numerous details invite us to identify with the author. In the dialogue portions of the work, the speakers are designated by the pronouns "Lui" and "Moi". I prefer to use the word Moi, rather than to refer to Diderot by name, since I wish to avoid giving the impression that the remarks addressed to Rameau are necessarily to be taken as the author's true opinions. Although I do not accept the view that Moi represents a self-caricature of certain hypocritically conformist tendencies which Diderot discerns in himself (cf. Doolittle, op. cit., passim.), I readily admit that there is a degree of differentiation, deliberate, I think, between the image of himself which Diderot offers us in Moi and the image which, from our total knowledge of him, we may suppose that he considered himself to present sub specie aeternitatis.

[2] AT, V, 474.

with his continued integration in the social group. On this point Lui differs from Moi only in his contention that moral education should teach the child to adapt to the corrupt society which actually exists, whereas Moi holds that it is preferable for children to be brought up in a social and moral environment which fits them less for the existing state of society than for an ideal society in which men would cooperate in the pursuit of their common welfare.[1] In reacting against the stereotyping of character, Diderot does not mean to suggest that no restraints should be placed on basic human urges. The Russian cadets, for example, receive a large part of their moral education from the social relationships in which they interact with their fellow-cadets on a footing of equality, a better school for virtue than the hierarchical adult society into which the young Parisians are early introduced and which provides such excellent training in flattery and deceit.

The question whether Diderot's "individualism" conflicts with his social ethic cannot, however, be decided solely by referring to the texts quoted so far in this chapter, texts in which Diderot criticizes the artificial uniformity of manners and

[1] Cf. AT, V, 471-73.

character imposed by social pressures. Other critics have voiced an opinion similar to that of Hermand, but in a more extreme form, quoting as evidence various passages in which Diderot expresses admiration for individuals who have preserved the original energy of their nature, even when their conduct is anti-social. The following remarks of Jean Fabre are a good example of this approach:

> Pour se rassurer, plus encore que par goût du paradoxe, [Diderot] cherche volontiers à justifier, sur le plan de la moralité, son admiration pour les grandes âmes, même criminelles: le spectacle de l'énergie est toujours salutaire, même dans le mal (Cf. Salon de 1765, AT, X, 342: "Je ne hais pas les grands crimes . . ."; Salon de 1767, AT, XI, 118; Article "Laideur", AT, XV, 410, etc.) La haine de la médiocrité le pousse jusqu'à esquisser une apologie du crime: ne sont méprisables que ces hommes -- la majorité hélas! -- dans lesquels "il n'y a pas assez d'étoffe, ni pour faire un honnête homme, ni pour faire un fripon." "Si les méchants n'avaient pas cette énergie dans le crime, les bons n'auraient pas la même énergie dans la vertu." Tarquin garantit Scaevola, et Damiens Regulus. . . . Les scrupules moraux ne tiennent guère devant l'esthétique et cette considération de l'unité, essentielle à la définition du Beau. "Vous le savez, vous, ma Sophie, vous le savez, vous, mon amie. Un tout est beau lorsqu'il est un; en ce sens Cromwell est beau, et Scipion aussi, et Médée, et Aria, et César, et Brutus. . . ." (10 août 1759)[1]

More recently, David Funt has contended, in a similar vein, that in Diderot

> there is a conventional morality, founded upon the restraint of conventional rules and maxims, both legal and polite. . . . There is also a more fundamental or natural morality, as illustrated in the Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville. . . . The acquired morality of

[1] Edition of Le Neveu de Rameau, pp. 213-14. The references are Fabre's.

> conventions is transcended by the morality founded on the integrity of the person and its uninhibited expression, a morality in which, Diderot sometimes suggests, even the great criminal may participate. "L'atrocité de l'action vous porte au-delà du mépris," claims the nephew of Rameau (AT, V, 457). It is this morality of integrity to which is opposed the hypocritical, i.e. that which is in internal conflict with itself, hence inhibited, and which gives rise only to petty ideas and petty acts, whether it be a question of petty virtues or petty crimes. "On prise en tout l'unité de caractère," says the nephew again (AT, V, 453).[1]

These remarks of Fabre and Funt are rather imprecise and ambiguous,[2] but their implication seems to be that Diderot considered as the highest ideal for human conduct not social cooperation but the vigorous and uninhibited deployment of the original forces of the individual nature. His ideal world would thus presumably be caracterized by agressive competition between individuals for survival and domination. Such interpretations are, I think, erroneous. The scholars who have proposed them have probably been deceived by Diderot's predilection for paradoxical forms of expression. I shall attempt to show in the remaining part of this chapter that a careful analysis of Diderot's text does not bear out the charge that he at times subscribes to an immoralistic ethic of individual efficacy running counter to his social ethic.

[1] "On the conception of the 'vicieux' in Diderot", in Diderot Studies, X, 1968, pp. 58-59.

[2] E.g. Fabre's comment, "Les scrupules moraux ne tiennent guère devant l'esthétique . . . ," and Funt's use of the words "transcended" and "participate".

In many of the passages which are frequently mentioned as instances of such an ethic of individual efficacy, Diderot's real concern seems to be related to the simultaneous presence of both good and evil in the world. It will be convenient first to examine certain texts in which he deals with the presence of both good and evil in the same individual, and then to consider other passages in which he refers instead to the occurence of good and evil separately, in different individuals.

In one of the letters to Sophie Volland, the discussion is centred on Lovelace, hero of Richardson's novel Clarissa. It appears from Diderot's remarks that Sophie and her sister Mme Le Gendre reacted to Lovelace by wishing him to be destroyed as an evil being. Diderot counters by declaring that the ladies have been too hasty in weighing up the balance of good and evil in Clarissa's seducer; all is not evil in Lovelace's character:

> C'est que ce Lovelace est d'une figure charmante, qui vous plaît comme à tout le monde, et que vous en avez dans l'esprit une image qui vous séduit; c'est qu'il a de l'élévation dans l'âme, de l'éducation, des connaissances, tous les talents agréables, de la légèreté, de la force, du courage; c'est qu'il n'y a rien de vil dans sa scélératesse; c'est qu'il vous est impossible de le mépriser; c'est que vous préféreriez mourir Lovelace, de la main du capitaine Morden, à vivre Solmes; c'est qu'à tout prendre, nous aimons mieux un être moitié bon moitié mauvais, qu'un être indifférent. Nous espérons de notre bonheur ou de notre adresse d'esquiver à sa malice et de profiter dans l'occasion de sa bonté. Croyez-vous que quelqu'un sous le ciel eût osé impunément faire souffrir à Clarisse la centième partie des injures que Lovelace lui fait? C'est quelque chose qu'un persécuteur qui,

> en même temps qu'il nous tourmente, nous protège contre tout ce qui vous environne et nous menace. Et puis, c'est que vous avez un pressentiment que cet homme, qui s'est endurci pour une autre, se serait adouci pour vous.[1]

As is frequently the case when Diderot poses moral problems for Sophie and her sister, his aim is to amuse and tease them and also, probably, to criticize the conventionality of their moral attitudes. The serious point which emerges, however, from his remarks in the letter under discussion is that Lovelace is only a particularly striking example of the general truth that good and evil are intermingled in human nature, and that therefore it is often a very difficult matter to decide whether there is more good or more evil in an individual. Diderot in no way denies the immorality of Lovelace's conduct towards Clarissa; nor does he suggest that the many admirable qualities which the charming scoundrel possesses exonerate him for his wickedness. Rather Diderot contests the conventional tendency to classify individuals as either all good or all bad.

The problem of the correct attitude to take towards characters in which good and evil qualities are found concomitantly is also Diderot's main concern in the well-known passage from Le Neveu de Rameau where Lui and Moi discuss men of genius who manifest moral defects in their private lives. According to Lui, such men, apart from the single field of activity in which they excel, are good

[1] Roth, III, 317-18 (Sept. 28, 1761).

for nothing: "ils ne savent ce que c'est que d'être citoyens, pères, mères, parents, amis."[1] Thus, continues Lui, it is in the interest of any individual to resemble them as far as possible, but not to wish them to be common. Moi concedes that men of genius are often maleficent in their private lives, but argues that they are beneficent through their achievements. When one weighs the benefits and disadvantages which such men bring to mankind, one must conclude that the good they do greatly exceeds the evil. He takes as an example Racine:

> Mais Racine? Celui-là certes avait du génie, et ne passait pas pour un trop bon homme. . . . Lequel des deux préféreriez-vous? ou qu'il eût été un bon homme, identifié avec son comptoir, comme Briasson, ou avec son aune, comme Barbier, faisant régulièrement tous les ans un enfant légitime à sa femme, bon mari, bon père, bon oncle, bon voisin, honnête commerçant, mais rien de plus; ou qu'il eût été fourbe, traître, ambitieux, envieux, méchant, mais auteur d'Andromaque, de Britannicus, d'Iphigénie, de Phèdre, d'Athalie? . . . Pesez le mal et le bien. Dans mille ans d'ici, il fera verser des larmes; il sera l'admiration des hommes, dans toutes les contrées de la terre. Il inspirera l'humanité, la commisération, la tendresse. On demandera qui il était, de quel pays, et on l'enviera à la France. Il a fait souffrir quelques êtres qui ne sont plus, auxquels nous ne prenons presque aucun intérêt; nous n'avons rien à redouter ni de ses vices, ni de ses défauts. Il eût été mieux sans doute qu'il eût reçu de la nature la vertu d'un homme de bien avec les talents d'un grand homme. C'est un arbre qui a fait sécher quelques arbres plantés dans son voisinage, qui a étouffé les plantes qui croissaient à ses pieds; mais il a porté sa cime jusque dans la nue, ses branches se sont étendues au loin; il a prêté son ombre à ceux qui venaient, qui viennent et qui viendront se reposer autour de son tronc majestueux; il a produit des fruits d'un goût exquis, et qui se renouvellent sans cesse.[2]

[1] AT, V, 392.

[2] AT, V, 395-97.

In order to judge, therefore, whether mankind is better or worse off for the existence of men of genius whose private conduct is wicked, we must take a long-term view:

> . . . oublions pour un moment le point que nous occupons dans l'espace et dans la durée; et étendons notre vue sur les siècles à venir, les régions les plus éloignées et les peuples à naître. Songeons au bien de notre espèce; si nous ne sommes point assez généreux, pardonnons au moins à la nature d'avoir été plus sage que nous.[1]

As in the case of Lovelace, Diderot-Moi does not deny that Racine's private conduct was maleficent; he claims, however, that the total effect of Racine's acts for mankind as a whole is overwhelmingly beneficial. The question here raised is not that of the moral judgment to be passed on particular acts, but rather whether one is justified in criticizing a natural order in which good and evil are often inextricably mingled, in this case in the same being. Moi believes, it is true, that one can find examples of the genius who is free from notable moral defects; it is clear, nevertheless, from his comments on Voltaire and Greuze that he recognizes a certain correlation between moral deficiency and genius. Voltaire's sensitivity to criticism arises from the same psychological source as the artistic sensibility which enables him to create the characters of his tragedies. Similarly, Greuze's vanity has the same origin as the enthusiasm which accounts for his talent as a painter:

> Si vous jetez de l'eau froide sur la tête de Greuze, vous éteindrez peut-être son talent avec sa vanité.

[1] AT, V, 397.

> Si vous rendez de Voltaire moins sensible à la critique, il ne saura plus descendre dans l'âme de Mérope, il ne vous touchera plus.[1]

The cases of Lovelace and Racine concern primarily the presence in the same individual of qualities which are respectively beneficent and maleficent towards others. The Salon de 1767 contains some reflections which, while relating to a similar theme, deal with qualities which are respectively harmful and beneficial to the individual who possesses them. Here too it was Diderot's belief that Nature tends to balance good qualities with bad. Reflecting on the kind of personal character which brings its possessor happiness, Diderot contrasts the balance, the lack of strong passions, the mediocrity, which shield a man equally from blame and envy with, on the other hand, the tendency to fly to extremes, the strong passions, the acute sensibility, which result in a mixture of exaltation and unhappiness. But why is it, he asks, that, for all the apparent or real disadvantages of sensibility, no one would willingly give up his share of it and become mediocre? He takes as examples of mediocrity and sensibility two contrasting characters from Piron's comedy La Métromanie. M. Baliveau, a rich bourgeois, is eager for the solid advantages afforded by wealth, bent on exercising a petty tyranny over those near him, and totally devoid of idealism. His nephew Damis, on the other hand, who has adopted the significant pseudonym of M. de l'Empirée, lives above his means, neglects his law studies,

[1] AT, V, 397.

but is generous and sets no value on money for its own sake or for its material advantages; his eyes are fixed on literary fame; in his personal relations he is honorable and kind. While his uncle is scheming to have him imprisoned, the young man contrives to overcome the obstacles impeding the happy marriage of his friend Dorante.[1] Diderot comments as follows:

> Heureux, cent fois heureux, . . . M. Baliveau, capitoul de Toulouse! c'est M. Baliveau, qui boit bien, qui mange bien, qui digère bien, qui dort bien. C'est lui qui prend son café le matin, qui fait la police au marché, qui pérore dans sa petite famille, qui arrondit sa fortune, qui prêche à ses enfants la fortune; qui vend à temps son avoine et son blé; qui garde dans son cellier ses vins, jusqu'à ce que la gelée des vignes en ait amené la cherté; qui sait placer sûrement ses fonds; qui se vante de n'avoir jamais été enveloppé dans aucune faillite; qui vit ignoré; et pour qui le bonheur inutilement envié d'Horace, le bonheur de mourir ignoré fut fait. M. Baliveau est un homme fait pour son bonheur et pour le malheur des autres. Son neveu, M. de l'Empirée, tout au contraire.[2]

I think it will be clear from the three passages which I have cited so far that Diderot does not wish to question the validity of an ethic of beneficence or to propose new and unorthodox criteria for judging particular actions. His meditation has quite another object. The problem he examines is whether one should criticize the natural order for producing evil alongside of good. Moi, in Le Neveu de Rameau, defends not the evil that

[1] I base this description of the two characters on the text of Piron's play, to which one must, I think, return in order to understand what Baliveau and M. de l'Empirée represent for Diderot. For an example of a misinterpretation of Baliveau, see Seillière, op. cit., pp. 264-65.

[2] Salon de 1767, AT, XI, 126.

men of genius do in their private lives, but rather Nature for creating this mixture of good and evil in them. I think it unnecessary here to examine in detail the arguments put forward by Lui and Moi with respect to the simultaneous presence of good and evil in the world and in man. Moi's final conclusion -- and, I think, that of the author -- is that it is unreasonable to pass a value judgment on the actual order of the universe since it is the only possible order:

> Acceptons donc les choses comme elles sont. Voyons ce qu'elles nous coûtent, et ce qu'elles nous rendent, et laissons là le tout que nous ne connaissons pas assez pour le louer ou le blâmer, et qui n'est peut-être ni bien ni mal, s'il est nécessaire, comme beaucoup d'honnêtes gens l'imaginent.[1]

So far we have considered passages in which Diderot reflects on the coexistence of good and evil in the same individual. There are, however, several important passages, relating to a similar theme, but which illustrate his concern with the presence of both good and evil in the human race when they occur separately, in different individuals. Here too we shall see that the main object of Diderot's enquiry is to determine whether one should criticize the natural order which has brought about this state of affairs.

His answer to this last question emerges most clearly from a letter to Sophie Volland:

[1] AT, V, 398.

> Si les méchants n'avaient pas cette énergie dans le crime, les bons n'auraient pas la même énergie dans la vertu. Si l'homme affaibli ne peut plus se porter aux grands maux, il ne pourra plus se porter aux grands biens. En cherchant à l'amender d'un côté, vous le dégraderez de l'autre. Si Tarquin n'ose violer Lucrèce, Scoevola ne tiendra pas son poignet sur un brasier ardent. Cela est singulier; on est en général assez mécontent des choses, et l'on n'y toucherait pas sans les empirer.[1]

The reference to amending human nature means here, I think, imagining it in an improved form. Diderot never doubted the advisability of taking practical measures to ameliorate the actual conduct of individuals. He may have gone so far as to question the desirability of a type of education which so weakened the fibre of human nature as to render men incapable of either great crimes or of great heroism; but he never suggests that society should cease to apply laws and to enforce them by punishing wrong-doers. Although the passage I have quoted is immediately preceded by the remark "Je ne puis m'empêcher d'admirer la nature humaine, même quelquefois quand elle est atroce," I do not think this implies moral approval of crime on Diderot's part. It is, however, easy to see how the paradoxical form of such a remark might be misleading. I shall have more to say presently about this admiration of Diderot's for energy in crime.

The following passage also deals with the theme of the presence of good and evil in different individuals and proposes

[1] Roth, III, 98 (Sept. 30, 1760). Henri Lefebvre, having quoted this passage, exclaims: "On croit rêver; où donc est passé le moraliste? En bonne forme, voilà un très beau plaidoyer pour les méchants." (Op. cit., p. 229.)

a similar account of the interdependence of these moral opposites:

> . . . c'est que les grandes et sublimes actions et les grands crimes portent le même caractère d'énergie. Si un homme n'était pas capable d'incendier une ville, un autre homme ne serait pas capable de se précipiter dans un gouffre pour la sauver. Si l'âme de César n'eût pas été possible, celle de Caton ne l'aurait pas été davantage. L'homme est né citoyen tantôt du Ténare, tantôt de l'Olympe; c'est Castor et Pollux; un héros, un scélérat; Marc-Aurèle, Borgia: *diversis studiis ovo prognatus eodem*.[1]

Once again, like that previously quoted, this passage is immediately preceded by a startlingly paradoxical remark: "Je hais toutes ces petites bassesses qui ne montrent qu'une âme abjecte, mais je ne hais pas les grands crimes . . . ." Here too there is not, I think, any implication of moral approval of great crimes, any belief that the great criminal transcends common humanity to such a degree that he earns the right to be judged by a different moral law. Diderot is merely pointing out that if one wishes the natural order to produce heroes, one has to accept having great villains as well; we need not approve of them, but we must reconcile ourselves to an order of things in which they inevitably exist. With regard to the presence of good and evil in different individuals, Diderot's point is, in fact, much the same as the one he makes with regard to the concomitance of

[1] *Salon de 1765*, AT, X, 342. Diderot alludes to the legend of Manlius Curtius, who plunged on horseback into an abyss in order to save the city of Rome. Presumably the man who burned the city is Nero. The twin brothers Castor and Pollux, born from Leda's egg, were respectively mortal and immortal.

good and evil in the same individual. He does not propose that we should judge the evil personal qualities of certain men of genius or the maleficent energy of great criminals according to a different moral standard from that which is applied to ordinary men. Diderot is concerned with the universal scheme of things, and concludes that it makes no sense to pass value judgments on human nature as a whole; one must accept it, as one must accept the fundamental order of the universe.

