

THE ROADS TO  
MODERNITY

THE BRITISH, FRENCH,  
AND AMERICAN ENLIGHTENMENTS



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VINTAGE BOOKS  
A Division of Random House, Inc.  
New York

“The Age of Benevolence” obviously had its underside. If it produced a generation of reformers and humanitarians, it was partly because there was much to reform and even more to offend the sensibilities of a humane person. While one historian finds 1766 noteworthy as the year of publication of Jonas Hanway’s *Earnest Appeal of Mercy to the Children of the Poor*, a tract that publicized infant mortality rates in the poorhouses and prepared the way for the boarding-out law, another cites that year as a time of an unprecedented number of food riots occasioned by a harvest failure—sixty riots in a three-month period, by one count.<sup>45</sup>

Yet another historian, David Owen, attributes the philanthropic movement to a complex of “Puritan piety, a benevolently humanitarian outlook, and a concern for national interest.”<sup>46</sup> Others have been less generous, pointing to a mixture of motives in which public-spiritedness and good-heartedness served the interests of self-promotion and self-gratification.<sup>47</sup> “The beauty of such enlightened largesse,” Roy Porter writes, “lay in fostering among the *bien pensants* the glow of a superior sensibility.” But even he does not deny the practical effect of such largesse in the creation of hospitals, asylums, and other charitable establishments, and in the movements for penal reform and the abolition of the slave trade.<sup>48</sup>

This was the distinctive characteristic of the British Enlightenment, especially by comparison with the French. Benevolence was a more modest virtue than Reason, but perhaps a more humane one. And an Age of Benevolence was a more modest aspiration than an Age of Reason, but a more practical one. If that Age of Benevolence fell far short of what reformers at the time, and historians since, would have liked, it did represent—as, indeed, the very idea of Enlightenment did—a notable advance of spirit and consciousness, a “forward march of the human spirit,” as Diderot put it in explaining his Enlightenment.<sup>49</sup>

## THE FRENCH ENLIGHTENMENT: THE IDEOLOGY OF REASON



Just as Tocqueville brought to the study of America the perspective of a Frenchman, so he brought to the study of France the perspective gained from his experiences in both America and England. The contrast between the French *philosophes* and their English counterparts, he wrote in his work on the *ancien régime*, reflected the distinctive role of intellectuals in the two countries.

In England writers on the theory of government and those who actually governed cooperated with each other, the former setting forth their new theories, the latter amending or circumscribing these in the light of practical experience. In France, however, precept and practice were kept quite distinct and remained in the hands of two quite independent groups. One of these carried on the actual administration while the other set forth the abstract principles on which good government should, they said, be based; one took the routine measures appropriate to the needs of the moment, the other propounded general laws without a thought for their practical application; one group shaped the course of public affairs, the other that of public opinion.<sup>1</sup>

He might have included America alongside England, for there the "writers on the theory of government and those who actually governed" not only cooperated with each other but actually were one and the same, so that the practical and the theoretical were even more closely related.

There were, of course, a multitude of reasons for the disparities among the three Enlightenments: the very different political characters of the countries and the relationship of classes within those political systems; the nature and authority of the churches and their role in the state; economies at various levels of industrialism and subject to different kinds and degrees of government regulation; and all the other historical and social circumstances that were unique to each country and helped shape its temper and character. The *philosophes*, living in a country that was neither autocratic nor free, that was erratic in its exercise of censorship and prosecution, that had never experienced the kind of reform of either church or state which might encourage another generation of reformers, could hardly aspire to influence policy as their counterparts in Britain or America could. What they could aspire to was bold and imaginative thinking, unconstrained by such practical considerations as how their ideas might be translated into reality. They were, in effect, all the more free to theorize and generalize precisely because they were less free to consult and advise.

The *Encyclopédie* embodied the spirit of the French Enlightenment, as *The Federalist* did the American. The initial edition of the *Encyclopédie*, published between 1751 and 1772, consisted of seventeen volumes of text and another eleven of engraved plates; seven supplementary volumes appeared between 1776 and 1780. The subtitle was ambitious enough, *Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, but the prospectus was still more ambitious: it was to be a systematic analysis of the "order and interrelations of human knowledge."<sup>2</sup> In the article "Encyclopedia," Denis Diderot, its prin-

cipal editor, went beyond even this; its mission was "to collect all the knowledge that now lies scattered over the face of the earth, to make known its general structure to the men among whom we live, and to transmit it to those who will come after us," thus making men, of this time and of all time, not only wiser but also "more virtuous and more happy."<sup>3</sup>

*The Federalist* had no such grand pretensions. Designed for a specific purpose and a specific country, the papers did take the occasion to reflect upon human nature and society and even aspired to formulate the principles of a science of politics, but such speculations grew out of immediate, practical concerns and were advanced modestly and even tentatively. In the final paper Hamilton warned his countrymen against "the chimerical pursuit of a perfect plan." "I never expect to see a perfect work from imperfect man," and the collective work of many men (he was speaking of the Constitution, but it applied to the *Federalist* itself) was all the more likely to be imperfect, a compound of "the errors and prejudices, as of the good sense and wisdom," of individuals of diverse interests and inclinations.<sup>4</sup>

#### REASON AND RELIGION

It was not only the *philosophes'* penchant, as Tocqueville said, for abstract principles that made them unique. It was a particular principle: reason. That word, repeated constantly and in the most varied contexts, served almost as a mantra, a token of good faith and right-mindedness.\* Long before Paine