As a final example of Diderot's reflections on a world order in which heroes and great criminals exist side by side, let us examine his remarks on Damiens, the would-be assassin of Louis XV:

> Qu'il y ait eu parmi nous un homme qui ait osé attenter à la vie de son souverain; qu'il ait été pris; qu'on l'ait condamné à être déchiré avec des ongles de fer, arrosé d'un métal bouillant, trempé dans le bitume enflammé, étendu sur un chevalet, démembré par des chevaux; qu'on lui ait lu cette sentence terrible, et qu'après l'avoir entendue, il ait dit froidement: "La journée sera rude"; à l'instant j'imagine aussi qu'il respire à côté de moi une âme de la trempe de celle de Régulus, un homme qui, si quelque grand intérêt, général ou particulier, l'exigeait, entrerait sans pâlir dans le tonneau hérissé de pointes.[1]

I shall have further remarks to make on this passage later. For the moment I wish only to stress that here again Diderot's position is that in the actual order of the world there is an interconnection between the existence of great criminals and great heroes, that one cannot have one without the other.

[1] Roth, III, 141-42 (To Sophie Volland: Oct. 14-15, 1760).

The explanation Diderot gives for the interdependence of good and evil, whether in the physical world, in the same human individuals, or separately in different individuals, is that good and evil have the same origin. He expounds this theory most fully in a note to Le Prosélyte répondant par lui-même (c. 1763):

> J'ai vu de savants systèmes, j'ai vu de gros livres écrits sur l'origine du mal; et je n'ai vu que des rêveries. Le mal tient au bien même; on ne pourrait ôter l'un sans l'autre; et ils ont tous les deux leur source dans les mêmes causes. C'est des lois données à la matière, lesquelles entretiennent le mouvement et la vie dans l'univers, que dérivent les désordres physiques, les volcans, les tremblements de terre, les tempêtes, etc. C'est de la sensibilité, source de tous nos plaisirs, que résulte la douleur. Quant au mal moral, qui n'est autre chose que le vice ou la préférence de soi aux autres, il est un effet nécessaire de cet amour-propre, si essentiel à notre conservation, et contre lequel de faux raisonneurs ont tant déclamé. Pour qu'il n'y ait pas de vices sur la terre, c'est aux législateurs à faire que les hommes n'y trouvent aucun intérêt.[1]

In a second note, Diderot declares that it is inconceivable that a world should exist without evil:

> Je ne sais s'il peut y avoir un système où tout serait bien; mais je sais bien qu'il est impossible de la concevoir. Otez la faim et la soif aux animaux, qu'est-ce qui les avertira de pourvoir à leurs besoins? Otez-leur la douleur, qu'est-ce qui les préviendra sur ce qui menace leur vie? A l'égard de l'homme, toutes ses passions, comme l'a démontré un philosophe de nos jours, ne sont que le développement de la sensibilité physique. Pour faire que l'homme soit sans passions, il n'y a pas d'autre moyen que de le rendre automate. Pope a très bien prouvé, d'après Leibniz, que le monde ne saurait être que ce qu'il est; mais lorsqu'il en a

[1] AT, II, 85, note 1.

> conclu que tout est bien, il a dit une absurdité; il devait se contenter de dire que tout est nécessaire.[1]

With regard to moral evil and human suffering these remarks confirm the ideas of Moi concerning Voltaire and Greuze and those of Diderot regarding the benefits and disadvantages which a M. de l'Empirée derives from the gift of sensibility. The source of moral evil and of moral good is self-love, which is fundamentally the tendency of all organisms to strive to continue their own existence. This self-love is guided by sensibility, which in its origin is a physical phenomenon inseparable from the organism and which in its developed form gives rise to the human passions. In order to refute completely the view that Diderot tended towards immoralistic individualism, it will be necessary to examine in some detail his ideas concerning the passions.

As early as 1746, in the Pensées philosophiques, Diderot declares his preference for strong passions, the first five sections of the work being devoted to this theme. The following selection will give an idea of Diderot's point of view:

[1] Ibid., p. 85, note 2. Assézat identifies the "philosophe de nos jours" as Condillac. Cf. Voltaire's Preface to the Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne of 1755 (Mélanges, Pléiade edition, Paris, 1961, pp. 301-03). All these reflections of Diderot's concerning good and evil in the universe should be seen in the context of the controversy regarding optimism in the decade around 1760.

> On déclame sans fin contre les passions; on leur impute toutes les peines de l'homme, et l'on oublie qu'elles sont aussi la source de tous ses plaisirs. C'est dans sa constitution un élément dont on ne peut dire ni trop de bien ni trop de mal. Mais ce qui me donne de l'humeur, c'est qu'on ne les regarde jamais que du mauvais côté. . . . Cependant il n'y a que les passions, qui puissent élever l'âme aux grandes choses. Sans elles, plus de sublime, soit dans les moeurs, soit dans les ouvrages; les beaux-arts retournent en enfance, et la vertu devient minutieuse. . . . Les passions sobres font les hommes communs. . . . Les passions amorties dégradent les hommes extraordinaires. La contrainte anéantit la grandeur et l'énergie de la nature. Voyez cet arbre; c'est au luxe de ses branches que vous devez la fraîcheur et l'étendue de ses ombres: vous en jouirez jusqu'à ce que l'hiver vienne le dépouiller de sa chevelure. Plus d'excellence en poésie, en peinture, en musique, lorsque la superstition aura fait sur le tempérament l'ouvrage de la vieillesse.[1]

We shall see later that Diderot does insist that in their expression strong passions should be subjected to some form of restraint. But I would like to concentrate for the moment on his preference for strong rather than weak passions. I would not seek to deny that he prefers a world in which there is a mixture of extremes in good and evil to a world in which moral mediocrity is the rule. He prefers the energy which gives rise either to great crimes or to great heroism rather than the moral weakness which makes a man incapable either of marked altruism or of a sufficiently resolute selfishness to act in a decidedly malevolent way. It is in this sense that he hates "toutes ces petites bassesses qui ne montrent qu'une âme abjecte," but does not hate great crimes, because of the quality of energy which, like acts of heroism, they manifest.[2]

[1] AT, I, 127-28.

[2] See above, p. 196. Cf. also the rather similar remark in his letter to Sophie Volland dated Sept. 30, 1760, quoted above, p. 195.

With the "energetic" character, whether good or evil, Diderot contrasts the mediocre man:

> Tenez, mon amie, votre Desmarets n'était bon à rien. Il n'y avait pas assez d'étoffe ni pour faire un honnête homme ni pour faire un fripon. S'il n'est pas encore complètement stupide, cela ne tardera pas à venir. Au reste, un coup d'oeil sur les inconséquences et les contradictions des hommes, et l'on voit que la plupart naissent moitié sots et moitié fous. Sans caractère comme sans physionomie, ils ne sont décidés ni pour le vice ni pour la vertu. Ils ne savent ni immoler les autres ni se sacrifier; et soit qu'ils fassent le bien, soit qu'ils fassent le mal, ils sont malheureux et j'en ai pitié.[1]

It is true, on the other hand, that according to Diderot, it is precisely the mediocre mass of mankind, lacking a pronounced natural disposition either to cooperative or to anti-social behaviour, which can be influenced by education and legislation:

> Il est un phénomène, constant dans la nature, auquel Helvétius n'a pas fait attention, c'est que les âmes fortes sont rares, que la nature ne fait presque que des êtres communs; que c'est la raison pour laquelle les causes morales subjuguent si facilement l'organisation.[2]

It is this fact which justifies our hope for the general improvement of the standard of human morality through the agency of good government and an appropriate educational system. But the kind of virtue, if it deserves the name, which results from careful nurture is not what fills Diderot with enthusiasm or makes him proud to belong to the human race. He is more impressed

[1] Roth, III, 97-98 (To Sophie Volland; Sept. 30, 1760).

[2] Réfutation d'Helvétius, AT, II, 393.

by that virtue which springs spontaneously from the original seed of the individual nature.

Diderot's preference for a world in which all is not mediocrity, but where there are instances of great heroism, inevitably balanced by other instances of great villainy, may no doubt be rejected by some moralists, who consider that a state of harmonious mediocrity would be more conducive to the happiness of society as a whole. I think, however, that much could be said on either side of the question and that it would be wrong to reach the hasty conclusion that Diderot's position is immoralistic. When we consider, for example, all the passages in which Diderot speaks of the concomitance in the natural order of great crimes and great heroism, we find that his attitude toward different types of great criminal varies. For instance, when he contrasts Marcus Aurelius and Borgia, Manlius Curtius and Nero,[1] his attention is concentrated, as regards the villains, on one quality only, their "energy", which here seems to mean the strength of the passions. This quality pleases him, he explains, for two reasons. One is that it provides him with an aesthetically pleasing spectacle: "On en fait de beaux tableaux et de belles tragédies." The other reason is that the existence in some men of violent passions directed toward evil affords an

[1] See above, p. 196.

[2] Salon de 1765, AT, X, 342.

assurance that there exist in other men equally strong passions directed toward good. I do not think one can suppose that Diderot has any actual moral admiration for a Nero or a Borgia, in the sense that he would like to resemble them. In other cases, however, it seems that he feels a true moral admiration for at least certain aspects of the character of a criminal. He admires, for instance, Damiens's courage in the face of his terrible sentence. Such admiration does not denote immoralism. Diderot himself clarifies in the following passage the distinction between approval of criminal ends and admiration for the intellectual or psychological qualities which are deployed in their pursuit:

> Une seule chose peut nous rapprocher du méchant; c'est la grandeur de ses vues, l'étendue de son génie, le péril de son entreprise. Alors, si nous oublions sa méchanceté pour courir son sort; si nous conjurons contre Venise avec le comte de Bedmar, c'est la vertu qui nous subjugue encore sous une autre face.[1]

In this context we must, in my view, take the word "vertu" to mean something different from justice, which is the way Diderot, true to his social ethic, usually defines it. Here it has a meaning closer to its etymological sense and refers to whatever qualities are considered desirable in a man. This meaning is broader than that of beneficence or justice, for it includes also the intellectual and psychological characteristics which make a man efficient in carrying out his designs. In short, the word refers to qualities which, from the point of view of social morality, are neutral. My interpretation is confirmed, I think,

[1] Salon de 1767, AT, XI, 118.

by a closely parallel passage in the article "Laideur":

> Une chose est belle ou laide sous deux aspects différents. La conspiration de Venise dans son commencement, ses progrès et ses moyens nous fait écrier: Quel homme que le comte de Bedmar! qu'il est grand! La même conspiration sous les points de vue moraux et relatifs à l'humanité et à la justice nous fait dire qu'elle est atroce, et que le comte de Bedmar est hideux![1]

Diderot's conception of what is admirable in human character is complicated by the fact that at times he appeals to the principle of unity of character. In a letter to Sophie Volland, he remarks:

> Un tout est beau lorsqu'il est un. En ce sens, Cromwell est beau, et Scipion aussi, et Médée, et Aria, et César, et Brutus.[2]

This principle of unity, however, is rather different from the principle on which is founded Diderot's admiration for Damiens or the comte de Bedmar. In such men Diderot finds qualities which he would like to possess; but it is clear from certain portraits in <u>Le Neveu de Rameau</u> that he would not feel this way about all characters possessing unity. Such unity may be found in weak as well as in strong characters, in base souls as well as in noble ones, a fact which is illustrated by Bouret and Palissot, in whom Rameau's nephew finds a unity of character of which he himself falls short. Their perfection in baseness may possibly be the

[1] AT, XV, 410.

[2] Roth, II, 208 (Aug. 11, 1759).

source of a certain aesthetic pleasure for the observer, but, if one can speak at all of their inspiring admiration, it is certainly not the sort of admiration with which Damiens's courage fills Diderot, reminding him as it does of the courage of a Regulus.

We remember that Rameau, having failed to elicit from Moi anything other than amused contempt for Palissot and Bouret, tries again with his anecdote concerning the renegade of Avignon.[1] The scoundrel in question gains the confidence of a rich Jew, still privately practising his religion, and pretends to be converted to Judaism; whence the appelation "renegade". After some time has elapsed, he secretly denounces the Jew to the Inquisition and makes off with his fortune on the pretext of keeping it safe from the authorities. Meanwhile the Jew is burned at the stake. The main difference between the case of the renegade and those of Palissot and Bouret is that his act is infinitely more heinous. He is an example of those extremes in vice which give Diderot the assurance that there will exist in other men equal extremes of virtue, whereas Bouret and Palissot partake rather of the mediocrity of a Desmarets. However, we are not tempted to identify ourselves with the renegade. The only quality which we might perhaps wish to possess in equal measure is his intelligence; but even this we class rather as guile and have little sympathy with it. One would not, in the case of the renegade, speak of "la grandeur de ses vues, l'étendue de son

[1] AT, V, 454-56.

génie", as Diderot does with regard to the comte de Bedmar. As for courage, there is no evidence that the renegade possesses any. He has worked out such a clever plan that he does not need to be courageous. It may be possible to derive a certain aesthetic pleasure from contemplating the unfolding of his nefarious scheme, just as one might from observing a series of clever chess moves; the degree of his wickedness may well astonish one; but there is no question, either for Diderot or for his reader, of feeling a positive attraction for the qualities of his personality. It is true, admittedly, that, in the following remarks, Diderot lends Lui, as so often throughout the dialogue, certain of his own ideas:

> S'il importe d'être sublime en quelques genres, c'est surtout en mal. On crache sur le petit filou, mais on ne peut refuser une sorte de considération à un grand criminel: son courage vous étonne, son atrocité vous fait frémir. On prise en tout l'unité de caractère.[1]

All these ideas are Diderot's own, and I think that he would have been ready to defend them as compatible with his belief in beneficence. But Lui parts company with the author when he illustrates these principles by the example of the renegade in such a way as to imply that moral considerations are irrelevant to the case. Apart from the fact that the renegade lacks the "sublime" qualities of a Damiens, Lui's approach is unacceptable to Moi because it is an attempt to substitute aesthetic judgments for moral ones in a case where the latter seem of infinitely greater importance to a man of virtue.

[1] AT, V, 453.

Lui's tactics in the dialogue are largely dictated by his desire to attain in the philosopher's eyes a significance which will raise him above mere contempt. To this end he presents himself as an artist in flattery and in the manipulation of people. Admitting, however, that he himself falls short of perfection in baseness and immorality, he attempts to gain at least Moi's recognition of the excellence of other more consummate examples. For a while Moi is amused, but on hearing the anecdote of the renegade his amusement gives way to horror:

> Je commençais à supporter avec peine la présence d'un homme qui discutait une action horrible, un exécrable forfait, comme un connaisseur en peinture ou en poésie examine les beautés d'un ouvrage de goût, ou comme un moraliste ou un historien relève et fait éclater les circonstances d'une action héroïque.[1]

This is precisely the reaction Lui was hoping to elicit from Moi. The latter's horror is proof that he no longer sees Lui as merely a despicable nonentity. Surely, in the eyes of the reader too, Lui arouses a more positive feeling than mere contempt; but this does not mean that the reader is thereby an immoralist at heart, or that he approves morally of the Nephew's character or conduct.

If "energy", for Diderot, is not to be equated simply with unity of character, what meaning does he give the term? It might be supposed, since he often expresses his approval of strong

[1] AT, V, 457.

passions, that "energy" consists of their uninhibited expression. Yet it seems that there is a difference between his attitude to a Nero and to a Damiens or a comte de Bedmar. The answer, I believe, is that Diderot conceives of a type of energy which is more admirable than the unrestrained discharge of passion. It is a controlled energy, resulting from a certain equilibrium in the personality, which renders the individual not only more efficient in acting upon the exterior world, but also more self-sufficient, more independent of circumstances. Thus Diderot admires Damiens because he is capable of submitting to the most terrible fate without being dismayed.

Early in his career, Diderot seems to look to a balance between opposing passions to achieve the coordination which results in this inner strength:

> Ce serait donc un bonheur, me dira-t-on, d'avoir les passions fortes. Oui, sans doute, si toutes sont à l'unisson. Etablissez entre elles une juste harmonie, et n'en appréhendez point de désordres. Si l'espérance est balancée par la crainte, le point d'honneur par l'amour de la vie, le penchant au plaisir par l'intérêt de la santé, vous ne verrez ni libertins, ni téméraires, ni lâches.[1]

This conception is one which Diderot seems to have subsequently discarded. Perhaps he felt that such a balance between opposing

[1] Pensées philosophiques, AT, I, 128. The notion of a balance of opposing passions seems to have been an influential idea among early eighteenth-century moralists. Vernière observes in a note on this passage (Oeuvres philsophiques, p. 11, note 2) that Diderot may well have been influenced on this point by the Nouveaux dialogues (1711) of Rémond de Saint-Mard, who, with his brother Rémond le Grec, author of a Dialogue de la volupté (1736), was a well known apologist of the passions.

forces might result in personalities marked by chronic indecison or by that moral mediocrity which he detested. Furthermore, at least one of the motives which he lists, namely the need or desire to conserve one's health, is rarely a passion. It is more accurately described as a rational motive. In mentioning it, Diderot allows another conception of the control of the passions to intervene, one which he develops fully in later writings, where he appeals to a regulating force superior to the passions and of a different nature, namely the will, conceived as the executive agent of the reason. He thus reverts to the position of Descartes in the Traité des passions. The following passage from the section of that work entitled "En quoi on connaît la force ou la faiblesse des âmes" is particularly interesting in this respect, since here Descartes specifically states his preference for the regulation of the passions by reason rather than by other passions:

> C'est par le succès de ces combats que chacun peut connaître la force ou la faiblesse de son âme; car ceux en qui naturellement la volonté peut le plus aisément vaincre les passions et arrêter les mouvements du corps qui les accompagnent ont sans doute les âmes les plus fortes; mais il y en a qui ne peuvent jamais éprouver leur force, parce qu'ils ne font jamais combattre leur volonté avec ses propres armes, mais seulement avec celles que lui fournissent quelques passions pour résister à quelques autres. Ce que je nomme ses propres armes sont des jugements fermes et déterminés touchant la connaissance du bien et du mal, suivant lesquels elle a résolu de conduire les actions de sa vie; et les âmes les plus faibles de toutes sont celles dont la volonté ne se détermine point ainsi à suivre certains jugements, mais se laisse continuellement emporter aux passions présentes, lesquelles, étant souvent contraires les unes aux autres, la tirent tour à tour à leur parti et, l'employant

> à combattre contre elle-même, mettent l'âme au plus déplorable état qu'elle puisse être.[1]

Probably Diderot's reflections on human physiology, a subject which had interested Descartes too, caused him to feel the inadequacy of a conception of "energy" and human greatness which stressed only the strength of the passions and neglected the idea of a superior moderating force. Bordeu, in Le Rêve de d'Alembert, expounds a theory of the nervous system in which information from the senses is carried along a network of threads to the brain, which in its turn transmits orders through the nerve threads, thus causing actions. The nerve threads are likened to branches and the brain to a trunk. Bordeu explains that there is variation from person to person as to the relative dominance of the trunk or the branches, the character of the person differing accordingly:

> Le principe ou le tronc est-il trop vigoureux relativement aux branches? De là les poètes, les artistes, les gens à imagination, les hommes pusillanimes, les enthousiastes, les fous. Trop faible? De là ce que nous appelons les brutes, les bêtes féroces. Le système entier lâche, mou, sans énergie? De là les imbéciles. Le système entier énergique, bien d'accord, bien ordonné? De là les bons penseurs, les philosophes, les sages.[2]

Clearly we have here a different conception of "energy" from that which would equate it with strong passions. It is broadly true that the passions are here represented by the strength of the

[1] Traité des passions, article 48, Pléiade edition, Paris, 1953, p. 720.

[2] AT, II, 169-70.

influence of the nerve threads, though perhaps this equation is not entirely accurate, since, for example, enthusiasts are classed with those in whom the trunk is too powerful relative to the branches. The nerve threads seem to represent at one and the same time the influence of external reality and the basic physiological needs. The trunk also seems to have a double meaning. It appears to represent, on the one hand, tendencies which exist within the personality independently of external reality, tendencies to create inner appearances, and, on the other hand, the capacity for obtaining a balanced picture of external reality from the often exaggerated reports arriving through the nerve threads. In this second meaning the trunk represents reason. This, it seems, is the aspect of the trunk's activity which dominates, or at least counterbalances, the influence of the nerve threads in the clear thinkers, the philosophers and the sages. Bordeu subsequently explains more precisely how the great man attains his strength:

> Le grand homme, s'il a malheureusement reçu cette disposition naturelle [excessive sensibility], s'occupera sans relâche à l'affaiblir, à la dominer, à se rendre maître de ses mouvements et à conserver à l'origine du faisceau tout son empire. Alors il se possédera au milieu des plus grands dangers, il jugera froidement, mais sainement. Rien de ce qui peut servir à ses vues, concourir à son but, ne lui échappera; on l'étonnera difficilement; il aura quarante-cinq ans; il sera grand roi, grand ministre, grand politique, grand artiste, surtout grand comédien, grand philosophe, grand poète, grand musicien, grand médecin; il régnera sur lui-même et sur tout ce qui l'environne. Il ne craindra pas la mort, peur, comme a dit sublimement le stoïcien, qui

> est une anse que saisit le robuste pour mener le faible partout où il veut; il aura cassé l'anse et se sera en même temps affranchi de toutes les tyrannies du monde.[1]

Greatness, thus defined, is no guarantee of beneficence. But, as I have stressed throughout this discussion, there is no reason for supposing that Diderot approves morally of the actions of a "great", but maleficent man. A good illustration is his attitude to Frederick II, in whom he saw greatness joined with wickedness.[2]

In his letter on education addressed to the comtesse de Forbach, Diderot distinguishes between "fermeté" (which, according to Bordeu's account, would be identical with greatness) and "la véritable grandeur". The truly great man, Diderot here affirms, possesses the same qualities as the truly good man:

> La justice et la fermeté; la justice, qui n'est rien sans la fermeté; la fermeté, qui peut être un grand mal sans la justice; la justice, qui règle la bienfaisance et qui arrête le murmure; la fermeté, qui donnera de la teneur à sa conduite, qui le résignera à sa destinée et qui l'élèvera au dessus des revers.[3]

No doubt this issue is really only terminological. It all depends whether or not one includes justice or beneficence in the definition of greatness. The important point for our discussion is that Diderot effectively distinguishes between, on the one hand, that

[1] AT, II, 171.

[2] Cf. Correspondance inédite, ed. André Babelon, Paris, 1931, I, 220 (To Mme d'Epinay; April 9, 1774).

[3] Roth, XII, 37. (To the comtesse de Forbach; ca. 1772.)

strength of the personality which makes a man master of himself and therefore master of his fate (in the sense that he can control his reactions to circumstances),[1] and, on the other hand, the combination of this quality with beneficence and justice. There are no grounds for supposing that Diderot does not prefer the latter; nor, as far as I can see, is there any immoralism in feeling admiration for the first quality even when it is accompanied by maleficence.

Let us now review the conclusions we have so far reached concerning Diderot's preferences with regard to the individual personality. We have seen that he prefers unity of character to that lack of coordination which results in weakness; and he prefers powerful impulses to weak ones. The combination of these two ideals results in a personality in which powerful impulses are kept in check by an interior dominating force. This gives a man resoluteness in carrying out his purposes and inner strength in the face of the blows of fate. Up to this point these preferences of Diderot's may be termed aesthetic, since moral judgments concern, in his view, the social effects of acts, and the qualities listed so far may be socially either beneficent or maleficent.

[1] Diderot does not appeal here to the notion of free-will. Whether an individual can achieve such self-mastery or not will depend upon the interaction of external influences and the original forces of his nature.

However, Diderot's highest ideal for individual development includes also beneficence. This, in order to be effective, demands, when circumstances are difficult, much the same qualities of inner coordination and strength which he finds aesthetically pleasing.

The just and beneficent man, which is how Diderot defines the virtuous man, employs his energy of soul not only in opposing external difficulties, but also in an interior combat. It is the servant of his reason in its constant struggle not to destroy, but to temper his passions.[1] In the Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron, Diderot protests against a certain over-complacent moral naturalism which he finds in certain writings of Seneca:

> "La nature nous a formés pour la vertu . . ." C'est le préjugé d'un homme de bien qui a oublié ce qu'il a fait d'efforts et de sacrifices pour devenir vertueux. Combien de passions violentes et naturelles dans le franc sauvage! Dans l'état policé, mille vicieux pour un sage . . . "Le chemin de la vertu n'est ni raide ni escarpé. . ." Le chemin de la vertu est taillé dans un roc escarpé. Celui que de longs et pénibles travaux ont conduit à son sommet, s'y tient difficilement: après avoir longtemps gravi, il marche sur une planche étroite et élastique, entre des précipices.[2]

This conception of virtue as requiring a sacrifice does not conflict with Diderot's oft-repeated contention that enlightened self-interest always justifies virtuous conduct.[3] The compatibility

[1] See the letter to Landois, quoted above, p. 74.

[2] AT, III, 288. See also Plan d'une université, AT, III, 431-32, and Eloge de Richardson, AT, V, 214.

[3] Diderot's arguments in support of this doctrine will be discussed in the next chapter. See below, pp. 239-52.

of the two principles is clearly illustrated in the following passage:

> . . . l'oeuvre du bonheur ne s'accomplit pas sans peine; la vertu est presque toujours un sacrifice pénible de soi; la probité demande de la force, du courage, une vue bien claire, bien nette de ses propres intérêts bien entendus, l'oubli du moment, dont la récompense incertaine n'est que dans l'avenir.[1]

The fact that virtue requires a short-term sacrifice means that, in the man who understands the necessity of this sacrifice for the ultimate attainment of the greatest possible personal happiness, there arises a battle between reason and the demand of the passions for immediate satisfaction. The stronger the passions which drive him toward maleficent actions, the more difficult it is for his reason to overcome them. Some men are good naturally and without notable effort, but many must achieve goodness "en travaillant sur eux-mêmes".[2] In Le Fils naturel, Diderot portrays in Dorval precisely this inner struggle and the final triumph of virtue.

The strikingly paradoxical form in which Diderot couches his remarks on the great criminals should not make us forget the numerous passages in which he expresses his admiration for heroic virtue. Thus he relates, for instance, how a black slave in one of the colonies, when commanded by his master to hang some fellow-slaves who had run away and been recaptured, cut off his own hand in a gesture of refusal.[3] We must recall also his admiration for

[1] Pages contre un tyran, in Oeuvres politiques, ed. Vernière, p. 137. Cf. also Essai sur le mérite et la vertu, AT, I, 60, note.

[2] Roth, VII, 202 (To Viallet; Oct. or Nov. 1767).

[3] Réfutation d'Helvétius, AT, II, 409. The anecdote is repeated in the Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron, AT, III, 313.

calm fortitude with which Socrates sacrificed his life to remain true to his principles,[1] and his constant allusions to the heroes of antiquity, to Codrus, Curtius, Regulus and Cato of Utica. In fact, to take a broad view of Diderot's writings as a whole, there is no doubt that while he admires strength of character whether it occurs in virtuous men or in criminals, he prefers that it should be joined with virtue.

This is not to imply that the qualities of character admired by Diderot are all directly concerned with beneficence. On the contrary, strength of character, the power to overcome one's own weaknesses and to remain undaunted by the blows of fate, is a value whose justification is independent of considerations of social utility. Nevertheless, heroic virtue remains Diderot's highest ideal for the individual character.

It may perhaps be objected finally that the inner struggle between reason and the passions which Diderot considers to be the necessary preliminary to virtuous action is precisely that war in the cavern between natural man and artificial and moral man which B in the Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville deplores.[2] I do not think, however, that this is a valid parallel, for the man of whom B speaks is not the individual, but man in general, as he exists in European society. His "natural" aspect is not to be equated with the uncontrolled passions nor his "artificial and

[1] Cf. De la poésie dramatique, AT, VII, 314-16.

[2] See above, p. 86.

moral" aspect with the demands of the ideal social morality. Instead, the "natural" aspect may be taken as including such limits on self-expression as are inseparable from social existence -- the kind of limits one finds even in the Tahitian utopia -- while the "artificial and moral" aspect refers to restrictions which are not essential to a satisfactory society, but are arbitrary, since they are not dictated by man's inherent needs either as an individual or as a social being.

On the contrary, these needs, in their dual aspect, are the source of a moral law which Diderot considers neither arbitrary nor "artificial", but natural. This law, he affirms, takes precedence over strictly individual impulses and propensities. We must now proceed to the examination of Diderot's conception of this natural moral law and its relation to the positive laws actually in force in various societies.

constitution was not perfectly well timed."[7]

In part this concern reflected opinion in the mother country where the ideal articulated by Blackstone and De Lolme of an independent Commons acting as a balancing organ in the constitution all but disappeared in the reaction to the Revolution after 1792. Only if the King and landed aristocracy maintained sufficent "influence" to control the Commons and in general exercised predominant political power, could England be saved from Jacobinism. Moreover the old notion that opposition to government by organized factions implied disloyalty had been revived and was exploited with effect by Pitt's supporters to suggest that the Foxite Whigs were collaborating with the enemy.[8] Similar authoritarian attitudes prevailed among the English in Lower Canada. The English assemblymen with virtual unanimity supported all legislative measures proposed by the Governor or Executive Councillors and willingly conferred powers on the Executive at the expense of the judiciary,[9]

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[7]Kent to Dalrymple, 1 Dec. 1792, n. 2 above.

[8]See e.g. Brown, The French Revolution, ch. IV, passim; Archibald S. Foord, His Majesty's Opposition, 1714-1830 (Oxford, 1964), 415-20.

[9]See e.g. p. 65-66 above.

CHAPTER VII

A UNIVERSAL MORAL LAW

So far I have considered Diderot mainly as a critical thinker in ethics. I have shown, however, that his critical attitude towards many orthodox values does not lead him to moral nihilism, and that his condemnation of much that characterizes the European society of his day (or our own, for that matter) does not imply that he questions the desirability of social bonds which favour the development of what is valuable in human nature. In this chapter I wish to study in some detail his attempt to establish a doctrine of universal ethical values. Such an ethic is social in that it concerns the individual's relations with his fellows, but it is not, as Diderot conceives it, at variance with the moral obligations of man as they would be in a state where there were not yet any positive laws or reciprocal conventions. In Diderot, social morality and natural morality are, ideally, the same.

Diderot has no sympathy with that extreme scepticism which denies even the ultimate distinction between the notions of good and evil. Deductive reason, he claims in the article "Pyrrhonienne", must be used with sobriety; for a point is reached at which reason casts the maximum possible light on a question and beyond which further subtleties merely cloud the issue:

> Lorsque, de conséquences en conséquences, j'aurai conduit un homme à quelque proposition évidente, je cesserai de disputer, je n'écouterai plus celui qui niera l'existence des corps, les règles de la logique, le témoignage des sens, la distinction

> du vrai et du faux, du bien et du mal, du plaisir et de la peine, du vice et de la vertu, du décent et de l'indécent, du juste et de l'injuste, de l'honnête et du déshonnête.[1]

Diderot is far from wishing to replace the old certainties by a mere void. In fact, his objection to traditional morality, both religious and secular, is not that it lays down rigid universal principles, but, on the contrary, that it is inconsistent and lacks any firm basis. One of Diderot's main aspirations as a moralist is to establish immutable and universal ethical principles.

For Diderot the formulation of a doctrine of universal moral values was not simply an intellectual ambition but a deeply felt emotional need. It may perhaps seem strange that this should be so, since the theme of incessant and ineluctable change in nature and in man is so prominent in his writings, and inconstancy is at times regarded by him as one of those natural prerogatives of the individual which it is an act of oppression to negate.[2]

[1] AT, XVI, 491-92.

[2] Cf. Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville, AT, II, 224: "Rien, en effet, te paraît-il plus insensé qu'un précepte qui proscrit le changement qui est en nous; qui commande une constance qui n'y peut être, et qui viole la liberté du mâle et de la femelle, en les enchaînant pour jamais l'un à l'autre; qu'une fidélité qui borne la plus capricieuse des jouissances à un même individu . . .?"

But, on the whole, his insistence on mutability is accompanied by an acute feeling of regret. This is perceptible in a passage from Jacques le fataliste in which the vows of fidelity of mortal lovers are contrasted with the signs of perpetual change visible everywhere in the universe of which they are part:

> Le premier serment que se firent deux êtres de chair, ce fut au pied d'un rocher qui tombait en poussière; ils attestèrent de leur constance un ciel qui n'est pas un instant le même; tout passait en eux et autour d'eux, et ils croyaient leurs coeurs affranchis de vicissitudes. O enfants! toujours enfants![1]

A letter to Falconet reveals even more explicitly the anguish with which awareness of mutability fills Diderot. Does not Falconet, he asks, feel for his sculpture, for his beautiful Pygmalion, a father's attachment to his children?

> Est-ce que tu n'es pas père? Est-ce que tes enfants ne sont pas de chair? Est-ce que, quand tu t'es épuisé sur un morceau qui te satisfait, après le souris d'approbation, ne te vient-il pas sur la lèvre un soupir de regret que, passé le présent tribut précaire du jour, tout sera fini demain pour l'ouvrier et pour l'ouvrage?
>
> Et certes, regardant et voyant ces pieds, ces mains, ces têtes, ces membres si délicats, je me suis quelquefois écrié douloureusement: Pourquoi faut-il que cela finisse? Et c'était du plus profond de mon coeur. . . .
>
> J'ai dit de ton ouvrage ce que j'ai quelquefois dit de Voltaire même, de l'homme, lorsque son poème m'enchantait, et que je pensais à la caducité qui le touche . . .: Pourquoi faut-il que cela meure?[2]

It is this same anguish, and not any serious hypothesis reconciling materialism with the possibility of immortality, which Diderot expresses in the following lines:

[1] AT, VI, 117.

[2] Roth, VI, 38-39 (Jan. 27, 1766).

> O ma Sophie, il me resterait donc un espoir de vous toucher, de vous sentir, de vous aimer, de vous chercher, de m'unir, de me confondre avec vous, quand nous ne serons plus! S'il y avait dans nos principes une loi d'affinité, s'il nous était réservé de composer un être commun, si je devais dans la suite des siècles refaire un tout avec vous, si les molécules de votre amant dissous venaient à s'agiter, à se mouvoir et à rechercher les vôtres éparses dans la nature! Laissez-moi cette chimère; elle m'est douce; elle m'assurerait l'éternité en vous et avec vous.[1]

This desire for permanence, Diderot suggests, may be an essential part of human nature:

> L'animal n'existe que dans le moment; il ne voit rien au delà. L'homme vit dans le passé, le présent et l'avenir. Dans le passé pour s'instruire; dans le présent pour jouir; dans l'avenir pour se le préparer glorieux à lui-même et aux siens. Il est de sa nature d'étendre son existence par des vues, des projets, des attentes de toute espèce.[2]

The human spirit is "un esprit dont les élans sont toujours vers l'infini."[3] Supposing an astronomer were to prove conclusively that in a thousand years' time the earth will be destroyed by a collision with a comet, all cultural and intellectual ambition would languish, perhaps even power and glory would cease to motivate men; everyone would simply cultivate his garden and plant his cabbages: "Sans nous en douter, nous marchons tous à l'éternité."[4] The chemist Venel, who ceases working on his

[1] Roth, II, 284 (To Sophie Volland; Oct. 15 [?], 1759).

[2] Roth, VI, 259-60 (To Falconet; Aug. 5, 1766).

[3] Roth, V, 208 (To Falconet; Dec. 4, 1765).

[4] Eléments de physiologie, ed. Mayer, Appendice I, p. 327 (Fragment entitled "Influence de la brièveté du temps sur les travaux des hommes.")

analysis of the medicinal waters of France as soon as the government ceases paying him, puzzles and disturbs Diderot. How can a man be so lacking in idealism? How can a man live so exclusively in the present moment, unmindful of anything but its fleeting pleasures?

> Il boit, il mange, il dort; il est profond dans la pratique de la morale de Salomon, la seule qui lui paraisse sensée pour des êtres destinés à n'être un jour qu'une pincée de poussière.[1]

There is little evidence from Diderot's writings of a physical horror of death or annihilation. What he feels seems rather to be a need to believe that human existence and endeavour are in some way meaningful. Immortality or an after-life, literally understood, are not necessary; what <u>is</u> required is belief that, though the individual passes into nothingness, he contributes to a permanent achievement and upholds unchangeable values. It is in this light that we must see Diderot's insistence on posterity and the infallible judgment which it will pass on us. We will not be conscious of it personally, but in all other respects it has the same significance as the "next world" has for the religious man.[2]

As a basis for morality, religion is inadequate, since it provides no consistent universal principles. While still in his

[1] <u>Voyage à Bourbonne</u>, AT, XVII, 342.

[2] Roth, VI, 67 (To Falconet; Feb. 15, 1766).

early deistic stage, Diderot contrasts the variability of particular cults with the universality of natural morality.[1] Many years later we find him condemning the incoherence of the moral principles contained in the Bible[2] and inveighing against the inconsistency of the morality championed by the priest:

> Sa justice ou celle de Dieu, ou des livres inspirés, est celle des circonstances. Il n'y a point de vertus qu'il ne puisse flétrir, et point de forfaits qu'il ne puisse sanctifier; il a des autorités pour et contre.[3]

True morality cannot change in this way; it is permanent, not arbitrary. What is claimed to be the will of God can provide no basis for it, since man must use his own reason to decide whether the demands made on him in God's name are just or not.

Christianity, then, has been put to the test and found wanting. It does not provide that sure foundation for the principles governing the conduct of life for which Diderot felt such a passionate need. He marks this rejection, while at the same time affirming that it is a positive and constructive step, by postulating the existence of a secular Trinity in place of the religious one. To Voltaire he writes:

> Ce qui me plaît des frères, c'est de les voir presque tous moins unis encore par la haine et le mépris de celle que vous avez appelée l'infâme que par l'amour de la vertu, par le sentiment de la bienfaisance et par le goût du vrai, du bon et du beau, espèce de trinité qui vaut un peu mieux que la leur.[4]

[1] De la suffisance de la religion naturelle, AT, I, 272-73.