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\* The two notable exceptions, as will be seen, were Montesquieu and Rousseau, who did not share the *philosophes'* reverence for reason and who had therefore an uneasy and anomalous relationship with them. Montesquieu was treated with personal respect although his ideas were either ignored or rejected, while Rousseau was dismissed by Voltaire as a "Judas" and by Diderot as an "anti-*philosophe*."<sup>5</sup>

declared his age to be the "Age of Reason," Diderot had defined the *Encyclopédie* as the instrument of "a reasoning age," "a philosophical age."<sup>6</sup> This article was nicely complemented by another which made the *philosophe* not only the spokesman of that philosophical age but something more as well. The reader was reminded of the familiar adage (pedantically attributed to the emperor Antoninus): "How happy the people would be if kings were philosophers or philosophers were kings."<sup>7</sup>

The idea of reason had as its converse the idea of religion. "Reason is to the philosopher," the *Encyclopédie* declared, "what grace is to the Christian. Grace moves the Christian to act, reason moves the philosopher."<sup>8</sup> Here, as elsewhere, reason was not just pitted against religion, defined in opposition to religion; it was implicitly granted the same absolute, dogmatic status as religion. In this sense, reason was the equivalent of the doctrine of grace. There is much truth in the familiar assertion that the *philosophes'* animus against religion was a by-product of their hostility to the Catholic Church, a church that was seen as authoritarian and repressive in itself, and even more so as the accomplice of an authoritarian and repressive state. This was, certainly, a dominant factor in their thinking. But it does not entirely account for the "studious ferocity," as Tocqueville put it, of their attack on religion.<sup>9</sup> What was at stake for the *philosophes* was nothing less than reason. And reason illegitimized not only the Catholic Church but any form of established or institutional religion, and beyond that any religious faith dependent on miracles or dogmas that violated the canons of reason.

Some of the articles commissioned or written by Diderot—on "Conscience," "Fanaticism," "Irreligion," "Tolerance," "Intolerance"—rather than taking issue with religion as such, made the case for religious toleration, the liberty to profess other religions than Catholicism, or, it may be, no

religion at all. In "Irreligion," Diderot argued that such liberty would have no serious consequences for society because morality was independent of religion. Other articles, by the Baron d'Holbach notably, were overtly anti-religion; "Priests" and "Theocracy" suggested that religion was an invention by clever clerics who imposed it on the ignorant and intimidated masses. Still others made just enough concessions to orthodoxy to forestall censorship and prosecution.

Diderot's article on "Reason" was typically and deliberately ambiguous, paying lip service to religion by conceding an area in which revelation was entitled to "complete assent from the mind," and then hastening to add that this did not limit or undermine reason but rather confirmed reason in all matters where there was "a clear and distinct idea." In such cases, reason was the only "true and competent judge"; revelation could confirm judgments based upon reason but could not invalidate them. "We are men before we are Christians," Diderot reminded his readers. Decrying the doctrinal and ceremonial extravagances of most religions, he concluded that religion, "which is the honor of humanity and the most excellent prerogative of our nature over beasts, is often the area where men appear to be most irrational."<sup>10</sup>

Outside the *Encyclopédie*, some of the *philosophes* were less restrained. Holbach, Claude Helvétius, and Julien de Lamettrie were avowed atheists and materialists, while others professed to believe in some form of Christianity, rejecting only the authority and institutions of the church. Voltaire, a deist or proponent of natural religion, was above all a believer in religious toleration. But his hatred of *l'infâme* (he once announced that he intended to end his letters with what had become his signature, "*Ecrasez l'infâme*") went well beyond the cause of toleration. It was directed not only against intolerance and fanaticism, and not only against the institutions and authority of the Roman Catholic Church, but against Christianity itself. Diderot said

that he spoke for most of the *philosophes* when he paid tribute to Voltaire as the “sublime, honorable, and dear Anti-Christ.”<sup>11</sup> The historian Peter Gay, himself an admirer of Voltaire, described Voltaire’s “distaste” for Christianity as “almost an obsession.” Repeatedly and passionately, Voltaire returned to the theme: “Every sensible man, every honorable man, must hold the Christian sect in horror.”<sup>12</sup>

“Every sensible man, every honorable man”—but not the common people, who, in the eyes of some eminent *philosophes* were neither sensible nor honorable because they were in thrall to Christianity. In his article on the *Encyclopédie*, Diderot made it clear that the common people had no part in the “philosophical age” celebrated in this enterprise. “The general mass of men are not so made that they can either promote or understand this forward march of the human spirit.”<sup>13</sup> In another article, “Multitude,” he was more dismissive, indeed, contemptuous, of the masses. “Distrust the judgment of the multitude in matters of reasoning and philosophy; its voice is that of wickedness, stupidity, inhumanity, unreason, and prejudice. . . . The multitude is ignorant and stupefied. . . . Distrust it in matters of morality; it is not capable of strong and generous actions . . . ; heroism is practically folly in its eyes.”<sup>14</sup>

Diderot might have argued—and this may well have been the intention of other *Encyclopédistes*—that the masses were in this unhappy condition because they were still in bondage to religion and the church, and that the progress of enlightenment would liberate them from that benighted state. It would have been a plausible mission of the *Encyclopédie* to extend the “march of the human spirit” to the “general mass of men.” Yet that was not the argument of either the article on the *Encyclopédie* or that on the “Multitude.” Diderot’s rebuke to

Helvétius, that a man was “destined by nature for a given function,”<sup>15</sup> was a milder version of his remarks to Voltaire. The poor, he told Voltaire, were “imbeciles” in matters of religion, “too idiotic—bestial—too miserable, and too busy” to enlighten themselves. They would never change; “the quantity of the *canaille* is just about always the same.”<sup>16</sup>

Voltaire agreed, with a typically Voltairean proviso. Religion, he wrote Diderot, “must be destroyed among respectable people and left to the *canaille* large and small, for whom it was made.” This was the point of his famous witticism: “I want my lawyer, my tailor, my servants, even my wife to believe in God, because it means that I shall be cheated and robbed and cuckolded less often. . . . If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him.” Almost as an afterthought, he added: “But all nature cries out to us that he does exist”<sup>17</sup>—thus making God complicitous in the creation of those benighted souls.