[2] Mémoires pour Catherine II, ed. Vernière, pp. 112-13.

[3] Plan d'une université, AT, III, 511.

[4] Roth, IV, 176-77 (Sept. 29, 1762).

This theme of the secular trinity, which appears in several subsequent writings,[1] is not a mystical idea, but a rhetorical device which crystallizes in a striking form Diderot's insistence that there exist certain universal values, unaffected by circumstances and vicissitudes, by the unceasing flux of things.

The first person of the new trinity, "le vrai", requires, perhaps, some elucidation. Although Diderot explains nowhere in precise terms what he means by it, it is clear, from the various contexts in which he uses it, that it concerns primarily general propositions rather than matters of contingent fact. Diderot is not averse to those white lies which are so often necessary to spare other people, or oneself, pain or embarrassment.[2] In Pages contre un tyran, he endorses the exception which d'Holbach makes in favour of such "mensonges officieux" in his Essai sur les préjugés. On the other hand, regarding those truths which affect the happiness of the human race, he shares d'Holbach's conviction that

> . . . il est d'un philosophe, d'un homme de bien, d'un ami de ses semblables, de les annoncer sans ménagement; . . . c'est que le mensonge ne peut avoir que des suites fâcheuses en corrompant le jugement et la conduite; c'est que le mensonge est à l'origine de toutes nos calamités; c'est que le bien qu'il produit est passager et faible et que les suites en sont longues et toujours funestes;

[1] Cf., for example, Mémoires pour Catherine II, ed. Vernière, p. 249: ". . . il est une trinité contre laquelle les portes de l'enfer ne prévaudront jamais: le vrai qui engendre le bon, et le beau qui procède de l'un et de l'autre."

[2] Cf. Monsieur Hardouin in Est-il bon, est-il méchant?

> c'est qu'il n'y a aucun exemple que la vérité ait été nuisible ni pour le présent ni pour l'avenir.[1]

The "truth" which Diderot includes in his secular trinity is, then, first and foremost the truth about human nature and the human condition. The falsehoods to which it is opposed are those prejudices regarding human nature and social relations which are embodied in the traditional sexual ethic and the ideal of moral austerity, and in the established system of political and social inequality. The truth about man is that each individual has an equal right with his fellow-men to his share in the common happiness and that he cannot obtain his share without helping his fellow-men to obtain theirs. The pursuit of individual happiness, the equality of men, and the bond between beneficence and happiness,[2] these are the basic tenets constituting "le vrai".

We can perhaps best illustrate Diderot's conception of the second person of the secular trinity, "the good", by studying his refutation of the view that morality is essentially a matter of preserving public order, that therefore virtue consists in obeying whatever positive laws are in force, and, finally, that without the formulation of positive laws there would not exist any principles of morality. The Tahitian Orou points out to Bougainville's chaplain that the arbitrary decisions of magistrates and priests cannot alter the just or unjust nature of actions:

[1] Oeuvres politiques, ed. Vernière, p. 139. Cf. the following remarks of Moi in Le Neveu de Rameau, AT, V, 394: ". . . je crois que si le mensonge peut servir un moment, il est nécessairement nuisible à la longue, et qu'au contraire la vérité sert nécessairement à la longue, bien qu'il puisse arriver qu'elle nuise dans le moment."

[2] See below, p. 239.

> . . . sont-ils maîtres du bien et du mal? Peuvent-ils faire que ce qui est juste soit injuste, et que ce qui est injuste soit juste? dépend-il d'eux d'attacher le bien à des actions nuisibles, et le mal à des actions innocentes ou utiles? Tu ne saurais le penser, car, à ce compte, il n'y aurait ni vrai ni faux, ni bon ni mauvais, ni beau ni laid; du moins, que ce qu'il plairait à ton grand ouvrier, à tes magistrats, à tes prêtres, de prononcer tel; et, d'un moment à l'autre, tu serais obligé de changer d'idées et de conduite.[1]

Diderot insists against Helvétius that there is a distinction between justice and injustice which even savage men must have recognized before the existence of any general convention:

> Je serais assez porté à croire que le sauvage qui enlève au sauvage la provision de fruits qu'il a faite, s'enfuit, et que par sa fuite il s'accuse lui-même d'injustice, tandis que le spolié, par sa colère et sa poursuite, lui fait le même reproche.[2]

Expressed in this form, Diderot's view is open to obvious objections. One can easily imagine a variant of this scene in which the aggressor stands his ground, confident that he has nothing to fear from a weaker savage, while the latter takes to his heels to avoid a fight. The conclusion Diderot draws is, however, less easy to refute: "Les lois ne nous donnent pas les notions de justice; il me semble qu'elles les supposent."[3]

In the Entretien d'un père avec ses enfants, Diderot raises the question whether, in circumstances where one believes a greater effective good will result from infringing a positive law

[1] Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville, AT, II, 224-25.

[2] Réfutation d'Helvétius, AT, II, 355.

[3] Loc. cit.

than from obeying it, one is justified in breaking the law. Several cases are discussed, the crucial one being, I think, that which was faced by Diderot's father many years before. On the death of a rich priest, he receives from the priest's poor relations an authorization to undertake certain legal formalities pending their arrival. While making an inventory of the priest's property, he discovers a will naming as sole heir a rich Parisian bookseller. He wonders whether to destroy the will. The bookseller does not need the money, whereas it could alleviate the desperate situation of the priests' relations. Besides, a pile of unopened letters from the bookseller and the age of the will make it highly probable that the priest had changed his mind and had simply forgotten to destroy the will. It seems to Diderot's father that the only argument against doing so is that it would mean breaking a law. Hesitating, however, to trust his own judgment, he consults a highly respected casuist, Father Bouin, who pronounces that the positive law must take precedence over any assessment of probable good or ill effects. Submitting, it appears, more to the casuist's authority than to his arguments, Diderot's father refrains from destroying the will. He witnesses the despair of the poor relations and is dismayed at the callousness of the heir, who refuses to help them in any way. In the conversation with his children, the old man admits that he still feels troubled by the decision which he took. Yet how, he asks, could he reject the authority of Father Bouin? The young Diderot boldly declares that his father's decision was wrong, that he

should have been guided by natural equity instead of by the letter of the law. He admits that his own attitude is one which it would be dangerous to publicize, because the majority of people are not wise enough to make right decisions on the basis of natural equity and it is better that they should consider themselves strictly bound by the letter of the law. But, he whispers to his father at the end of the dialogue, "à la rigueur il n'y a point de lois pour le sage .... . Toutes étant sujettes à des exceptions, c'est à lui qu'il appartient de juger des cas où il faut s'y soumettre ou s'en affranchir."[1]

This does not mean that ultimately all moral decisions result from the arbitrary volition of an individual. The young Diderot of the dialogue claims that when the wise man makes a moral decision, he is obeying the universal human reason in which he participates:

> Mon père: Tu aurais préféré ta raison à la raison publique; la décision de l'homme à celle de l'homme de loi.
>
> Moi: Assurément. Est-ce que l'homme n'est pas antérieur à l'homme de loi? Est-ce que la raison de l'espèce humaine n'est pas tout autrement sacrée que la raison d'un législateur?[2]

This "reason of the human species" is what, in the article "Droit naturel", Diderot calls the "general will". Natural law, he says, has its source in the general will of the human species:

> C'est à la volonté générale que l'individu doit s'adresser pour savoir jusqu'où il doit être homme,

[1] AT, V, 307-08.

[2] AT, V, 301.

> citoyen, sujet, père, enfant, et quand il lui convient de vivre ou de mourir. C'est à elle à fixer les limites de tous les devoirs. Vous avez le droit naturel le plus sacré à tout ce qui ne vous est point contesté par l'espèce entière. . . . Tout ce que vous concevrez, tout ce que vous méditerez sera bon, grand, élevé, sublime, s'il est de l'intérêt général et commun.[1]

The general will may be consulted

> dans les principes du droit écrit de toutes les nations policées; dans les actions sociales des peuples sauvages et barbares; dans les conventions tacites des ennemis du genre humain entre eux, et même dans l'indignation et le ressentiment, ces deux passions que la nature semble avoir placées jusque dans les animaux pour suppléer au défaut des lois sociales et de la vengeance publique.[2]

However, realizing no doubt that this evidence is often contradictory and that it can provide reliable guidance only after it has been sifted and interpreted, Diderot goes on to state that the general will of the human species is present in each individual as "un acte pur de l'entendement qui raisonne dans le silence des passions sur ce que l'homme peut exiger de son semblable, et sur ce que son semblable est en droit d'exiger de lui."[3]

I do not propose to discuss Diderot's specific views on the third person of the secular trinity, "le beau", since his aesthetic

[1] AT, XIV, 299-300.

[2] Ibid., p. 300.

[3] Ibid., p. 300.

theory is beyond the scope of my subject. Let us instead examine in greater detail what he understands by the immutability, or universality, of values.

First of all, universal values are those which do not change with time and place. In a letter to the actress-novelist Mme Riccoboni, Diderot rejects the view that there are different and equally valid standards of excellence for theatrical works in different countries. With this affirmation of the universality of literary values he couples that of the universality of moral principles:

> Je ne connais et ne suis disposé à recevoir de loi là-dessus que de la vérité. Votre dessein serait-il de faire de l'action théâtrale une chose technique qui s'écartât tantôt plus, tantôt moins de la nature, sans qu'il y eût aucun point fixe, en delà et en deçà duquel on pût l'accuser d'être faible, outrée, ou fausse ou vraie? Livrez-vous à des conventions nationales, et ce qui sera bien à Paris sera mal à Londres, et ce qui sera bien à Paris et à Londres aujourd'hui, y sera mal demain. Dans les moeurs et dans les arts, il n'y a de bien et de mal pour moi, que ce qui l'est en tout temps et partout. Je veux que ma morale et mon goût soient éternels.[1]

In the Observations sur le Nakaz, he takes his stand against the political relativism to which Catherine II, under the influence of Montesquieu,[2] subscribed:

> La Russie est une puissance européenne. Peu importe qu'elle soit asiatique ou européenne. Le point

[1] Roth, II, 95 (Nov. 27, 1758).

[2] Cf. Vernière's Introduction to the Observations, in Oeuvres politiques, p. 331, and Yves Benot's remarks in Textes politiques, Paris, 1960, p. 33.

> important, c'est qu'elle soit grande, florissante et durable.
>
> Les moeurs sont partout des conséquences de la législation et du gouvernement; elles ne sont ni africaines ni asiatiques ni européennes, elles sont bonnes ou mauvaises. On est esclave sous le pôle où il fait très froid. On est esclave à Constantinople où il fait très chaud; il faut que partout un peuple soit instruit, libre et vertueux. Ce que Pierre Ier apporta en Russie, s'il était bon en Europe, était bon partout.
>
> Sans nier l'influence du climat sur les moeurs, l'état actuel de la Grèce et de l'Italie, l'état futur de la Russie montreront assez que les moeurs bonnes ou mauvaises ont d'autres causes. Ces Scythes si jaloux de leur liberté, s'ils existaient encore, occuperaient quelques provinces ou russes ou voisines de la Russie.[1]

Diderot's intransigence on this point must be seen as a reaction against the political and social conservatism for which he suspects that Montesquieu's relativism is being used as a pretext. He would like to feel certain that, when Catherine II speaks of making legislation conform to the spirit of the nation, this is not just an excuse for taking no action to mitigate the absolutism of the Russian government, to diminish the excessive inequality between the classes or to grant the serfs their personal freedom:

> C'est à la législation à suivre l'esprit de la nation. Je ne crois pas cela; c'est à la législation à faire l'esprit de la nation. Je sais bien que Solon suivit l'esprit de sa nation; mais Solon n'était pas despote, mais Solon n'avait pas affaire à un peuple serf et barbare. Quand on peut tout et qu'il n'y a rien de fait, il ne faut pas s'en tenir aux meilleures lois qu'un peuple peut recevoir; il faut lui donner les meilleures lois possibles.[2]

[1] In Oeuvres politiques, ed. Vernière, pp. 349-50.

[2] Observations sur le Nakaz, ed. cit., pp. 370-71.

Despite this insistence on the universality and immutability of natural law, Diderot recognizes the necessity for positive laws to vary according to local and temporal circumstances and admits that to reconcile this variability with the immutability of natural law presents a tricky problem:

> Voici pourtant une difficulté. Les lois naturelles sont éternelles et communes. Les lois positives ne sont que des corollaires des lois naturelles. Donc les lois positives sont également éternelles et communes. Cependant, il est certain que telle loi positive est bonne et utile dans une circonstance, nuisible et mauvaise dans telle autre; il est certain qu'il n'y a point de code qu'il ne faille réformer avec le temps. Cette difficulté n'est peut-être pas insoluble; mais il faut la résoudre.[1]

In speaking of positive laws as "corollaries," rather than as "applications," of natural laws, Diderot makes the problem appear more difficult than it need be. To judge from other passages in the same work, he does in fact think of positive laws as applications of unchanging natural laws to particular circumstances. We see this in the following passage:

> Au reste, je ne crois pas que l'évidence ni aucun autre moyen puisse rendre les lois immuables; je les crois non pas toutes, mais quelques-unes du moins, abandonnées aux vicissitudes des circonstances. La position actuelle d'un Etat inspire une loi très sage; et cette loi dépendante de la circonstance serait très nuisible si la position venait à changer.[2]

The variations arising from the application of natural law to changing circumstances can be seen most frequently, says Diderot, in the case of the criminal law:

[1] Ibid., p. 353. Cf. also ibid., p. 436 (section CXX).

[2] Ibid., p. 359.

> C'est surtout la portion criminelle du code qui, sans cesser d'être une conséquence de la loi naturelle, souffre et doit souffrir de fréquentes corrections. Les circonstances doivent souvent faire varier les rapports des délits aux peines, parce qu'elles font varier la nature des délits.[1]

It may perhaps seem that Diderot could easily have resolved the whole problem by considering natural law as defining general principles of justice, while admitting that these might be observed in a variety of ways according to circumstances. Indeed, this is the point of view which he adopts in his Réflexions sur le livre de l'Esprit, when he rejects Helvétius's contention that there is no absolute justice or injustice:

> Ce paradoxe est faux en lui-même, et dangereux à établir: faux parce qu'il est possible de trouver dans nos besoins naturels, dans notre vie, dans notre existence, dans notre organisation et dans notre sensibilité qui nous exposent à la douleur, une base éternelle du juste et de l'injuste, dont l'intérêt général et particulier fait ensuite varier la notion en cent manières différentes. C'est, à la vérité, l'intérêt général et particulier qui métamorphose l'idée de juste et d'injuste; mais son essence en est indépendante.[2]

It seems, however, that Diderot was reluctant to concede that natural law could not be formulated in any more precise way. Perhaps he felt that if it could be given a more definite content the appeal to it against the injustices of the existing social and political system would have a greater persuasive force. This hypothesis receives some support from the following passage, in which he claims that, whereas many laws must be temporary and

[1] Ibid., p. 376.

[2] AT, II, 270.

variable, those which safeguard civil liberty and the security of property and ensure that taxation is levied equitably are immutable:

> . . . il n'y a point de code dont la sagesse puisse être éternelle . . . . Il faut rappeler les lois à l'examen, parce qu'il y a deux sortes de bonheur. Un bonheur constant qui tient à la liberté, à la sûreté des propriétés, à la nature de l'impôt, à sa répartition, à sa perception, et qui distingue les lois éternelles. Un bonheur accidentel, variable et momentané, qui demande une loi momentanée; un état de choses qui passe. Ce bonheur, cet état de choses passe; la durée de la loi deviendrait funeste, il faut la révoquer.[1]

The second attribute of a universal ethical principle is that it does not vary with the identity of the moral agent. That all men's actions must be judged by the same ethical standard is taken for granted throughout Diderot's writings. It is implicit, in particular, in his insistence that laws must apply equally to all citizens.[2] It may, therefore appear contradictory for him to write, in his memoir "De la morale des rois": "Je doute que la justice des rois, et par conséquent leur morale, puisse être la même que celle des particuliers. . . ."[3] However, Diderot does not mean that the essential principles of justice are different for a king, but that the lack of any superior agency to enforce them equally on all his fellow-sovereigns means that

[1] Mémoires pour Catherine II, ed. Vernière, p. 236. Both the "eternal" and the temporary laws to which Diderot refers here are, of course, equitable laws. He clearly did not think that the unjust laws regulating taxation in eighteenth-century France were, or should be, permanent.

[2] See above, pp. 119-20.

[3] Mémoires pour Catherine II, ed. Vernière, p. 231.

there is a great pressure on him to take precautionary measures which conflict with ideal justice. It is certain that Diderot himself sees no contradiction in his position, for, only a few pages later in the same memoir, he affirms that God's notion of justice cannot rationally be supposed to differ from ours:

> "Mais qui vous a dit que Dieu devait être un souverain comme vous l'imaginez?" Le sens commun; car s'il y a deux notions de souveraineté et de bienfaisance, l'une pour lui et l'autre pour moi, il y aura deux notions de vice et de vertu, deux notions de justice, deux morales, une morale céleste et une morale terrestre. Sa morale ne sera plus la mienne, et j'ignorerai ce qu'il faut que je fasse pour conformer mes actions à ses principes et pour lui plaire.[1]

The third requirement which must be fulfilled for moral principles to be universal is that they must not vary according to the identity of the recipient of the action. Again, this is implicit in the demand that the law must be applicable equally to all citizens. But not only does the duty of justice and beneficence take no account of difference of class and wealth, it also transcends national barriers. Recommending to Hume a Frenchman newly arrived in London, Diderot invokes the bond of fraternity which nature has established between all men,[2] and in a later letter addresses the Scottish philosopher in the following terms:

> Ne verrons-nous jamais finir ces aversions nationales qui resserrent dans un petit espace l'exercice de la bienfaisance? Et qu'importe que cet homme soit né en deçà ou au delà d'un détroit: en est-il moins un

[1] Ibid., p. 233. Cf. also Roth, II, 192 (To Sophie Volland; Aug. 3, 1759).

[2] Roth, VII, 220 (Nov. 24, 1767).

> homme? N'as-tu pas les mêmes besoins? n'es-tu pas exposé aux mêmes peines, avide du même bonheur? Fais donc pour lui ce qu'il est en droit d'attendre de toi sur une infinité de rapports immuables, éternels et indépendants de toutes les conventions. Je trouve Polyphème plus excusable d'avoir mangé les compagnons d'Ulysse, que la plupart de ces petits Européens, qui n'ont que cinq pieds et demi, et deux yeux, qui se ressemblent en tout, et qui ne s'en dévorent pas moins.
>
> Mon cher David, vous êtes de toutes les nations, et vous ne demanderez jamais au malheureux son extrait baptistaire. Je me flatte d'être, comme vous, citoyen de la grande ville du monde.[1]

Aristotle, Diderot remarks, places brigandage in the category of hunting, a scandalous view:

> Je suis tenté de rayer du nombre des sages un législateur assez étranger au sentiment d'humanité, pour défendre le vol et l'injustice à trois ou quatre milles à la ronde, et le permettre au delà.[2]

So far our discussion in this chapter has been concerned primarily with illustrating Diderot's belief in universal ethical principles. We have still to see what kind of conduct these principles prescribe for the individual, what, in other words, constitutes right action.