Voltaire was a deist, unlike some of his confreres—Holbach, most notably—who were outright atheists. It was not, however, because of his theological differences with Holbach that he and d’Alembert (who was in substantial agreement with Holbach) opposed the publication of Holbach’s atheistic writings. In spite of their commitment to religious toleration, they argued, in the time-honored tradition of prudent philosophers, that such views should circulate privately but not publicly. In his *Philosophical Dictionary*, Voltaire raised the question of whether “a nation of atheists” could exist. “It seems to me,” he replied, “that one must distinguish between the nation properly so called, and a society of philosophers above the nation. It is very true that in every country the populace has need of the greatest curb.” Princes, he conceded (although not, presumably, philosophers), also had need of restraint, but it was the people especially who required a “Supreme Being, creator, ruler, rewarder, revenger.”<sup>18</sup>

Without religion, he wrote elsewhere, the lower classes would be nothing but "a horde of brigands like our thieves"; they would "pass their miserable lives in taverns with fallen women"; each day would begin anew "this abominable circle of brutalities."<sup>19</sup>

One historian has described the *philosophes'* belief in the social utility of religion as a "paradox," a "contradiction," a "lag in their social thought" caused by their inability to create an organic, unitary conception of society based upon their secular beliefs.<sup>20</sup> But there could be no such organic, unitary conception so long as the classes were divided, as the *philosophes* thought, by the chasm not only of poverty but, more crucially, of superstition and ignorance. For the British philosophers, that social chasm was bridged by the moral sense and common sense that were presumed to be innate in all people, in the lower classes as well as the upper. The *philosophes*, allowing to the common people neither a moral sense nor a common sense that might approximate reason, consigned them, in effect, to a state of nature—a brutalized Hobbesian, not a benign Rousseauian, state of nature—where they could be controlled and pacified only by the sanctions and strictures of religion.

Although Voltaire thought Holbach's profession of atheism so imprudent as to warrant suppression, he himself made no effort to conceal, in public as in private, his "horror" of Christianity—or, even more, his horror of Judaism.<sup>21</sup> The Old Testament for him was nothing else than a chronicle of cruelty, barbarism, and superstition. It has been suggested that he used Judaism as a surrogate for Christianity, his tirades against the former being a convenient disguise for his animus against the latter.<sup>22</sup> But his obsession with Judaism went beyond that subterfuge. Moreover, it was not only the Judaism of the Old Testament, the foundation of Christian-

ity, that he decried. Many of the entries in the *Philosophical Dictionary* were on modern as well as ancient Jews, vilifying them, in the classical mode of anti-Semitism, as materialistic, greedy, barbarous, uncivilized, and, again and again, usurious. (The last charge is all the more egregious because Voltaire himself staunchly defended the principle of usury against the Catholic Church, which condemned it.) The Jews had deserved their expulsion from Spain, Voltaire said, because they had controlled all the money and commerce in the country. And they still aspired to do so, making usury their "sacred duty."<sup>23</sup>

In one letter to d'Alembert, Voltaire grudgingly conceded that although Jews had a history of persecuting others, nevertheless they themselves deserved to be tolerated because enlightened men must be tolerant at all costs. But this was written at the height of the Calas affair when he was making the case for toleration for the Huguenots. Half a dozen years later he had so far forgotten that argument that he gave vent to diatribes (not in private letters but in published writings) that are especially chilling in the light of recent history: "I would not be in the least surprised if these people [Jews] would not some day become deadly to the human race. . . . You [Jews] have surpassed all nations in impertinent fables, in bad conduct, and in barbarism. You deserve to be punished, for this is your destiny."<sup>24</sup>

While some historians today ignore or belittle Voltaire's anti-Semitism, contemporaries were well aware of it. Anti-Jewish pamphleteers quoted him approvingly, and Jewish writers counted him as their enemy. His views, moreover, were shared in large part (although less passionately and obsessively) by Diderot, Holbach, and others. Perhaps uneasy about this patent violation of the principle of toleration, Diderot assigned the article "Jew" to Louis de Jaucourt, who wrote an altogether sympathetic account of Jews and Judaism. Apart from Jaucourt, however, and Montesquieu, who

was very nearly philo-Semitic, most of the *philosophes* were far more derogatory of Judaism than of Christianity.\*

## LIBERTY AND REASON

If reason heads the list of qualities defining the French Enlightenment, liberty is not far behind. Reason may have been the impulse behind the appeal for religious toleration—reason refusing to be bound by the strictures of religion—but the ostensible principle supporting that appeal was liberty, the liberty to follow one's conscience, interest, and will. The idea of liberty, however, although often invoked, did not elicit anything like the passion or commitment that reason did. Nor did it inspire the *philosophes* to engage in a systematic analysis of the political and social institutions that would promote and

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\* Anti-Semitism was present in Britain as well, but in a milder and less insistent form. Shaftesbury found in the Jewish heroes of the Bible the embodiment of the worst characteristics of human beings. And Burke spoke casually of "money-jobbers, usurers, and Jews," and described Lord George Gordon, the anti-Catholic agitator responsible for the Gordon riots, who later converted to Judaism, as the "heir to the old hoards of the synagogue . . . the long compound interest of the thirty pieces of silver." But Gordon could redeem himself, Burke added, by meditating on the Talmud until he learned to conduct himself in a manner "not so disgraceful to the ancient religion" he had embraced.<sup>25</sup> Hume, on the other hand, was notably sympathetic to the Jews and critical of the "egregious tyranny" that had been responsible for their persecution and expulsion from England in the thirteenth century.<sup>26</sup> So far from being vilified as usurers, Jews were often praised (after their readmission to England by Cromwell) for their contributions to commerce and the economy. In Britain, it was generally men of letters and public figures who were well disposed to the Jews, favoring, for example, the bill passed by Parliament in 1753 providing for the naturalization of foreign-born Jews. That bill was repealed several months later because of popular pressure.

protect liberty.<sup>27</sup> Two notable exceptions were Turgot and his fellow physiocrats, who inquired seriously into the conditions of economic liberty, and Montesquieu, whose *Spirit of the Laws* was the seminal work (for America, although not for France) on political liberty.