Diderot gives a double answer to this question. The rightness of an action consists in its conformity, on the one hand, with

[1] Roth, VIII, 15-16 (Feb. 22, 1768).

[2] Réfutation d'Helvétius, AT, II, 396-97.

the interest of the individual, and, on the other hand, with the general good. The Tahitian Orou puts the case as follows:

> Veux-tu savoir, en tous temps et en tous lieux, ce qui est bon et mauvais? Attache-toi à la nature des choses et des actions; à tes rapports avec ton semblable; à l'influence de ta conduite sur ton utilité particulière et le bien général.[1]

It may be objected that to base morality, at one and the same time, on individual interest and the general good is unsatisfactory, since it fails to resolve one of the major problems of ethics, the frequent conflict between individual advantage and the common weal. This objection can best be answered by analysing a formula in which Diderot clarifies the relationship between individual happiness and the general welfare: "Il n'y a qu'une seule vertu, la justice; un seul devoir, de se rendre heureux. . . ."[2]

The first part of this double formula defines right action, while the second defines obligation to perform right action. To define virtue as justice has two implications, which may be termed negative and positive. Negatively such a definition implies the exclusion of various kinds of conduct which have sometimes been considered to be admirable, e.g. asceticism and self-maceration, scrupulous performance of religious rites, a magnificent manner of living, aggressiveness, the point of honour, and unquestioning loyalty to a group. The positive meaning of

[1] Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville, AT, II, 225.

[2] Mémoires pour Catherine II, ed. Vernière, p. 231. A similar formula appears at the end of the Eléments de physiologie, ed. Mayer, p. 308.

justice, for Diderot, is well-ordered beneficence. It often happens that beneficence is so ill-judged as to produce, all told, more evil than good. This can happen, for instance, when a magistrate's clemency towards a criminal endangers the lives of countless people.[1]

The second part of Diderot's definition of morality is necessary because his deterministic conception of human psychology does not permit him to conceive of moral obligation, or duty, as belonging to a different category from desire:

> Nous sommes tout aussi passifs dans le désir et le devoir. Dans le désir, car il a un objet qui se présente à moi aussi involontairement qu'un objet physique à mes sens, et dont ou la présence ou le ressouvenir me meut tout aussi involontairement.
>
> Et ainsi du devoir, ou du bonheur qui m'est propre et que je considère sous un certain point de vue qui m'invite ou m'éloigne d'une action.
>
> L'idée de mon bonheur, et tout ce qui s'ensuit ou vient au moment où je m'y attends le moins, ou ne vient pas, ou produit un effet ou n'en produit point.[2]

Thus Diderot is bound to consider the individual's desire for happiness as the only basis of his moral obligations; for duty can have no other meaning. It is in this sense that he affirms: "Je veux être heureux, est le premier article d'un code antérieur à toute législation, à tout système religieux;"[3] and: "Il n'y a qu'un devoir, c'est d'être heureux. Puisque ma pente naturelle,

[1] Commentaire sur Hemsterhuis, p. 333.

[2] Commentaire sur Hemsterhuis, p. 311.

[3] Observations sur le Nakaz, ed. cit., p. 371.

invincible, inaliénable, est d'être heureux, c'est la source et la source unique de mes vrais devoirs, et la seule base de toute bonne législation."[1] These statements in no way imply amoral individualism. Underlying them is the assumption of a natural harmony between the true happiness of each individual and general happiness. When Diderot defines ethics as "la science qui fait découler de l'idée du vrai bonheur, et des rapports actuels de l'homme avec ses semblables, ses devoirs et toutes les lois justes,"[2] everything turns on the meaning of the word vrai. It implies that individuals are often motivated by a false idea of their own happiness, which prompts them to perform apparent, instead of true, duties. In Diderot's system, then, duty is enlightened desire; it is what one would inevitably do if one understood perfectly one's true interests.

The big problem which remains for Diderot is to show that this harmony between the true happiness of the individual and conduct conducive to general happiness does in fact obtain, even when positive laws are unjust or where the "force légitime" is not efficacious in enforcing them consistently on all.

In order to refute Helvétius's claim that "un homme communément bien organisé est capable de tout", Diderot cites himself as an example of a man who, possessing in abundance the qualities necessary for successful ethical thought and motivated

[1] Mémoires pour Catherine II, ed. Vernière, p. 235.

[2] Plan d'une université, AT, III, 490-91.

by a strong desire for achievement in that field, has nevertheless found several ethical problems completely beyond his power to solve. The first instance he quotes is precisely the problem to which I have just alluded:

> . . . je suis convaincu que dans une société même aussi mal ordonné que la nôtre, où le vice qui réussit est souvent applaudi, et la vertu qui échoue presque toujours ridicule, je suis convaincu, dis-je, qu'à tout prendre, on n'a rien de mieux à faire pour son bonheur que d'être un homme de bien.[1]

He would dearly like to be able to write a convincing defence of this last proposition:

> C'est une question que j'ai méditée cent fois et avec toute la contention d'esprit dont je suis capable; j'avais, je crois, les données nécessaires; vous l'avouerai-je? je n'ai pas même osé prendre la plume pour en écrire la première ligne. Je me disais: Si je ne sors pas victorieux de cette tentative, je deviens l'apologiste de la méchanceté: j'aurai trahi la cause de la vertu, j'aurai encouragé l'homme au vice.[2]

Diderot is quite accurate in stating that he never penned a complete and thorough demonstration of the connection which he postulates between happiness and virtue. However, from the numerous passages in which he approaches one aspect or another of the question, we can form a composite picture of what might have been his attempt at such a demonstration. This is what I propose to do in the following pages.

Diderot found the society in which he lived a depressing

[1] Réfutation d'Helvétius, AT, II, 345.

[2] Loc. cit. Cf. Roth, II, 106-09; X, 60; AT, II, 345, 510; V, 215, 427; VI, 439; XII, 316.

spectacle of moral corruption in which the good man often failed to receive his just deserts, while unscrupulous men were frequently rewarded. Nor did he find any consolation in his reading of history:

> . . . l'on voit à chaque ligne le crime heureux à côté de la vertu opprimée, la médiocrité récompensée à côté du talent persécuté, l'ignorance sous la pourpre, le génie sous des haillons, le mensonge honoré, la vérité dans les fers.[1]

In another letter, he remarks bitterly:

> J'ai dit quelque part que l'homme de bien ressemblait aux parfums dont on n'obtenait une odeur délicieuse qu'en les broyant. Cela est vrai. Mais cela n'est-il pas bien consolant pour le parfum broyé? Son sort est donc de recréer l'odorat du méchant.[2]

Rameau's nephew thinks that the undeniable misfortune of many good men and the success of many wicked ones is a peremptory argument against virtue:

> Lui: . . . Mais, à votre compte, il faudrait donc être d'honnêtes gens?
>
> Moi: Pour être heureux, assurément.
>
> Lui: Cependant je vois une infinité d'honnêtes gens qui ne sont pas heureux et une infinité de gens qui sont heureux sans être honnêtes.
>
> Moi: Il vous semble.[3]

"Il vous semble." Diderot's way of answering the objection is precisely to show that the evidence from history and the contemporary scene regarding the relation between virtue and happiness is illusory. The virtuous men who seem to be unhappy are not

[1] Roth, VI, 94 (To Falconet; Feb. 15, 1766).

[2] Roth, IX, 179 (To Mme de Maux [?]; probably Autumn 1769).

[3] Le Neveu de Rameau, AT, V, 426-27.

really unhappy, and the wicked men who seem to be happy are really unhappy.

Let us consider the various ways in which Diderot accounts for this discrepancy between appearances and reality. To begin with, one has to take into account not just one moment in the life of a man, but the over-all picture. If one allows sufficient time to pass, the anomalies due to chance are rectified:

> C'est, mon ami, que la méchanceté n'a que son moment. C'est qu'il faut tôt ou tard que la peine boiteuse atteigne le coupable qui fuit devant elle. . . . Laisse faire les méchants; fais le bien; attends, et sois heureux.[1]

Admittedly, crime may procure a momentary pleasure.[2] In its immediate consequences its advantages often outweigh its drawbacks. If this were not so, no one would commit any crimes. But in the long run vice destroys happiness. Even when a crime goes completely undetected and entails, at least overtly, no unpleasant consequences for the doer, it nevertheless begins or confirms the habit of criminal conduct and so increases the chances of eventual punishment:

> . . . après une mauvaise action, on est bien plus voisin d'une seconde; après deux mauvaises actions, bien plus voisin encore d'une troisième. On en fait donc trois, on en fait donc mille, et l'on tombe dans le châtiment et le mépris que l'on mérite.[3]

[1] Roth, VIII, 108 (To Falconet; Sept. 6, 1768).

[2] Cf. Roth, VI, 13 (To Falconet; Jan. 10, 1766).

[3] Roth, IV, 146 (To Sophie Volland; Sept. 9, 1762).

In another letter to Sophie, to account for the fact that some wise men meet with constant failure and some foolish men constant success, Diderot invokes the laws of probability. In a conversation in which he had taken part the following question had arisen:

> Comment il arrivait que des sots réussissaient toujours, et que des gens de sens échouaient en tout, en sorte qu'on dirait que les uns semblaient de toute éternité avoir été prédestinés au bonheur, et les autres à l'infortune. Je répondis que la vie était un jeu de hasard; que les sots ne jouaient pas assez longtemps pour recueillir le salaire de leur sottise, ni les gens sensés, celui de leur circonspection. Ils quittent les dés lorsque la chance allait tourner; en sorte que, selon moi, un sot fortuné et un homme d'esprit malheureux sont deux êtres qui n'ont pas assez vécu.[1]

Since, in Diderot's opinion, a wicked man is a man not wise enough to see where his best interests lie, one may, I think, apply the idea of this passage to the inevitable, though sometimes tardy, retribution which awaits all wicked men. Admitting, then, that the vagaries of chance are often responsible for a certain delay in the arrival of the natural punishments which befall the vicious man and of the benefits which naturally accrue to the virtuous man, we must now ask what exactly is the nature of these rewards and punishments in Diderot's view.

The apparent plausibility of the objection raised by Rameau's nephew is due to a common misconception of happiness. He equates it with worldly success, that is to say, with money, power and the pleasures which these can procure, and hopes that his son

[1] Roth, III, 98-99 (To Sophie Volland; Sept. 30, 1760). Cf. AT, IV, 91; AT, IX, 206.

will be "heureux, ou, ce qui revient au même, honoré, riche et puissant."[1] The philosopher denies the Nephew's premise, claiming to be one of those "strange people" ("gens bizarres") who do not regard wealth as the most precious thing in the world.[2] In the Réfutation d'Helvétius, Diderot makes a similar ironical use of the word bizarrerie. Helvétius asks: "Pourquoi si peu d'hommes honnêtes?" and replies: "C'est que l'infortune poursuit presque partout la probité." Helvétius's point is that this situation should be remedied by appropriate changes in legislation. Diderot, for his part, is not content to say that enlightened self-interest would motivate men to virtue given a suitable form of legislation; he wishes to prove in addition that virtue is the best path to happiness even in the most corrupt and unjust society:

> Il n'y a point de peuple si généralement corrompu qu'on n'y puisse trouver quelques hommes vertueux; parmi ces hommes vertueux il n'y en a peut-être pas un seul qui ne fût parvenu aux honneurs et à la richesse par le sacrifice de la vertu. Je voudrais bien savoir par quelle bizarrerie ils s'y sont refusés, quel motif ils ont eu de préférer une probité indigente et obscure au vice opulent et décoré.[3]

There are several passages which illustrate well Diderot's conviction that wealth is very often not what men most desire. The Salon de 1769, for example, contains the following anecdote. The painter Hall, commissioned to paint the portraits of two young

[1] Le Neveu de Rameau, AT, V, 472.

[2] Ibid., p. 478.

[3] AT, II, 425.

princes, brings with him several miniatures. While he is painting one of the princes, the other looks at the miniatures and is struck by the portrait of a young peasant girl:

> "La jolie personne! s'écria le prince.
> -- Il est vrai, dit l'artiste; aussi ai-je eu grand plaisir à la peindre.
> -- Elle vous a donc donné bien de l'argent? (N'êtes-vous pas émerveillé de cette belle réflexion, mon ami?)
> -- Non, monseigneur, elle n'était pas en état de me payer; c'est moi qui l'ai payée d'avoir bien voulu se prêter à la fantaisie que j'avais de la peindre.
> -- Ce portrait vous fait donc grand plaisir?
> -- Un plaisir infini, monseigneur . . ."
> A cette réponse, savez-vous ce que fait monseigneur? Il prend le portrait et le met en pièces.[1]

Presumably, Hall's willingness to work for his personal satisfaction without monetary reward is felt by the young prince to contradict the scale of values on which his own life is founded. The boy refuses to accept the idea that, since a painter can know a sort of happiness which a prince's wealth could never buy, being a prince confers no essential superiority. He therefore seeks to destroy the source of the painter's happiness.

In a letter to Princess Dashkoff, Diderot expresses an ideal of happiness in which wealth and public office are unimportant:

> Pour moi, il y a tant de choses dont je puis aisément me passer, qu'il ne m'en coûte pas de mépriser les richesses. Un morceau de pain, noir ou blanc peu importe, un pot d'eau claire, quelques livres, un ami, et de temps en temps les charmes d'un petit entretien féminin; voilà, avec une conscience tranquille, tout ce qu'il me faut. Les honneurs qui n'amènent pas avec eux des devoirs sont de purs badinages créés

[1] AT, XI, 451-52.

> tout exprès pour amuser de grands enfants. L'âge n'est plus pour moi où ces choses-là pouvaient me plaire, quoique, à la vérité, en jetant un regard en arrière sur le passé, je ne me rappelle pas le moment où elles ont pu avoir pour moi beaucoup d'attrait.[1]

The reason why wealth and honours do not necessarily bring happiness is that they neither provide peace of mind nor compensate for the lack of it; for peace of mind is, in Diderot's view, the essential constituent of happiness. In his long letter to the Princess of Nassau-Saarbrück, written in 1758, he says that if he were entrusted with the education of the Princess's children he would teach them "que le bonheur peut être aussi à celui qui scie le marbre et qui coupe la pierre; que la puissance ne donne pas la paix de l'âme, et que le travail ne l'ôte pas."[2] In a letter to Sophie Volland, he contrasts the happy life of the simple, honest farmer Jean-Jacques-Nicolas Bled with the wretched existence of the rich landowner Caesar-Alexandre-Victor de Soyecourt, a dishonoured man, who, amid his gilded panelling, is consumed by shame and boredom.[3]

What does Diderot consider necessary for the enjoyment of that inner contentment which in his view constitutes happiness? It is not simply the consciousness of one's virtue that produces

[1] AT, XX, 43 (To Princess Dashkoff; Jan. 25, 1774).

[2] Roth, II, 53 (May or June 1758).

[3] Roth, IV, 198-99 (Oct. 17, 1762). Cf. Constance's contempt for the trappings of worldly success in Le Fils naturel, AT, VII, 70.

this feeling. We shall show later that this consciousness, though a sine qua non of contentment, is not sufficient alone to procure the most complete happiness. Diderot refuses to go as far as the Stoics in identifying virtue and happiness:

> L'homme heureux du stoïcien est celui qui ne connaît d'autre bien que la vertu, d'autre mal que le vice; qui n'est ni abattu ni enorgueilli par les événements; qui dédaigne tout ce qu'il n'est ni le maître de se procurer, ni le maître de garder, et pour qui le mépris des voluptés est la volupté même. Voilà peut-être l'homme parfait; mais l'homme parfait est-il l'homme de la nature?[1]

Diderot prefers the doctrine of Epicurus, who considers that pleasures, both physical and psychological, can increase our happiness, provided we are not enslaved by them.

Physical pain is an evil and physical pleasures, in moderation, contribute to a man's contentment. But more important still are the non-physical pleasures, those one may find in aesthetic appreciation, in companionship, friendship and love, and in the practice of beneficence. Rameau's nephew goes too far when he says that all is vanity except for physical pleasures, good wine, delicious food, beautiful women and soft beds.[2] The philosopher's position is more nuanced:

> Je ne méprise pas les plaisirs des sens, j'ai un palais aussi, et il est flatté d'un mets délicat ou d'un vin délicieux; j'ai un coeur et des yeux, et j'aime à voir une jolie femme, j'aime à sentir sous ma main la fermeté et la rondeur de sa gorge,

[1] Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron, AT, III, 315.

[2] Le Neveu de Rameau, AT, V, 423.

> à presser ses lèvres des miennes, à puiser la volupté dans ses regards, et à en expirer entre ses bras; quelquefois avec mes amis une partie de débauche, même un peu tumultueuse, ne me déplaît pas; mais, je ne vous le dissimulerai pas, il m'est infiniment plus doux encore d'avoir secouru le malheureux, d'avoir terminé une affaire épineuse, donné un conseil salutaire, fait une lecture agréable, une promenade avec un homme ou une femme chère à mon coeur, passé quelques heures instructives avec mes enfants, écrit une bonne page, rempli les devoirs de mon état, dit à celle que j'aime quelques choses tendres et douces qui amènent ses bras autour de mon cou.[1]

Among the psychological pleasures which the philosopher exalts, the most important is the joy of beneficence. He continues, in the passage just quoted, by affirming that he would rather be the rehabilitator of the memory of Calas then the author of Mahomet. Referring to the education which he is giving his daughter, Diderot writes to Sophie Volland:

> Et puis nos promenades, la petite bonne et moi, vont toujours leur train. Je me proposai dans la dernière de lui faire concevoir qu'il n'y avait aucune vertu qui n'eût deux récompenses: le plaisir de bien faire, et celui d'obtenir la bienveillance des autres. . . .[2]

Another of his correspondents receives the following exhortation:

> Vous êtes jeune, vous avez l'âme honnête et sensible; accoutumez-vous de bonne heure au plaisir de faire le bien, aux indifférents, aux amis, au pauvre, au riche, à l'homme heureux, à l'homme malheureux, aux ennemis, aux bons, et même aux méchants. Quand vous aurez goûté de cette satisfaction, vous ne pourrez plus vous en passer.[3]

[1] Ibid., pp. 425-26.

[2] Roth, IX, 127 (To Sophie Volland; Aug. 31, 1769).

[3] Roth, XI, 221 (To the abbé de Langeac; ca. end of 1771). The phrase "aux ennemis" seems to be misplaced; logic would require it to be placed in the vicinity of "aux amis".