A long article by Diderot on "Political Authority," in the first volume of the *Encyclopédie*, opened promisingly: "No man has received from nature the right to command others. Liberty is a gift from heaven, and each individual of the same species has the right to enjoy it as he enjoys the use of reason."<sup>28</sup> But it went on to deal only in the most general terms with the relation between subjects and monarchs. Another lengthy article on "Liberty" treated it entirely as a metaphysical problem, a question of free will and determinism. This was followed by half-page articles on "Natural Liberty" (liberty in the state of nature), "Civil Liberty" (liberty under law), and "Political Liberty" (on legislative and executive bodies), and a considerably longer article on "Liberty of Thought" (primarily on religion).

On the subject of liberty, as on religion, the *philosophes* may have been less than forthright for prudential reasons. A more concrete and extensive analysis of liberty could well have invited censorship, prosecution, and imprisonment. This was, in fact, the experience of several *philosophes* at one time or another. Diderot was briefly imprisoned early in his career, Rousseau and Voltaire had to take temporary refuge abroad, and d'Alembert felt obliged to resign the editorship of the *Encyclopédie* (which continued to be published under Diderot's editorship, even after it was formally suppressed in 1759). In spite of these measures, however, the *philosophes* did manage to discuss at some length and with great passion the no less sensitive subject of religion, with the usual euphemisms and concessions, to be sure—stratagems that might have been adapted to the subject of liberty as well.

Censorship and public condemnation, while inhibiting and



intimidating booksellers as well as authors, were less formidable than one might suppose. They sometimes even redounded to the favor of the writers. Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, published anonymously in Amsterdam in 1721, was easily smuggled into France, where it sold so well that eight new editions came out in as many years—all without appearing in the booksellers' catalogues. (The double device, of fictional letters about an exotic country, was adopted by many imitators to evade the censors.) In 1748, *The Spirit of the Laws* was even more successful, in spite of the fact that the work was placed on the Index. The public burning of Voltaire's *Philosophical Letters* in 1734, on the grounds that the work was subversive and sacrilegious, helped make it an immediate success and may have inspired the author to greater feats of audacity. In 1765, so far from being discouraged by the burning of his *Philosophical Dictionary* and its proscription by Rome, Voltaire spent the next five years reprinting, revising, and enlarging it. Helvétius's *De l'esprit* was condemned by the Sorbonne and publicly burned (and, as an additional bonus, criticized by Voltaire, Rousseau, and others), whereupon it became famous in France and was translated into every European language.

The case of Montesquieu illustrates, perhaps more dramatically than anything else, the equivocal role of liberty in the thinking of the *philosophes*. Rousseau is often regarded, with good reason, as the odd man out among them. But in important respects, Montesquieu was even more so. Although *The Spirit of the Laws* was quoted in the *Encyclopédie*, it did not inform the thinking of the *philosophes*, as it did the authors of *The Federalist*, where it was cited frequently and appreciatively. Montesquieu himself, although he was asked to contribute to the *Encyclopédie*, did not do so; he finally agreed to write one article, on "Taste," but died before it was completed. (D'Alembert wrote his eulogy in the *Encyclopédie*.)

Apart from Jaucourt, who genuinely admired him, Montesquieu had few followers among the *philosophes* and many critics. When he died, only Diderot attended his funeral, as a mark of personal respect rather than sympathy with his ideas.

Unlike his confreres, Montesquieu did not appeal to reason as the fundamental principle of politics and society. Instead, he approached these subjects sociologically, making the political forms and institutions of a country dependent on the "spirit" of the regime and its physical and historical circumstances: "Mankind are influenced by various causes, by the climate, by the religion, by the laws, by the maxims of government, by precedents, morals, and customs; whence is formed a general spirit of nations."<sup>29</sup> Conspicuously absent from this list of causes was reason. And conspicuously present was religion. Montesquieu was not uncritical of the church in France, but he was more dismissive of atheism, preferring an established church suitable to the character of the country—the Catholic Church for France, the Anglican for England.

This sociological mode was hardly congenial to *philosophes* who believed that the function of reason was to produce universal principles independent of history, circumstance, and national spirit. "A good law," Condorcet protested, "ought to be good for all men, just as a true proposition is true for all."<sup>30</sup> The abbé Sieyès voiced a common complaint when he said that Montesquieu was concerned with "what is" rather than "what ought to be," thus violating the basic purpose of a "true political science."<sup>31</sup> Rousseau similarly criticized Montesquieu, in the name of the "science of political right," for dealing with the "positive right of established government" instead of the "principles of political right."<sup>32</sup> Helvétius went further, rejecting everything in *The Spirit of the Laws* that derived from the British model, most notably the separation of powers that Montesquieu regarded as the genius of the British constitution and the prerequisite of political liberty. Helvétius thought so ill of the book that he urged Montesquieu not to publish it,

warning him that it would hurt his reputation.<sup>33</sup> Voltaire, in his *Commentary on the Spirit of the Laws*, while ostensibly praising its brilliant author, was sharply critical of the work itself. "Hardly has he established a principle, when history opens before him and shows him a hundred exceptions." (Montesquieu reciprocated in kind. "Sound judgment is better than brilliance," he said of Voltaire.)<sup>34</sup>