Diderot himself declares that he is "possédé du démon de la bienfaisance".[1] He is drawing on his own experience when he asks the Maréchale: "Ne pensez-vous pas qu'on peut être si heureusement né, qu'on trouve un grand plaisir à faire le bien?"[2]

For Diderot, then, psychological pleasures are more important than physical ones. Indeed, as regards the physical side of man's nature, he is more concerned with the avoidance of pain than with the enjoyment of pleasures. Thus he calls good health the corner-stone of happiness.[3] But peace of mind is, in his opinion, even more essential:

> Après la connaissance de la vérité et l'amour de la vertu, les deux plus grands biens de l'homme sont la paix et la santé; mais la paix avant la santé. On ne jouit pas de la santé sans la paix, et l'on voit quelquefois celui qui a la paix, sourire dans la douleur.[4]

Tranquillity of conscience is more important than either physical or psychological pleasures, because these may be poisoned by remorse if they are contrary to virtue, whereas the man who retains a good conscience, though suffering physically and mentally, can still at least prefer his lot to that of a man living amid luxury and pleasure, but tormented by guilt and self-contempt: "Il reste . . . dans ces coeurs-là une particule sensible que le

[1] Roth, XII, 92 (To François Tronchin; July 17, 1772).

[2] Entretien d'un philosophe avec la maréchale de . . ., AT, II, 510.

[3] Essai sur la peinture, AT, X, 485.

[4] Roth, II, 57. (To the Princess de Nassau-Saarbrück; May or June, 1758).

ver ronge sans cesse et ne détruit jamais."[1] Remorse is the greatest of all sufferings.[2] In Le Fils naturel, Dorval, in order to persuade Rosalie that they must give up their love, stresses the unhappiness which remorse and shame would bring them:

> Songez, mademoiselle, qu'une seule idée fâcheuse qui nous suit, suffit pour anéantir le bonheur; et que la conscience d'une mauvaise action est la plus fâcheuse de toutes les idées. Quand nous avons commis le mal, il ne nous quitte plus; il s'établit au fond de notre âme avec la honte et le remords; nous le portons en nous, et il nous tourmente.[3]

Diderot's theory of the inevitable remorse of the wicked man helps him refute the objection that wickedness is often crowned with success:

> Dans les sociétés corrompues, les avantages du vice sont évidents; son châtiment est au fond du coeur, on ne l'aperçoit point. C'est presque le contraire de la vertu.[4]

The peace of the soul which constitutes the essence of happiness can be known only by the virtuous man: "La sérénité n'habite que dans l'âme de l'homme de bien; il fait nuit dans l'âme du méchant."[5]

If wicked men merely despised virtue, it would be hard to account for the phenomenon of remorse, but, according to Diderot,

[1] Roth, IV, 211 (Oct. 31, 1762).

[2] Roth, IX, 179 (To Mme de Maux [?]; probably Autumn 1769).

[3] AT, VII, 78.

[4] Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron, AT, III, 252.

[5] Pensées détachées sur la peinture, AT, XII, 86.

they always respect and admire virtue in the depth of their hearts:

> Lorsque je vois un scélérat capable d'une action héroïque, je demeure convaincu que les hommes de bien sont plus réellement hommes de bien, que les méchants ne sont vraiment méchants; que la bonté nous est plus indivisiblement attachée que la méchanceté; et, qu'en général, il reste plus de bonté dans l'âme d'un méchant, que de méchanceté dans l'âme des bons.[1]

He is convinced that "il n'y a point de méchant qui n'ait souvent désiré d'être bon, et que le bon ne désira jamais d'être méchant."[2] In the same work he writes: "On peut haïr un homme vertueux dont la présence nous en impose; mais je ne crois pas que le plus méchant des hommes puisse haïr la vertu et la vérité, non plus que trouver beau ce qui est hideux."[3]

Virtue, then, even when it conflicts with a man's material interest, at least exempts him from remorse and brings him peace of mind and self-respect. "Il n'y a de félicité que pour l'homme dont la conscience est en paix," writes Diderot to his brother;[4] and to General Betsky: "je ne connais rien dans ce monde dont un homme qui a pour soi l'attestation du censeur que la nature a placé au-dessous de la mamelle gauche puisse se laisser affecter jusqu'à un certain point."[5] It is the consciousness of his virtue,

[1] Entretiens sur le Fils naturel, AT, VII, pp. 127-28. Cf. Roth, III, 281 (To Sophie Volland; Dec. 1, 1760).

[2] Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron, AT, III, 172.

[3] Ibid., p. 358.

[4] Roth, XII, 134 (Sept. 25, 1772).

[5] AT, XX, 61 (June 9, 1774). Diderot is speaking metaphorically when he refers to the heart in this way. As we shall see in the next chapter (pp. 254-55), he does not believe in the doctrine of a special moral sense. The conscience is, in his view, not an innate faculty, but is of experiential origin.

we are told, which consoles Seneca when he has lost all the other precious things in life.[1] In a letter to Vernes, Diderot extols the virtuous man:

> Ah! monsieur, étendez cet homme sur de la paille, au fond d'un cachot. Chargez-le de chaînes. Accumulez sur ses membres toute la variété des tourments. Vous en arracherez peut-être des gémissements; mais vous ne l'empêcherez point d'être ce qu'il aime le mieux. Privez-le de tout. Faites-le mourir au coin d'une rue, le dos appuyé contre une borne, et vous ne l'empêcherez pas de mourir content.[2]

Diderot sums up his justification of virtue by affirming that good men have no reason for envying the lot of the wicked or for thinking that there is any injustice in the worldly success which often attends their wickedness, for the wicked man is sufficiently punished by the very fact that he is wicked. Hence this prayer of a Muslim philosopher:

> O mon Dieu, pardonne aux méchants, parce que tu n'as rien fait pour eux, puisque tu les as laissés devenir méchants. Les bons n'ont rien de plus à te demander, parce qu'en les faisant bons, tu as tout fait pour eux.[3]

Such is Diderot's attempt to derive from a certain conception

[1] Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron, AT, III, 136.

[2] Roth, II, 108 (Jan. 9, 1759).

[3] Roth, IV, 172 (To Sophie Volland; Sept. 26, 1762). Cf. also Roth, III, 118 (To Sophie Volland; Oct. 7, 1760); Addition aux Pensées philosophiques, section xii, ed. Vernière, p. 59; Salon de 1769, AT, XI, 45.

of human nature positive principles of duty which apply to all men. Since he constantly stresses that this is a task in which he is not sure that he has succeeded, the question arises whether he is fully convinced of the truth of the propositions he is trying to prove or whether he merely has a strong desire to believe them. I shall devote my next and final chapter to seeking an answer to this question.

CHAPTER VIII

DIDEROT'S ETHICAL DILEMMA

In the course of my analysis of Diderot's attempt to base a universal ethic on enlightened self-interest, I have had occasion to note[1] certain misgivings on his part regarding his chances of success in this venture. To complete the picture of his ethical thought, it will be necessary to examine the significance of these doubts.

We have seen that, in order to remain faithful to his deterministic account of human psychology, Diderot defines moral obligation in terms of the happiness of the agent, and, further, that an evaluation of the agent's true happiness must take into account the elusive factor of remorse. Now, to claim that the man who acts against the general interest will inevitably feel remorse implies the existence in all men of a moral conscience. Our present enquiry must begin with a discussion of Diderot's doctrine concerning the origin and development of this moral conscience.

It would perhaps have simplified his problem if he had been willing, along with several of the moralists with whose writings he was familiar, to consider that knowledge of moral principles was innate, or at least that it was acquired by the exercise of

[1] See above, pp. 239-40.

a special moral faculty which received knowledge of the moral world in much the same way as the faculty of vision receives knowledge of the visible world. But Diderot consistently rejects both these views. In the Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville, A remarks that the law of nature is a law which we bring with us into the world "gravée au fond de nos coeurs." B corrects him:

> Cela n'est pas exact. Nous n'apportons en naissant qu'une similitude d'organisation avec d'autres êtres, les mêmes besoins, de l'attrait vers les mêmes plaisirs, une aversion commune pour les mêmes peines: voilà ce qui constitue l'homme ce qu'il est, et doit fonder la morale qui lui convient.[1]

In his commentary on Hemsterhuis, Diderot rejects the Dutch philosopher's theory that there exists a special moral faculty the function of which is to make moral judgments. These are made, says Diderot, by the same organ which makes all other judgments, i.e. the brain: "Ce n'est point un organe particulier; ce n'est toujours que la raison, ou la faculté intuitive appliquée à un nouvel objet; il est vrai que cette application donne de l'exercice au diaphragme, aux muscles, aux nerfs, à toute la machine."[2]

Another theory current in the eighteenth-century is that human beings have a natural sympathy for others of their species. In Diderot there are a few references to the existence in man of a principle of benevolence, with which is associated a complementary principle of self-love. The clearest text is the following:

[1] AT, II, 241.

[2] Commentaire sur Hemsterhuis, p. 241.

> Il y a dans la nature de l'homme deux principes opposés: l'amour-propre qui nous rappelle à nous, et la bienveillance qui nous répand. Si l'un de ces deux ressorts venait à se briser, on serait ou méchant jusqu'à la fureur, ou généreux jusqu'à la folie.[1]

It is not quite clear, however, whether this benevolence is innate or acquired through experience. If it is acquired, we have merely a variant of the experiential explanation of the moral conscience which we shall discuss later. If it is viewed as innate, it is still not in itself a sufficient explanation of the development of the moral conscience, since the function of the latter would, on this theory, presumably consist in establishing some proportion between the two principles of benevolence and self-love, when they are in conflict. Nor, in fact, does Diderot seem to base his theory of the origin of the moral conscience on these two principles.

For Diderot, the moral conscience -- in other words, an awareness of the obligation to respect the principles of justice -- is the result of the individual's experience, from his earliest infancy. This experience shows him that he needs the cooperation of other people, and that in order to obtain it he must behave toward others as he would have them behave toward himself. The individual soon realizes that other people are basically similar to himself and have the same needs as he has. He realizes that they need him as much as he needs them. It is this similarity in

[1] Roth, II, 52 (To the Princess de Nassau-Saarbrück; May or June 1758).

physical and psychological constitution between men -- Diderot calls it "identité [or "similitude"] d'organisation"[1] -- which explains the universality of the notions of justice, friendship, fidelity and the other virtues. The common weakness of men confronted by nature has necessitated their cooperation; hence society has arisen. For society is, essentially, "une lutte commune et concertée contre des dangers communs, et naissant du sein de la nature même qui menace l'homme de cent côtés différents".[2] In other words, recognition of ethical principles is really only a refined form of self-interest. Remarking that Helvétius defines man as an animal who combines ideas, Diderot enquires: "Quelles idées combine-t-il, si ce n'est celles de son repos, de son bonheur, de sa sécurité, idées très voisines de la notion de justice?"[3] One might object that ideas can be very close to each other without being identical. Diderot would answer, presumably, that, in his opinion, enlightened self-interest is in fact identical with the acceptance of the duty to be just, since, in his doctrine, the only duty, in the final analysis, is to seek one's own happiness. This text continues with an argument designed to answer the objection that only weak men are motivated to justice by enlightened self-interest:

[1] Réfutation d'Helvétius, AT, II, 356: ". . . la morale est fondée sur l'identité d'organisation, source des mêmes besoins, des mêmes peines, des mêmes plaisirs, des mêmes aversions, des mêmes désirs, des mêmes passions." Cf. AT, VI, 444.

[2] Fragment échappés, AT, VI, 444-45.

[3] Réfutation d'Helvétius, AT, II, 355-56.

> Si un homme seul était plus fort que tous les hommes qui l'entourent, peut-être vieillirait-il sans avoir d'autres idées claires que celles de la force et de la faiblesse; mais il ne tarde pas à connaître le ressentiment, puisqu'il l'éprouve, et à savoir que la flèche qui le frappera par derrière traversera sa poitrine, l'étendra mort sur place, et que cette flèche peut partir de la main d'un enfant. Qu'en conclura-t-il? Qu'il est dangereux de faire injure à l'enfant.[1]

These quotations from the Réfutation d'Helvétius might lead one to suppose that Diderot thinks that the moral knowledge derived from experience always takes the form of consciously formulated general principles which are then applied to particular cases. This, however, does not seem to have been his carefully considered opinion. He points out that men knew what justice required of them in particular circumstances long before any general principles of justice had been formulated:

> Il n'y a pas de science plus évidente et plus simple que la morale pour l'ignorant; il n'y en a pas de plus épineuse et de plus obscure pour le savant. C'est peut-être la seule où l'on ait tiré les corollaires les plus vrais, les plus éloignés et les plus hardis, avant que d'avoir posé des principes. Pourquoi cela? C'est qu'il y a des héros longtemps avant qu'il y ait des raisonneurs. C'est le loisir qui fait les uns, c'est la circonstance qui fait les autres: le raisonneur se forme dans les écoles, qui s'ouvrent tard; le héros naît dans les périls, qui sont de tous les temps. . . . Souvent il faudrait un long discours au philosophe pour démontrer ce que l'homme du peuple a subitement senti.[2]

Diderot reports to Sophie Volland the opinion which he had expressed in a conversation about "instinct", a word which, he says, is

[1] Ibid., p. 356.

[2] Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron, AT, III, 313-14. Cf. Observations sur le Nakaz, ed. cit., p. 405, where a similar point is made with regard to principles of political justice.

constantly applied to taste and to morality, but which is never defined:

> Je prétendis que ce n'était en nous que le résultat d'une infinité de petites expériences qui avaient commencé au moment où nous ouvrîmes les yeux à la lumière, jusqu'à celui où, dirigés secrètement par ces essais dont nous n'avions plus la mémoire, nous prononcions que telle chose était bien ou mal, belle ou laide, bonne ou mauvaise, sans avoir aucune raison présente à l'esprit de notre jugement favorable ou défavorable.[1]

This view is in line with his general theory of human action. He does not believe that conscious logic, either deductive or inductive, is the typical way in which the human mind puts into effect the lessons of experience and so directs action efficaciously. The following passage explains how he conceives the typical relation between experience and judgment or action:

> Qu'est-ce donc que le goût? Une facilité acquise par des expériences réitérées, à saisir le vrai ou le bon, avec la circonstance qui le rend beau, et d'en être promptement et vivement touché.
>
> Si les expériences qui déterminent le jugement sont présentes à la mémoire, on aura le goût éclairé; si la mémoire en est passée, et qu'il n'en reste que l'impression, on aura le tact, l'instinct.
>
> Michel-Ange donne au dôme de Saint-Pierre de Rome la plus belle forme possible. Le géomètre de La Hire, frappé de cette forme, en trace l'épure, et trouve que cette épure est la courbe de la plus grande résistance. Qui est-ce qui inspira cette courbe à Michel-Ange, entre une infinité d'autres qu'il pouvait choisir? L'expérience journalière de la vie. C'est elle qui suggère au maître charpentier, aussi sûrement qu'au sublime Euler, l'angle de l'étai avec le mur qui menace ruine; c'est elle qui lui a appris à donner à l'aile du moulin l'inclinaison la plus favorable au mouvement de rotation; c'est elle qui fait souvent entrer, dans son calcul subtil, des éléments que la géométrie de l'Académie ne saurait saisir.[2]

[1] Roth, IV, 125 (Sept. 2, 1762).

[2] Essai sur la peinture, AT, X, 519. The examples Diderot cites here are also used in the letter to Sophie which I have just quoted.

Diderot's theory of the development of the moral conscience provides, it is true, a plausible explanation of the phenomenon of remorse; but it fails to offer any assurance that this phenomenon must occur universally or that, in cases where remorse is experienced, the suffering it causes will necessarily be greater than the sacrifice entailed by virtue. May there not exist some individuals in whom the combination of original propensities and social experience has resulted in their particular brand of happiness being incompatible with virtue, even when all due allowance is made for feelings of remorse? For Diderot's ultimate dilemma is this: how can he base duty on the dictates of individual happiness and at the same time affirm that all men have the same duties, unless he is ready to assert that the true happiness of all individuals is the same?

That Diderot had grave doubts concerning the validity of this last assertion is clear from his remarks on a book entitled Le Temple du Bonheur. He relates how one day, as he is enjoying the pleasures of country life at d'Holbach's estate, he is delighted to witness the arrival of his friend Galiani. The abbé, however, refuses to stay a moment longer than his commission requires. "Je hais la campagne à la mort," he explains, "et je me jetterais dans ce canal si j'étais condamné à passer ici un quart d'heure de plus."[1] This is enough to convince Diderot how

[1] AT, VI, 438.

different is one man's happiness from another's. Such reflections may, perhaps, seem innocuous enough, since a man's preference for town or country life need not affect his moral conduct. But Diderot goes on to apply the principle of the individual character of happiness directly to the question of ethics:

> Mais quoi! est-ce que la pratique de la vertu n'est pas un sûr moyen d'être heureux? . . . Non, parbleu, il y a tel homme si malheureusement né, si violemment entraîné par l'avarice, l'ambition, l'amour désordonné des femmes, que je le condamnerais au malheur si je lui prescrivais une lutte continuelle contre sa passion dominante. Mais cet homme ne sera-t-il pas plus malheureux par les suites de sa passion que par la lutte qu'il exercera contre elle? Ma foi, je n'en sais rien, et je vois tous les jours des hommes qui aiment mieux mourir que de se corriger.[1]

The text continues with a specific allusion to Diderot's long-cherished hope of demonstrating the link between virtue and happiness:

> J'étais bien jeune lorsqu'il me vint en tête que la morale entière consistait à prouver aux hommes qu'après tout, pour être heureux, on n'avait rien de mieux à faire dans ce monde que d'être vertueux; tout de suite je me suis mis à méditer cette question, et je la médite encore.[2]

In the light of Diderot's preceding remarks, this can only mean that he doubts whether the virtue-happiness bond holds true in all cases, even when one takes into account the suffering of remorse. This is a problem which must necessarily arise for a moralist who contends that "notre propre bonheur est la base de

[1] Ibid., pp. 438-39.

[2] Ibid., p. 439.

tous nos vrais devoirs", and who then finds himself obliged to admit that "il y a autant de manières d'être heureux qu'il y a d'individus."[1]

I have already pointed out that, according to Diderot, all psychological phenomena correspond to material modifications in the body, and more particularly in the brain.[2] It follows that, in the final analysis, what defines the happiness peculiar to a given individual is his total bodily state, what Diderot calls "organisation". In his attempt to construct a universal ethic, he accords great importance, as we have seen,[3] to the principle of the identity of organisation. But, as he constantly points out to Helvétius, this identity is only approximate. As early as 1757, in the essay De la poésie dramatique, he remarks that we can scarcely wonder if men's judgments concerning truth, goodness and beauty are neither uniform nor consistent, since men differ so much organically and psychologically and since a given individual undergoes so many changes in the course of his life. For Diderot, who has so passionate a need to believe in permanent and universal values, the dilemma is acute:

> L'homme est-il donc condamné à n'être d'accord ni avec ses semblables, ni avec lui-même, sur les seuls objets qu'il lui importe de connaître, la vérité, la bonté, la beauté? Sont-ce là des choses locales, momentanées et arbitraires, des mots vides de sens?

[1] Observations sur le Nakaz, ed. cit., p. 404.

[2] See above, p. 22.

[3] See above, p. 233.

> N'y a-t-il rien qui soit tel? Une chose est-elle vraie, bonne et belle, quand elle me le paraît? Et toutes nos disputes sur le goût se résoudraient-elles enfin à cette proposition: nous sommes, vous et moi, deux êtres différents; et moi-même, je ne suis jamais dans un instant ce que j'étais dans un autre?[1]

Diderot further reflects on this question in the Salon de 1767. First he points out that the very identity of organisation which defines a species defines also its morality and limits the applicability of this morality to the species in question:

> Tout tend à son bonheur; et le bonheur d'un être ne peut être le bonheur d'un autre... La morale se renferme donc dans l'enceinte d'une espèce... Qu'est-ce qu'une espèce?... Une multitude d'individus organisés de la même manière... Quoi! l'organisation serait la base de la morale!... Je le crois...[2]

Next, admitting that a species is not composed of exactly identical individuals, he draws the ethical consequences of this fact:

> . . . je pensais que s'il y avait une morale propre à une espèce d'animaux et une morale propre à une autre espèce, peut-être dans la même espèce y avait-il une morale propre à différents individus, ou du moins à différentes conditions ou collections d'individus semblables . . . .[3]

The example Diderot chooses to illustrate these remarks is

[1] AT, VII, 391-92. Diderot proposes that we find the required universal standards of truth, goodness and beauty in an ideal of humanity which must be formed in the imagination from elements actually existing in nature. He does not, unfortunately, explain how we are to select the appropriate elements, or how different individuals could agree on this selection. If he means that forming the proposed ideal is to be the task of an élite of wise men, how could the conclusions of such a minority be binding for all men? It seems, therefore, that the initial problem remains unsolved.

[2] AT, XI, 124.

[3] Ibid., p. 124.

the artist. To attain the sublime in his works, the artist, or the poet, must constantly seek extremes and avoid that golden mean which in everyday life is the road to happiness. But Diderot's meditation is not long confined to the nature of the artist's creative activity. Even though the work in which this text is placed is concerned primarily with aesthetic judgments, here he is reflecting on an ethical question. His example, which, he declares a few lines earlier, is chosen so as not to scandalize his reader "par un exemple trop sérieux", quickly changes character. What he is really concerned with are men who, not in artistic productions, but in their real lives, are poets:

> Il ne faut point faire de la poésie dans la vie. Les héros, les amants romanesques, les grands patriotes, les magistrats inflexibles, les apôtres de religion, les philosophes à toute outrance, tous ces rares et divins insensés font de la poésie dans la vie, de là leur malheur.[1]

Here and in the page which follows there is an inextricable mixture of literalness and irony. It is quite clear that all Diderot's sympathy is for these "divine madmen". Not only does he honour them for the benefits they bestow on mankind, but he finds their character admirable _per se_. He would like to resemble them; no doubt he knows that at times he has. But he knows at the same time that these people suffer as a result of their single-mindedness. Yet this is not Diderot's last word on the matter. The onlooker who does not share these men's ideals cannot weigh

[1] _Ibid._, p. 125.

against their obvious sacrifices and misfortunes the satisfactions which they themselves experience. Diderot's experience is wide enough to embrace both points of view: "Je faisais en moi-même l'éloge de la médiocrité qui met également à l'abri du blâme et de l'envie, et je me demandais pourquoi cependant personne ne voudrait perdre de sa sensibilité et devenir médiocre?"[1]

It will be noticed that some of these "divine madmen" are men whose moral conscience makes demands on them which exceed those which the majority of honest, law-abiding citizens experience. The question therefore arises, how the theory of the origin and development of the moral conscience which I outlined earlier in this chapter can account for cases such as these. We can, indeed, broaden the question to include the problem posed by all kinds of behaviour which are commonly described as altruistic. How does it come about that some men, for example, consider themselves bound by a principle of justice even beyond the group in which their self-interest can be an operative motivation? Similarity of organisation and the need for cooperation in the struggle against nature explain the recognition of rules of conduct within a group, but they do not make inevitably for the application of these rules to outsiders. Diderot points this out himself:

> Voilà l'origine des liens particuliers et des vertus domestiques; voilà l'origine des liens généraux et

[1] Ibid., p. 125.

> des vertus publiques; voilà la source de la notion d'une utilité personnelle et publique; voilà la source de tous les pactes individuels et de toutes les lois; voilà la cause de la force de ces lois dans une nation pauvre et menacée; voilà la cause de leur faiblesse dans une nation tranquille et opulente; voilà la cause de leur presque nullité d'une nation à l'autre.[1]

We have already seen that Diderot himself will not countenance such a limitation of the field of application of the principles of justice.

The difficulty could partly be solved by saying that once contact has been made with another individual or group, the possibility of reciprocity, either cooperative or retaliatory, cannot be ruled out, and that this is sufficient reason for extending the principle of justice to all mankind. This explanation does not, however, account for the fairly widespread concern for the welfare of posterity, a concern which forms an important part of Diderot's personal moral commitment.

Nor does an account of the moral conscience which relies solely on enlightened self-interest explain how it happens that some men acquire a positive preference for just conduct and do not conform to it simply as a prudential calculation. Diderot often quotes examples from ancient history of personal sacrifice for the sake of the group, when not to make the sacrifice would not have meant punishment or even blame from the group. That certain people feel themselves morally obligated beyond what society at large considers to be the "call of duty" is hardly deniable. It will be recalled that one of the ideas of Landois

[1] Fragments échappés, AT, VI, 445.

which Diderot rejects is that men receive virtue grudgingly, as a patient does his medicine.[1]

This same letter to Landois provides, I think, Diderot's answer to the problem. He describes the man committed to virtue as a man who has a special kind of vanity, who constantly congratulates himself on possessing the inner strength necessary to make the sacrifices entailed by pursuing the general interest in preference to his particular interest. The origin of this "vanity" must lie in the transformation of a purely prudential attachment to justice into an independent motivation. This is consistent with the doctrine of the autonomy of acquired psychological drives with which Diderot counters Helvétius's attempt to reduce all human motivation to basic physical needs.[2] I think this doctrine explains Diderot's position in another text in which he rejects an entirely prudential account of the moral conscience:

> J'avouais bien que la crainte du ressentiment était bien la plus forte digue de la méchanceté; mais je voulais qu'à ce motif on en joignît un autre qui naissait de l'essence même de la vertu, si la vertu n'était pas un mot; je voulais que le caractère ne s'en effaçât jamais entièrement, dans les âmes même les plus dégradées. Je voulais qu'un homme qui préférait son intérêt propre au bien public sentît plus ou moins qu'on pouvait faire mieux et qu'il s'estimât moins de n'avoir pas la force de se sacrifier.[3]

These remarks do not imply that love of virtue is innate, but that

[1] Roth, I, 212 (June 29, 1756). See above p. 76.

[2] Cf. Réfutation d'Helvétius, AT, II, passim.

[3] Roth, III, 281 (To Sophie Volland; Dec. 1, 1760).

from the theoretical point of view, it is as much a contradiction of the universality of morality as the absence or deficiency of the moral conscience in some men. The two cases seem, in fact, to be linked in Diderot's thought in the passage from the Salon de 1767 which I have been discussing. When he says he has chosen the example of the ethic appropriate to the artist so as to avoid a more scandalous example, I think he is alluding precisely to the antithesis of those benefactors of mankind to whom his reflections on the artist almost immediately bring him. The really scandalous example would be the wicked man who delights in his wickedness.

Diderot's experiential doctrine of the origin and development of the moral conscience thus fails to give one a solid assurance that in certain individuals the interaction of their original dispositions and their experience will not result in a defective development of the moral conscience. Extreme cases will be rare, for even where the generalizing process referred to earlier fails to operate, social pressures are usually strong enough to produce at least a veil of prudent conformism. But in certain cases of mental derangement, where reality is unable to make itself adequately felt, one will find delight in maleficence in an undisguised form. Such is the case of the "wild beast" who murders a capuchin monk and revels in watching the contortions of his

once a commitment to just and cooperative conduct has been established in infancy and early childhood, it henceforth persists as an independent force in the personality, and even when, later on, other motivations outweigh it, it makes itself felt in the form of remorse.

The process by which the commitment to moral rules becomes independent of prudential self-interest appears in the following passage to consist of the generalization of the rule to include the moral agent himself objectively and on a footing of equality with other moral agents:

> Nous ne pouvons exister longtemps sans concevoir des idées d'ordre et de désordre, de bienfaisance et de malfaisance, d'amour et d'aversion en nous et dans les autres. Il est impossible que nous ne jugions pas nos propres actions, en les comparant à ces idées. Il est impossible que nous ne nous avouions pas à nous-mêmes leur conformité ou opposition à ces idées; et voilà la conscience qui juge. Il est impossible que nous nous refusions le mépris que nous aurions pour un autre qui les auraient commises; et voilà le remords qui naît. Il est impossible que nous entendions les autres détester ces actions et ceux qui les ont commises sans rougir; et voilà la honte; sans craindre d'être découverts et d'en être châtiés; et voilà le malaise du malfaiteur.[1]

In this way, Diderot succeeds in making his theory of motivation sufficiently complex to account for those individuals whose conscience makes greater demands on them than is the case with the average man; but this does not really help him to establish the universality of the principle of moral obligation. True, moral heroism is not usually considered to present a problem, but,

[1] Commentaire sur Hemsterhuis, p. 315.

dying victim.[1] In Nero we see an inborn malevolence eventually overcoming the superimposed education:

> Claude était né bon; des courtisans pervers le rendirent méchant: Néron, né méchant, ne put jamais devenir bon sous les meilleurs instituteurs. La vie de Claude est parsemée d'actions louables: il vient un moment où celle de Néron cesse d'en offrir.[2]

However, besides such instances of positive malevolence, there are numerous cases where it would appear that the influence of an ethic generally accepted, and sanctioned (albeit imperfectly) by legislation, has as its sole effect the desire to avoid punishment. Diderot's works offer a whole portrait-gallery of characters in whom there is no interior commitment to beneficence. Among these characters one should distinguish on the one hand men like Gousse and Father Hudson, whose personal ethic is unorthodox, who seem not to have arrived at a clear general principle of conduct and who therefore appear as beings alternately determined by good and by evil motives, and on the other hand characters like the Lui of Lui et Moi, Palissot and the renegade of Avignon, who, for all one can tell, are devoid of the capacity to derive pleasure from an act which benefits another.[3] But the

[1] Réfutation d'Helvétius, AT, II, 408.

[2] Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron, AT, III, 61.

[3] For Gousse, see Jacques le fataliste, AT, VI, 69-71; for Father Hudson, see ibid., pp. 183-92; for Palissot, see Le Neveu de Rameau, AT, V, 450-51; for the renegade of Avignon, see above, p. 205. The dialogue Lui et Moi appears in AT, XVII, 481-85.

problem whether a man may possibly be so constituted that his true happiness does not necessarily require him to be beneficent is most strikingly posed by Rameau's nephew, though scarcely in the most straightforward manner, since we can never be sure that his analysis of his own nature is correct: he may be attempting to deceive his interlocutor, and he may be himself deceived. The Nephew's claim is that he is essentially indifferent to moral values:

> . . . dans un sujet aussi variable que les moeurs, il n'y a d'absolument, d'essentiellement, de généralement vrai ou faux; sinon qu'il faut être ce que l'intérêt veut qu'on soit, bon ou mauvais, sage ou fou, décent ou ridicule, honnête ou vicieux.[1]

Those critics who have supposed that in Le Neveu de Rameau Diderot faces up to the logical consequences for ethics of his own deterministic materialism would presumably find support for their view in the passage I have just quoted. Now, it is true that Diderot's theory of motivation can be expressed in these terms, but there is a difference between his theory of motivation and his theory of moral obligation. The concept of interest on which the latter is based is that of true, as opposed to apparent, interest. Strictly speaking, for Diderot to admit that his ethic does not apply momentarily is a truism, because his determinism requires him to hold that every action actually performed is that which at the moment when it occurs costs the agent least; in other words, one always obeys the strongest motivation. The theory of

[1] Le Neveu de Rameau, AT, V, 443-44.

ethical value is, and can only be, concerned with the effect of conduct over a considerable period of time, ideally the whole life of the agent. The Nephew's parting remark, "Rira bien qui rira le dernier," is paralleled by the following remarks from the Conclusion of the Eléments de physiologie: "Je ne saurai qu'à la fin ce que j'aurai perdu ou gagné dans ce vaste tripot, où j'aurai passé une soixantaine d'années le cornet à la main, tesseras agitans."[1] It is, of course, quite possible that the Nephew too is thinking of the long-term conception of interest. In this case, his statement is indeed a challenge to Diderot's ethical position, since it implies a denial of the philosopher's contention that true happiness, that is to say long-term self-interest, always dictates a policy of beneficence. It seems to me that the real challenge which the Nephew represents for Diderot is not, therefore, the necessary logical outcome of the principle of determinism, since the virtue-happiness equivalence is not logically incompatible with determinism; nor is it the logical outcome of Diderot's materialism, since this is not concerned solely with physical pleasures. Rather, the issue is an empirical one: are men what Diderot would like to believe them to be, or are they as the Nephew sees them?

The refusal of the author to provide the answer to the ethical riddle posed by his work should not be taken as proof that the

[1] Ed. Mayer, p. 307. Cf. Plan d'une université, AT, III, 456: "Toute notre vie n'est qu'un jeu de hasard; tâchons d'avoir la chance pour nous."

Nephew represents an aspect of Diderot's personality which he normally suppressed, but which continued to strive for release nevertheless, and to which he gave oblique expression in the creations of his imagination. There are none but superficial resemblances between Diderot and the Nephew. Above all, Rameau does not represent the free being Diderot would like to be; on the contrary, he is servile and dependent. The worm has turned,[1] momentarily, it is true, but Rameau's present refusal to humiliate himself by begging for the forgiveness and continued hospitality of the patrons who have ejected him is but the exception which proves the rule to which his life conforms. How long can we expect him to maintain his defiant stance? It may well be true that Diderot had to combat within himself the desire to throw off conventional morality; but this is not at all the meaning of the Nephew's position. Rather, his morality consists of a precise conformity to the standards of behaviour generally prevailing in the society which he frequents.[2] With such a

[1] AT, V, 430: "Moi: . . . votre dignité me fait rire. Lui: Chacun a la sienne. Je veux bien oublier la mienne, mais à ma discrétion et non à l'ordre d'autrui. Faut-il qu'on puisse me dire: Rampe, et que je sois obligé de ramper? C'est l'allure du ver, c'est la mienne; nous la suivons l'un et l'autre quand on nous laisse aller, mais nous nous redressons quand on nous marche sur la queue; on m'a marché sur la queue, et je me redresserai.

[2] Cf. AT, V, 419: "Moi: Et pourquoi employer toutes ces petites viles ruses-là? Lui: Viles! et pourquoi, s'il vous plaît? Elles sont d'usage dans mon état; et je ne m'avilis pas en faisant comme tout le monde. Ce n'est pas moi qui les ai inventées, et je serais bizarre et maladroit de ne pas m'y conformer."

character Diderot, at any level of his being, can have had little sympathy. The true meaning of Le Neveu de Rameau cannot be expressed by reducing it to a clear-cut affirmation of an ethical principle, of any sort. But, if anything is certain, it is that it does not imply any doubt on Diderot's part concerning his personal moral commitment. The main ethical significance of the figure of the Nephew is that he embodies a challenge to Diderot's proposed universal ethic. If the Nephew is really what he claims to be, then human nature is not what Diderot would like to think it is, or perhaps there is no universal human nature at all. But in the dialogue this problem is ultimately left unresolved.

In the Salon de 1767, Diderot himself points out that any attempt to justify a universal ethic must be based on a certain conception of human nature:

> Que suis-je?... Qu'est-ce qu'un homme?... Un animal?... Sans doute; mais le chien est un animal aussi; le loup est un animal aussi. Mais l'homme n'est ni un loup ni un chien... Quelle notion précise peut-on avoir du bien et du mal, du beau et du laid, du bon et du mauvais, du vrai et du faux, sans une notion préliminaire de l'homme?... Mais si l'homme ne peut se définir... tout est perdu. Combien de philosophes, faute de ces observations si simples, ont fait à l'homme la morale des loups, aussi bêtes en cela que s'ils avaient

prescrit aux loups la morale de l'homme![1]

Let us consider for a moment Diderot's passing query, whether any definition of man is possible. For his purposes, neither a rough practical definition, nor the various definitions proposed by anatomists or anthropologists, are sufficient. Diderot needs a definition capable of serving as a basis for his pre-conceived idea of an ethic which is universally appropriate to mankind. Thus his doubt concerning the possibility of a definition of man is just another way of expressing his doubt as to the success of his attempt to demonstrate that enlightened self-interest justifies an ethic of social cooperation.

Diderot's main aspiration as an ethical thinker is to replace the authority of divine will or of positive law, which, in his opinion, subjects man to moral bondage, by an authority which, having its source within the individual himself, is compatible with his moral freedom, while at the same time it transcends the individual by its simultaneous presence in all men. Thus the young Diderot in the Entretien d'un père avec ses enfants resolves to be guided by the "reason of the human species", in which he participates, to quote "Droit naturel", by "a pure act of the

[1] AT, XI, 124. Diderot is presumably thinking particularly of Hobbes, one of whose maxims was homo homini lupus. The objections which he later raised to Helvétius's doctrine also stress the error of treating man as if he were one of the animals. Helvétius equates human motivation with that of animals in general, seeing men as prompted in all things by the desire for sensual pleasure and aversion for physical pain. Diderot complains that this may be true of the lower animals, but that in man one cannot deny other kinds of motivation: "Il me faut des causes propres à l'homme." (AT, II, 300.)

understanding reasoning in the silence of the passions."[1] But Diderot only succeeds in eliminating the arbitrariness of the moral decisions of individuals by adopting an arbitrary definition of man and refusing to attribute human status to any individuals who do not conform to this definition. Thus, in "Droit naturel", he writes:

> J'aperçois d'abord une chose qui me semble avouée par le bon et par le méchant, c'est qu'il faut raisonner en tout, parce que l'homme n'est pas seulement un animal, mais un animal qui raisonne; qu'il y a par conséquent dans la question dont il s'agit des moyens de découvrir la vérité; que celui qui refuse de la chercher renonce à la qualité d'homme, et doit être traité par le reste de son espèce comme une bête farouche; et que la vérité un fois découverte, quiconque refuse de s'y conformer est insensé ou méchant d'une méchanceté morale.[2]

It seems to me that two objections can be raised to this position. First, who shall decide what is reason and what is unreason? Secondly, by excluding certain unreasonable or morally wicked men from the human species, has Diderot not already abandoned the quest for a completely universal ethic? It would indeed appear that the universal moral principles which he postulates in "Droit naturel" are, in effect, binding only for those whom he considers to be "rational". I say "rational", rather than "virtuous", because Diderot wishes his ethic to apply to the wicked also, provided that they are rational, for, if they are, he believes that they

[1] See above pp. 228-29.