Among Voltaire's other objections, shared by almost all the *philosophes*, was Montesquieu's adherence to a theory that today may seem esoteric and academic but was of great political significance at the time. This was the *thèse nobiliaire*, the idea that the essential power in the French system of government, and the safeguard against monarchical despotism, resided with the nobility and the institutions it controlled, the *parlements* and judiciary. It is interesting that the alternative theory espoused by most of the *philosophes* was not a *thèse bourgeoise*, still less a *thèse prolétaire*, but the *thèse royale*, which insisted upon the fundamental authority of the king and denigrated the aristocracy as a self-seeking and disruptive force. "As to our aristocrats and our petty despots of all grades," Helvétius wrote to Montesquieu, "if they understand you, they cannot praise you too much, and this is the fault I have ever found with the principles of your work."<sup>35</sup>\*

\* It may be said that Montesquieu had a personal stake in the *thèse nobiliaire*, having been born into the *noblesse de robe*. By the same token some of the adherents of the *thèse royale* may also have been personally motivated, either because of their relations with enlightened monarchs or their positions, pensions, and grants, which were dependent on the court. (Thirty-eight of the *Encyclopédistes* belonged to the prestigious Royal Academies, which were salaried posts, and fifteen were longtime employees in the civil or military administration.) Voltaire had a special reason for resenting Montesquieu and his theories. Just as he was completing his *History of Louis XIV*, with its defense of the *thèse royale*, *The Spirit of the Laws* was published, undermining that thesis (which was also being discredited by the weakness of Louis XV).

These alternative theories had the largest implications. For Montesquieu, the nobility was a countervailing force to the monarchy, thus an essential part of the separation and balance of powers which he took to be the fundamental principle of political liberty. For the *philosophes*, that limitation of sovereignty was unacceptable, not only because it gave too much power to petty aristocrats but also because it threatened the authority and power of an enlightened, or potentially enlightened, monarch.

#### ENLIGHTENED DESPOTISM AND THE GENERAL WILL

The predilection of the *philosophes* for "enlightened despotism" (the expression was a contemporary one, not the invention of historians) was more than an exercise of vanity, a response to monarchs who flattered them by consulting, fêting, and even supporting them financially, as if they were indeed philosopher-kings. Voltaire was engagingly candid about this: "How does one resist a victorious king, a poet, musician, and philosopher, who affected to appear to love me!"<sup>36</sup> But beyond this was a serious philosophical principle. Enlightened despotism was an attempt to realize—to enthrone, as it were—reason as embodied in the person of an enlightened monarch, a Frederick enlightened by Voltaire, a Catherine by Diderot. "There is no prince in Europe," Diderot once rejoiced, "who is not also a philosopher."<sup>37</sup> When Voltaire left Prussia in 1753 after spending two years there, it was not he who was disillusioned with Frederick but Frederick who made it clear that Voltaire was no longer welcome at the court (among other reasons, because of his illegal speculation in government bonds). Almost twenty-five years later, Voltaire defended Catherine's Russia against Montesquieu, who had criticized it for being despotic. Her government, Voltaire reported, "seeks to destroy anarchy, the odious prerogatives of

the nobles, the power of the magnates, and not to establish intermediate bodies or to diminish its authority."<sup>38</sup>

If some of the *philosophes* later expressed qualms about absolute power in the hands of an enlightened despot, it was not because of any principled commitment to liberty, but because they began to suspect that good despots were rare and that even enlightened ones might fail to use their power wisely or justly. Diderot's relations with Catherine were more amiable than Voltaire's with Frederick, but even he was later moved to doubt. "If reason governed sovereigns," Diderot wrote, ". . . peoples would not need to bind the hands of the sovereigns." Unfortunately, that was rarely the case. The qualities that made for "a good, resolute, just, and enlightened master" were rare enough separately, still more so combined in a single person.<sup>39</sup> Two or three reigns of a "just and enlightened despotism," he told Catherine, would be a great misfortune, for they would reduce the subjects to the level of animals habituated to blind obedience. (He made this point in a private communication with Catherine, and repeated it briefly in his last published and little-known essay on the emperors Claudius and Nero.)<sup>40</sup>

Even utilitarians like Helvétius and Holbach, whose ultimate principle was the happiness of the people, did not welcome the separation of powers. On the contrary, they were as devoted to the *thèse royale* as Voltaire and as opposed to any idea of the separation of powers. Indeed, they were all the more eager to vest power in a "legislator" (a generic term that included a monarch) who would ensure that individual interests were made consonant with the greatest good of all. "The legislator," the article of that title in the *Encyclopédie* explained, "in all climates, circumstances, and governments [the allusions to Montesquieu are obvious] must propose to change private and property interests to community interests. Legislation is more or less perfect, according to what extent it leads to this goal."<sup>41</sup> The utilitarians had no principled objec-

tions to enlightened despotism, only practical ones. It was a failure of character and will, not of liberty, that gave them pause. Holbach, having dedicated one of his books to Louis XVI and spoken approvingly of his "absolute power," later had second thoughts: "Absolute power is very useful when it means to destroy abuses, abolish injustice, reprove vice, and reform morals. Despotism would be the best of governments if one could be promised that it would always be exercised by a Titus, a Trajan, or an Antoninus; but it usually falls into hands incapable of using it wisely."<sup>42</sup> However desirable unlimited power would be in the hands of an enlightened despot, Holbach concluded, such power finally "corrupts the mind and heart and perverts the best disposed men."<sup>43</sup> Even then, however, he was not moved to reconsider his opposition to limited sovereignty or the separation of powers.

"In the kind of universe which Helvétius depicts," Isaiah Berlin has observed, "there is little or no room for individual liberty."<sup>44</sup> He might have said the same of other Enlightenment thinkers—the physiocrats, for example, who, in the name of reason, argued in favor of both free trade and enlightened despotism. Men do not make laws, François Quesnay wrote, they only discover those laws which conform to "the supreme reason which governs the universe."<sup>45</sup> And that supreme reason was more readily discovered and acted upon by a single sovereign than by a multitude of individuals in a parliament reflecting different interests and ideas. Mercier de la Rivière coined the term "legal despotism" in place of "enlightened despotism" to make it clear that the authority of the despot derived from the natural law that was the basis of his sovereignty. Later, the term became a liability and even Mercier abandoned it, but at the time it was taken up favorably by Diderot, Mirabeau, and others (although not by Turgot, who thought it impolitic). It was Mercier who made the famous pronouncement deifying Euclid which has become the epigram of this school:

Euclid is the true type of despot. The geometrical axioms which he has transmitted to us are genuine despotic laws; in them the legal and the personal despotism of the legislator are one and the same thing, a force evident and irresistible; and for that reason the despot Euclid has for centuries exercised his unchallenged sway over all enlightened peoples.<sup>46\*</sup>

Because of their precept "*laissez faire, laissez passer*," the physiocrats have been identified with Adam Smith; one historian has described them as "Smith's acknowledged inspiration."<sup>47</sup> But while Smith agreed with them on the issue of free trade, he disagreed not only with the primacy they gave to agriculture as against industry and commerce but also with their conception of the state and political authority. Where Smith's theory of natural liberty applied to the polity as much as the economy, the physiocrats allowed for individual liberty only in the marketplace, arguing that the absolute sovereignty of a monarch was necessary to establish the conditions for economic liberty. Contrasting the physiocrats (*économistes*, he called them) with Smith, Walter Bagehot described them as being "above all things anxious for a very strong government; they held to the maxim, everything *for* the people—nothing by them; they had a horror of checks and counterpoises and resistances; they wished to do everything by the *fiat* of the sovereign."<sup>48</sup>

\* The mathematical paradigm was compelling for most of the *philosophes*, which is why Isaac Newton was idolized. D'Alembert was a mathematician of some distinction, the author, at the age of twenty-six, of a *Treatise on Dynamics* that elaborated upon Newton's laws of motion. So, too, Condorcet made his mark as a mathematician with his work on probability, long before he applied that mode of thought to social and political affairs.

What the enlightened despot was to some of the *philosophes*—the supreme arbiter and legislator—the general will was to others. The concept of the general will has always, and properly so, been identified with Rousseau's *The Social Contract*, published in 1762. But Rousseau himself, seven years earlier, in his article "Political Economy" (a misnomer, because it dealt entirely with politics and not at all with economics), attributed it to Diderot's article "Natural Law" in the same volume of the *Encyclopédie*.<sup>\*</sup> It is curious to find the two articles on ostensibly different subjects making the same point, in almost the same words, about the subservience of individual wills to the general will. Diderot's article is worth dwelling upon, partly because it shows that the idea of the general will was not, as is sometimes thought, confined to Rousseau, and partly because Diderot associated it, as Rousseau did not, with the idea of reason.

"We must reason about all things," Diderot wrote, "because man is not just an animal but an animal who reasons." There were different ways of arriving at the truth, but whoever refused to seek it renounced the very nature of man and "should be treated by the rest of his species as a wild beast." And once the truth had been discovered, whoever refused to accept it was "either insane or wicked and morally evil."<sup>49</sup> Without freedom, there was no good or evil, right or wrong. But it was not the individual who had "the right to decide about the nature of right and wrong." Only "the human race" had that right because only it expressed the general will. And the general will was always paramount.

\* The question of priority is murky. Rousseau had used the idea of the general will, although not the term, in his *Second Discourse* in 1754. But he had had access, the previous autumn, to a draft of Diderot's "Natural Law" article.

Individual wills are suspect; they can be good or evil. But the general will is always good. It is never wrong, it never will be wrong. . . . It is to the general will that the individual must address himself to know how far he ought to be a man, a citizen, a subject, a father, a child, and when it is suitable to live or to die. It is for the general will to determine the limits of all duties. . . . If you therefore meditate carefully on the above, you will remain convinced: 1) that the man who listens only to his individual will is the enemy of the human race; 2) that the general will in each individual is a pure act of understanding that reasons in the silence of the passions about what man can demand of his fellow man and what his fellow man can rightfully demand of him; 3) that this consideration of the general will of the species and of the common desire is the rule of conduct relating one individual to another in the same society. . . .

After several other such propositions, Diderot concluded by invoking once again the authority of reason: "All these conclusions are evident to anyone who reasons, and . . . whoever does not wish to reason, renouncing his nature as a human being, must be treated as an unnatural being."<sup>50</sup> In effect, the theory of the general will was a surrogate for the enlightened despot. It had the same moral and political authority as the despot because it, too, was grounded in reason, a reason that was the source of all legitimate authority.

If the idea of reason lent itself to theories of enlightened despotism and the general will, it was also invoked in support of such classically liberal causes as religious toleration and legal reforms. These two issues came to a dramatic head in the notorious Calas affair. The conviction and execution in 1762

of Jean Calas, a Huguenot charged with murdering his son ostensibly because of the young man's desire to convert to Catholicism, became an international *cause célèbre* when Voltaire took it up. For him, as Peter Gay says, the case was perfect: If Calas had murdered his son, it was a specimen of Protestant fanaticism; if the state had murdered the father, it was a specimen of Catholic fanaticism. "One way or the other," Voltaire wrote, "this is the most horrible fanaticism in the most enlightened century."<sup>51</sup> When he began to inquire into the circumstances of the case, after the execution of Calas *père*, Voltaire concluded that the father was innocent, the victim of a state-sponsored inquisition on behalf of the church—yet another example of the ubiquitous *l'infâme*.