[2] AT, XIV, 298.

will say, like Medea: "Video meliora, proboque, deteriora sequor."[1]

The article "Droit naturel" poses a particular problem which I shall now discuss because the solution I propose has an important bearing on the question of Diderot's success or failure in establishing a universal ethic. This problem concerns particularly the following paragraph:

> Il est évident que si l'homme n'est pas libre, ou que si ses déterminations instantanées, ou même ses oscillations, naissant de quelque chose de matériel qui soit extérieur à son âme, son choix n'est point l'acte pur d'une substance incorporelle et d'une faculté simple de cette substance, il n'y aura ni bonté ni méchanceté raisonnées, quoiqu'il puisse y avoir bonté et méchanceté animales; il n'y aura ni bien ni mal moral, ni juste ni injuste, ni obligation ni droit. D'où l'on voit, pour le dire en passant, combien il importe d'établir solidement la réalité, je ne dis pas du <u>volontaire</u>, mais de la <u>liberté</u>, qu'on ne confond que trop ordinairement avec le <u>volontaire</u>.[2]

I think it is clear that Diderot intends any censor, and indeed any orthodox reader, to understand that this paragraph is an affirmation of dualism and of free-will. However, what he in fact does is to state the ethical consequences which would be entailed by deterministic materialism and to point out that, if one is to avoid these consequences, one must establish the reality of free-will. "Droit naturel" appeared in volume V of the <u>Encyclopédie</u> in September 1755 and the letter to Landois dates from June 1756. Is it likely that Diderot's views on the question of free-will and determinism should have changed so radically in

[1] Diderot is fond of quoting or alluding to this verse of Ovid; e.g. Roth, VII, 205-06 (To Viallet; Oct. or Nov. 1767).

[2] AT, XIV, 297.

this interval of nine or ten months? Admittedly, it is not impossible -- especially if we assume that at the earlier date Diderot was already perfectly familiar with the arguments on both sides, but had not yet taken the final step of adhering to the deterministic doctrine. This would account for the great similarity in the way he formulates the question in the two texts, particularly with respect to the distinction between voluntary actions and free-will. I find this solution, however, very hard to accept. As early as 1753, in De l'Interprétation de la Nature, he points out that Maupertuis's attribution of sensibility to matter leads, if one draws the logical conclusions consistently, to a materialistic monism. Diderot is not sincere in claiming that in pointing to these consequences he is simply showing that Maupertuis's hypothesis, since it leads to consequences incompatible with the Christian conception of God, must be erroneous. Vernière notes[1] that Maupertuis, undeceived by Diderot's show of orthodoxy, remarks ironically in a work of 1756: "Si l'on était moins persuadé de la religion de l'auteur de l'Interprétation de la nature, on pourrait soupçonner que son dessein n'est pas tant de détruire l'hypothèse que d'en tirer ces conséquences qu'il appelle terribles." If then, in 1753, Diderot was willing to accept a materialistic account of the soul, how can one suppose that in 1755 he believes in free-will, which he defines as "l'acte pur d'une substance incorporelle et d'une faculté simple de cette

[1] Oeuvres philosophiques, p. 228, note 2.

substance"? I therefore conclude that the balance of probability favours the view that Diderot's professed rejection of determinism in "Droit naturel" is insincere.

If this be so, must we suppose that Diderot would admit that a contradiction exists between his deterministic views and the theory of natural law and the general will which he has elaborated in the remainder of this article? I think not, but contend rather that he does view this theory as meaningful even if one rejects the notion of free-will. In the first two paragraphs of the article he notes the complex problems besetting the philosopher who attempts to give a consistent rational account of natural law. He does not claim to be able to give a complete solution to these difficulties, but limits his objective to establishing certain principles which will provide answers to "les difficultés les plus considérables qu'on a coutume de proposer contre la notion du droit naturel."[1] The customary objections which he attempts to answer are, in fact, those of Hobbes, who rejects the traditional conception of natural law in favour of the view that justice is the result of social convention or the positive laws, which draw their binding authority from the contract of submission of subjects to government. We have already noted that on this point[2] Diderot consistently opposes the Hobbesian school. His opposition, however, does not in itself imply acceptance of free-will. If, in "Droit naturel", Diderot prefaces his rebuttal

[1] AT, XIV, 297.

[2] See above, pp. 168-69, 266.

of Hobbes by an insincere profession of belief in free-will, this merely indicates that, in disputing with Hobbes over the nature of right and obligation, he has decided to remain within the limits of his exoteric doctrine.[1] He is justified in doing so because right and obligation are concepts which are useful when one is dealing with that majority of mankind in whom social experience has developed, however imperfectly, a moral conscience. Individuals in whom this moral conscience has not developed belong, on the other hand, to a realm where the very notions of right and obligation are void of meaning. In "Droit naturel", Diderot affirms that they are to be treated by the rest of the human race as wild beasts; in the letter to Landois, he declares that they are to be strangled on the public square.[2] At this level, the exoteric and the esoteric doctrines coalesce.

Both of these doctrines are, I believe, proposed by Diderot as valid and useful each in its own domain. The exoteric doctrine, with its stress on rights and obligations, can, and indeed must, be applied in discussions where all parties accept as a basic assumption that the general good is a desirable end. Diderot shares that assumption with Hobbes, for example, and therefore can use it as a basis for discussing the nature of obligation. The esoteric doctrine, on the other hand, has the advantage of placing the whole question of human conduct in a broader perspective, in which both Hobbes and Diderot must see themselves

[1] See above, p. 74.

[2] Roth, I, 214 (June 29, 1756).

surrounded by men some of whom, like Rameau's nephew, do not share their basic assumption that the general good is desirable.

Generally speaking, Diderot's exoteric doctrine differs from his esoteric doctrine in that the former uses an orthodox terminology and treats as absolute certain principles which the esoteric doctrine recognizes as only relative to the prevailing form of society, the particular psychological condition of the individual or his social circumstances. With regard to the universality of ethical principles, however, the case is somewhat different. Here, the esoteric doctrine admits that there can be no complete universality, that there are men, albeit perhaps a small number, in whom duty, as Diderot conceives of it, does not require that they act in the general interest; the exoteric doctrine, on the other hand, refuses to admit these exceptions. On this point, therefore, it is not possible to maintain that the two doctrines are fundamentally identical. There seems here to have been a real hesitation in Diderot's mind. He so desperately wishes to believe that beneficence and social cooperation are the appropriate fulfilment of human nature in all individuals that he finds it difficult to resign himself to the conclusion that this is true of some men, but not of all men. It is here, I think, instead of in the question of materialism and determinism, that one is justified in locating the contradiction which many critics have seen between his intellect and his heart. If one allows for his overstating the case for ethical universality in many texts in order to refute the doctrine of arbitrary ethical

values and for rhetorical exaggeration for the purposes of moral exhortation, one finds the mature Diderot to be fundamentally sceptical about the possibility of a completely universal ethic.

Diderot's reluctance to admit the ultimate failure of his defence of a universally binding moral law has prevented him from exploring fully the theoretical consequences of such an ethical position. To conclude this chapter, I shall sketch out some of the consequences which seem to me to be implicit in his thinking on this question. I must at the same time warn the reader that we are here in the realm of hypothetical interpretation and that the paucity of direct evidence makes it impossible to maintain with complete assurance that Diderot would subscribe to all of the conclusions which I shall suggest.

The abandonment of ethical universality by no means leaves Diderot with no alternative but amoralism. He does not cease to believe that for himself duty is justice. Rameau's nephew does not represent a part or aspect of himself, but is the proof or illustration of the illusoriness of his desire to believe that all men are of the same moral nature as himself. Some men, he must ultimately admit, have a natural propensity towards beneficence and cooperative conduct, others towards maleficence. Social influences may modify the way these propensities are manifested in conduct; the naturally good man may be corrupted and the

naturally bad man be obliged out of prudence to restrain his maleficent impulses. The majority of men are, in any case, not predisposed in a decisive way either to beneficence or to maleficence; for them it is social influences which tip the balance. Thus it is true that the general standard of morality in a society will depend on the influence of legislation, government, education, etc., On the other hand, with regard to particular individuals, the relation between these influences and morality is not constant: there will always be some good men in the most corrupt societies, some evil men in the social systems most conducive to beneficence. If, therefore the proportion of good to evil in a given society is to be increased, social institutions will have to be modified so as to be more conducive to beneficence and justice on the part of individuals. But, in order that social institutions may be changed in this way, it is necessary that the influence of those individuals who already desire to promote the common welfare be stronger than the influence of those who have no such commitment. Thus one can consider the moral history of mankind as a struggle for dominance between opposing forces operating both through the instrument of social structure and through the agency of individual men.

In this battle between good and evil, the colours to which men rally are woven into the fabric of their destiny. Few are constantly faithful to only one standard. Indeed, the battle rages within each man as well as between men. Such internal struggles constitute the process of moral choice. The outcome

of this process is in each case predetermined. Whether one considers it to be free or not depends on one's definition of freedom. In any case, once one has rejected the notion of a spiritual soul, independent of the body and related in some way to a superior principle of goodness, the whole question of metaphysical freedom has a quite different significance. To ask the question whether man can be free is now to ask whether matter can be free, which is to say, whether the changes which affect it take place always according to constant principles or whether there can be random changes. It can be argued that to speak of such randomness as "freedom", thereby implying that conformity to constant laws is "bondage", is merely to apply the analogy of the freeman and the slave to a domain where it is no more than a poetical comparison devoid of real validity. Besides, it is hard to see why a thinker who desires a victory of good over evil in their eternal contest should see any reason for hope in the possibility of randomness, whether at the sub-atomic level or at that of human behaviour.

As for Diderot, he might possibly have derived hope and comfort from his theory of the two "procureurs généraux". There are, he says two "public prosecutors"; one is the official whose function is to punish those who break society's laws; the other is Nature, who punishes those vices which the law does not.[1] In this respect Nature's functions go beyond simply applying the penalty of sickness to vices such as over-indulgence in sensual

[1] Mémoires pour Catherine II, ed. Vernière, p. 232.

pleasures. She exterminates beings which are incompatible with the general order; she eliminates monsters.[1] Diderot perhaps supposed, or hoped, that Nature eliminated moral as well as physical monsters.[2] But, even if moral defects do in fact tend to be eliminated as incompatible with the general order, is there any necessary relation between moral defects in this sense and the forces of evil? Is it only maleficence which suffers this fate? Alas, no. The benefactors of mankind, the "divins insensés", are treated no better. Often their singularity of character is associated with a derangement in their temperament or brain which is a seed of destruction.[3] Nor are they exempt from the rigours of the laws of men, as the example of Socrates proves. Often, as in the case of the ancient heroes Curtius, Codrus and Decius,[4] the very nobility of these sublime spirits singles them out for elimination by self-immolation. The two "public prosecutors" seem bent on preserving the mediocre mass, easily enslaved and ready to enlist as the servile minions of enslavers. The monsters, maleficent or beneficent, continue to be produced and eliminated -- and who can tell what the outcome of it all will be? For the man who is committed to the cause of good, the only practical solution is to remain hopeful, and continue the fight.

[1] Eléments de physiologie, ed. Mayer, p. 209.

[2] Regarding Diderot's ideas on monsters, physical and moral, see G. Norman Laidlaw, "Diderot's teratology," Diderot Studies, IV, 1963, pp. 105-29.

[3] Cf. Salon de 1767, AT, XI, 125.

[4] For these heroes, see, for example, Réfutation d'Helvétius, AT, II, 304, 364, 443.

CONCLUSION

I shall bring my study to a close by recapitulating the most important aspects of Diderot's ethical position as I see it.

I have shown that, in the writings of his maturity, he is an atheist, a materialist and a determinist, and that on these points he never wavers. He views the practical consequences of determinism as limited, if the doctrine is correctly understood. All the various means by which society encourages beneficent conduct retain their efficacy. As for their "justification", while traditionalists may consider it unsatisfactory, their objections are in Diderot's opinion, based on an untenable theory of the will.

What separates Diderot from the traditionalists even more than his rejection of free-will is the great difference between their conception of the most desirable way of life for mankind and his own view. Their attitude implies that man is, in his individual nature, maleficent; all manner of constraints have therefore to be imposed on him to make him amenable to a cooperative existence. Diderot replies that some of these constraints, particularly those which affect man's enjoyment of sexual pleasures and physical pleasures in general, are unnecessary to the existence of a satisfactory society. The other kind of constraint, namely the limitation of individual liberty necessary to preserve the maximum possible degree of liberty for all individuals as they pursue their common welfare, need not be imposed from above, but

should be allowed to emanate from the general consensus of interests of the members of the social group. Indeed, when laws are imposed from above, the general welfare of all is in fact only a pretext; it is really the selfish interests of a small number of individuals which are served.

Diderot constantly criticizes the actual state of civilized society and wonders whether, in this form, it is not the source of more evil than good; but he never doubts that life in society -- provided that it is well-ordered -- is always preferable to an isolated existence. He finds himself therefore faced with the problem of how to improve the existing state of society. Here the important and difficult task is to weigh the long-term advantages of reform against the immediate disadvantages of flouting the established norms. With regard to sexuality, he hopes for a slow and gradual reform of laws and customs, but the only sound principle for the individual to follow in the meantime is to adapt his conduct to circumstances, behaving in a more or less emancipated way according to the probable good or evil effects of his conduct on others, and always remembering to take into account real psychological needs even when these are the unnatural products of a certain type of upbringing. With regard to political questions, changes should be sought through the reform of existing laws rather than by mass disregard for them, since the absence of effective law in a civilized society is a great evil. On the other hand, the overthrow of an existing government by a sudden violent movement can sometimes be a good thing, provided that it

replaces the previous laws and system of government by better ones.

When Diderot demands for the individual that he should be free to develop according to his original predispositions, he is not rejecting unconditionally all kinds of socially exerted influences. The individual develops through the interaction of his intrinsic nature and the environmental influences to which he is subjected. He cannot possibly escape these in one form or another. Diderot's demand is that they should be conducive to the development of the natural talents of the individual. With regard to morality, if the child has propensities which tend to make him anti-social, they should certainly be curbed as far as possible; if he has a natural leaning towards sympathy and kindness, these tendencies should be encouraged and allowed to develop freely. The ideal in all cases is the maximum freedom of individual development which is compatible with the integration of the individual into society. Diderot sees his own society as exerting an unnecessary degree of restriction on the development of individuals, resulting in an unnatural and undesirable similarity between them. Moreover, the structure of European society is based on a hierarchy of powers in which at all levels authority takes the form of domination of a greater by a smaller number of individuals. Thus servility is encouraged and the spirit of independence is stifled.

Diderot's concern for the freedom of the individual is partly attributable to his desire that the individual should be happy. It also results in part from his feeling that it is

intrinsically preferable for a man to be free rather than enslaved. I do not think it would be true to describe the first of these attitudes as ethical and the second not as ethical, but as solely aesthetic. Diderot thinks that the free, independent, existence is inherently more valuable than the life which is constrained and subservient. It is not simply a question of the aesthetic effect on an observer, though I would not deny that an aesthetic element does enter into his attitude. What we really have here are two ethical principles, one based on happiness, the other on dignity. I do not think that Diderot makes it clear what relationship he sees between the two, except that, in some men, a sense of dignity is inseparable from happiness.

The freedom of the individual, as Diderot conceives it, is not to be equated with the unrestrained expression of an internal force. His ideal of the truly free man is the man who is free from external constraints because he has not been subjected to unnecessary and arbitrary restrictions and because he voluntarily imposes on himself such restrictions as are necessary to the existence of a cooperative society. Such a man controls any potentially maleficent impulses which exist in him because he has decided rationally that he must do so in order to remain faithful to his dominant commitment, which is to cooperate in the pursuit of the general welfare. It is true that Diderot does allow one to suppose that certain men attain the degree of self-mastery which entitles them to be considered as free men without being committed to beneficence, but I do not think he can be accused of

contradicting himself if he claims that the ideal character is one which combines strength, that is to say freedom, with beneficence and justice.

Thus Diderot's exaltation of freedom does not in fact imply a rejection of the value of such constraints as a well-conceived society necessitates; nor does his criticism of many of the principles of traditional ethics mean that he denies the existence of all ethical principles.

Diderot would perhaps say that the difference between his view of moral obligation and that of Christian moralists is that, while they affirm that men ought to behave in a certain way if they wish to obey the will of God, he himself maintains that men ought to behave in a certain way if they wish to promote the general welfare. Diderot would, of course, like to dispense with such limiting references to the general welfare. I have shown how he makes elaborate attempts to demonstrate a universal moral imperative which depends only on the condition "if the individual wishes to be happy." If one could then assume that all individuals cannot but wish to be happy, one would arrive at an imperative which could be considered as categorical rather than merely conditional. Diderot fails, no doubt, in this attempt, and I have indicated that he himself is aware of his failure, though he cannot bring himself to admit that it is definitive or resign himself to accepting it emotionally. But are the Christian moralists in any better position? Either they admit that their ethical imperatives ultimately rest on what Diderot would see as

the unprovable assumption that man ought to obey God, or else they attempt to justify their imperatives by appealing to the concept of human nature, in which case they must inevitably find themselves faced with the same problems encountered by Diderot.

I doubt if Diderot's place in the history of philosophy will ever be appreciably greater than it has been hitherto, if only because of the labour of collation and interpretation which is demanded before one can arrive at a view of his thought in its totality. In the field of ethics, in particular, much uncertainty must inevitably remain where so much interpretative clarification has been necessary. The academic philosopher will also be justified in finding a great deficiency in the logical form of some of Diderot's arguments and may be excused for not wishing to take the trouble to supply half of the necessary assumptions from his other writings. Even when all due allowance is made for defects in the form rather than in the substance of his thought, it must still probably be concluded that Diderot is silent or inadequate on many problems which moral philosophers consider important. In support of his claim to a place in the history of moral philosophy, one can, however, at least say with some assurance that his meditation on man's moral nature is more far-reaching, original and profound than that of any other eighteenth-century French philosopher.

For the general reader, on the other hand, Diderot's thought is probably all the more stimulating precisely because of its lack of systematization, its often strikingly paradoxical form of expression and its constant exemplification in fictional situations and characters. Its relevance to the predicament of twentieth-century man no doubt also goes far toward explaining its current appeal. Diderot's reflections on sexual morality, on political freedom and on equality before the law speak directly to those men who today recognize the need for social, political and moral change, but who fear that in the process valuable elements of the traditional order may be lost. His doubts regarding the increase in general human happiness resulting from what is commonly called progress again strike a remarkably modern note. We may be sure that he would entertain similar doubts regarding those modern advances in technology, in complexity of economic organization and in the exploitation of the earth's natural resources which have created as many problems as they have solved. Diderot believed that, if men knew that the world was to be destroyed in a thousand years' time, they would lose all motivation to strive for great achievements and would content themselves with planting their cabbages. It is interesting to speculate what he would think today when a thousand years seems an optimistic estimate of the future of mankind. Perhaps he would point out that most people are blind to the danger, and that this is both a good thing and a bad thing, since it enables men to carry on with their usual activities undismayed, while at the same time making the eventual disaster still more probable.

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