For Voltaire, as for most of the *philosophes*, the immediate lesson to be drawn from the Calas affair was the need for religious toleration; the secondary lesson was the reform of a legal system that permitted this miscarriage of justice. Long before this, Montesquieu had taken up the cause of legal reform. In *The Spirit of the Laws*, he proposed a number of measures designed to liberalize the law. Sacrilege, heresy, and "the crime against nature" (homosexuality) should no longer be prosecuted as crimes; "indiscreet speech" should not be chargeable as high treason; the death penalty should be used more discriminately; and punishment in general (and of debtors in particular) should be less harsh and proportionate to the crime.<sup>52</sup> Whatever their differences with Montesquieu, the *philosophes* were entirely in agreement with him on these reforms. And whatever their differences with the English on the separation of powers and the role of Parliament, they favored the adoption of such other British institutions as trial by jury, habeas corpus, and royal reprieves. (Condorcet went so far as to favor an internationally uniform code of law.) They also vigorously opposed slavery and the slave trade; most called for the immediate emancipation of slaves, others for its gradual abolition.

## LE PEUPLE AND LA CANAILLE

On other social issues, however, the *philosophes* were far removed from the British. Just as there was nothing like the concept of a general will among the British philosophers, so there was nothing among the French like the "condition of the people" problem (as the British called it). The Americans, to be sure, were also less concerned than the British with this problem, perhaps because poverty in America, with all its attendant conditions, was far less exigent than in Britain. In France, however, the situation was, if anything, worse than in Britain. It might be said that the *philosophes* were inhibited from inquiring into social problems by the threat of censorship and prosecution. Yet that threat was far more serious in respect to religion, and it did not deter them from speculating and writing about that subject.

It is as if the *philosophes* expended so much intellectual capital on the exalted idea of reason that they had little thought left, and even less sympathy, for the common people. Diderot professed great admiration for Shaftesbury, whose book he had translated. But Shaftesbury would never have said, as Diderot did in one article, that a man who did not wish to reason must be treated as an "unnatural being," a "wild beast,"<sup>53</sup> or, in another, that "the common people are incredibly stupid."<sup>54</sup> The moral sense and common sense that the British attributed to all individuals gave to all people, including the common people, a common humanity and a common fund of moral and social obligations. The French idea of reason was not available to the common people and had no such moral or social component.

Holbach was obviously criticizing Adam Smith (and the moral philosophers in general) when he said that what moralists called "sympathy" was only an act of imagination. For some people, he observed, the sentiment of pity simply did not exist, or existed in a very feeble state. Indeed, most people

were unmoved by the distress of others—princes by the misfortunes of their subjects, fathers by the complaints of their wives and children, greedy men by the plight of those they had reduced to misery. So far from lending a helping hand to the unfortunate, they fled from the spectacle of misfortune. Worse yet, they deliberately added to the ills of others. "I must go beyond this," Holbach warmed to his theme. "Most men feel themselves entitled by the weakness or misfortune of others to inflict further outrages upon them without fear of reprisal; they take a barbarous pleasure in adding to their afflictions, in making them feel their superiority, in treating them cruelly, in ridiculing them."<sup>55</sup>

In an essay ironically entitled "Discourse on Happiness," Lamettrie described the happiness of ordinary people as consisting, in effect, of making other people unhappy. "Man in general seems a deceitful, tricky, dangerous, perfidious animal; he seems to follow the heat of his blood and passions rather than the ideas which were given to him in childhood and which are the basis of natural law and remorse." This observation was prefaced by the even more cynical comment: "Let it not be said that I am urging people to crime. I am urging them only to be tranquil in crime."<sup>56</sup> Helvétius was no less harsh. Ignorance was more dangerous than ambition, he wrote, and men in general were "more stupid than wicked."<sup>57</sup> So, too, Voltaire, who never concealed his disdain for the people—"la canaille" (the rabble), as he habitually called them. "As for the canaille," he told d'Alembert (much as Diderot had said to him), "I have no concern with it; it will always remain canaille."<sup>58\*</sup>

\* It may be said that the English had their equivalent of the *canaille* in the Irish immigrants. Yet while there was much indignation over the vagrancy, drunkenness, and lawlessness of some of the immigrants, this was often accompanied by expressions of pity for the wretched conditions in which they lived in England and the more desperate conditions in their own country from which they had fled.

The nearest British equivalent to this kind of misanthropy was Bernard Mandeville, and even he did not express himself quite so sharply. And Mandeville was hotly repudiated by the Enlightenment community in Britain, whereas in France, Diderot, Voltaire, Holbach, Helvétius, and Lamettrie were leading lights in the Enlightenment, valued contributors to the *Encyclopédie*, and frequenters of the Paris salons. (Holbach, the richest of the *philosophes*, presided over the most lavish salon.)

It is curious that just as the term "Enlightenment" has been claimed for the French, so has the word "compassion." Yet it was the English who introduced that word into the social vocabulary long before the French and made it the central theme of their moral philosophy, as the French did not. In the *Encyclopédie*, "Compassion" earned an entry of only several sentences, concluding with the observation that the more miserable one is, the more susceptible to compassion—which is why, d'Alembert wryly concluded, the people love to watch executions.<sup>59</sup> "Beneficence" fared somewhat better, a single column containing the usual platitudes, with an added qualification that gave primacy to reason: "It is not simply goodness of soul that characterizes beneficent people; that would only make them sensitive and incapable of harming others. It is a superior reason that brings that to perfection."<sup>60</sup>

Rousseau, who is generally credited with the idea of compassion (or pity, as he more often spoke of it),<sup>61</sup> gave it an ambiguous role in society. Unlike the British, for whom compassion was a social virtue, a quality natural to individuals in society, in Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, pity appeared as a "natural sentiment" only in the state of nature, where it contributed to the preservation of the species by moderating the force of *l'amour de soi* (self-love). In civil society, pity was replaced by the "factitious" sentiment

of *l'amour propre* (vanity, the corruption of self-love), which destroyed both equality and freedom and subjected mankind to "labor, servitude and misery."<sup>62</sup> Reviewing the *Discourse* (four years before his own *Theory of Moral Sentiments* appeared), Smith criticized Rousseau for sharing Mandeville's asocial conception of human nature, which assumed that "there is in man no powerful instinct which necessarily determines him to seek society for its own sake." The absence of that moral instinct, in Rousseau as in Mandeville, meant that the laws of society had no moral validity; they were nothing but "the inventions of the cunning and the powerful, in order to maintain or to acquire an unnatural and unjust superiority over the rest of their fellow creatures."<sup>63</sup>

In his novel *Emile*, Rousseau did posit an "inner sentiment," as the basis, however, not of compassion but of self-love. "When the strength of an expansive soul makes me identify myself with my fellow, and I feel that I am, so to speak, in him, it is in order not to suffer that I do not want him to suffer. I am interested in him for love of myself [*l'amour de moi*]." This in turn was the source of justice: "Love of men derived from love of self [*l'amour de soi*] is the principle of human justice."<sup>64</sup> The social virtues did not come naturally to Emile. He had to learn them by becoming involved with those less fortunate than he. But he had also to learn that "his first duty is toward himself."<sup>65</sup> And he was instructed to exercise the social virtues not in relation to particular individuals but to the "species," the "whole of mankind."

The less the object of our care is immediately involved with us, the less the illusion of particular interest is to be feared. The more one generalizes this interest, the more it becomes equitable, and the love of mankind is nothing other than the love of justice. . . . It is of little importance to him [Emile] who gets a greater share of happiness provided that it contributes

to the greatest happiness of all. This is the wise man's first interest after his private interest, for each is part of his species and not of another individual.

To prevent pity from degenerating into weakness, it must, therefore, be generalized and extended to the whole of mankind. Then one yields to it only insofar as it accords with justice, because of all the virtues justice is the one that contributes most to the common good of men. For the sake of reason, for the sake of love of ourselves, we must have pity for our species still more than for our neighbor.<sup>66</sup>

Whatever Rousseau's differences with the *philosophes* (and they were many), they had this in common: the tendency to "generalize" the virtues, to elevate "the whole of mankind" over the "individual," the "species" over one's "neighbor." When Francis Hutcheson spoke of the "greatest happiness for the greatest numbers," he meant this in the most prosaic, quantitative sense; when Rousseau spoke of the "greatest happiness of all," he meant it in some transcendent, metaphysical sense, a "common good of men" that was something other than the sum of the goods of individual men.

The "common good of men" did not necessarily mean the good of the common man. It did not even mean the education of the common man. In *Emile*, Rousseau's great work on education, the common man figured not at all. Emile himself was of "noble birth," and his education was undertaken by a private tutor. "The poor man," Rousseau observed, "does not need to be educated. His station gives him a compulsory education. He could have no other."<sup>67</sup> The same message appeared in *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*: "Those who are destined to live in country simplicity have no need to develop their faculties in order to be happy. . . . Do not at all instruct

the villager's child, for it is not fitting that he be instructed; do not instruct the city dweller's child, for you do not know yet what instruction is fitting for him."<sup>68</sup>

In his article "Political Economy," Rousseau spoke of the need for public education, not in the prosaic sense of reading, writing, and arithmetic but as a moral and social discipline. Education in this larger sense, he explained, was too important to be left to the "understanding and prejudices" of mortal fathers, for "the state remains, and the family dissolves." Thus, the public authority had to take the place of the father and assume the responsibility of imbuing children with "the laws of the state and the maxims of the general will." Only then would children learn "to cherish one another mutually as brothers, to will nothing contrary to the will of society, to substitute the actions of men and citizens for the fruitless and vain babbling of sophists, and to become one day the defenders and fathers of the country of which they will have been so long the children."<sup>69</sup> It was in the same spirit, seventeen years later, that Rousseau recommended to the new government of Poland a system of education that would inculcate children in the love of country. "It is education which must give souls the national form, and so direct their opinions and their tastes that they are patriots by inclination, by passion, by necessity. A child, on opening his eyes, should see his country, and until he dies he should see nothing but his country." Under such a regimen, children would not be allowed to play separately and privately but only together and in public, so that they would all aspire to a common goal.<sup>70</sup>

It may be said that Rousseau withheld education, in the ordinary sense, from the common man in the belief that natural man had his own natural virtue and wisdom, which would only be corrupted by education. But that would not account for the other *philosophes*, who had no such faith in natural man. It is remarkable that the leading lights of the Enlightenment should



have paid so little attention to the kind of elementary education that would be the necessary prelude to enlightenment in its loftier sense. The proposals for popular education that were circulated at the time did not come from the major *philosophes* and did not have the imprimatur of the *Encyclopédie*. When the *Encyclopédie* did raise the subject, it dealt with it in moral and political terms rather than the commonplace sense of literacy. The article on "School" defined it simply as a public place "where one teaches languages, humanities, sciences, arts, etc.," followed by one short paragraph on the etymology of the word.<sup>71</sup> Another, on "Education," explained that for every order of citizens some kind of education was appropriate. Just as there were schools that teach the verities of religion, so there should be those that teach the "exercises, the practices, the duties and the virtues of their state."<sup>72</sup> Yet another article gave to the "Legislator" the task of educating children as a means "of attaching the people to the country, of inspiring them with community spirit, humanity, benevolence, public virtues, private virtues, love of honesty, passions useful to the state, and finally of giving them and of conserving for them the kind of character, of genius that is suitable to the country."<sup>73</sup>

Voltaire did raise the subject of education in the usual sense of that word, conceding that some few children, the offspring of skilled artisans, might be taught to read, write, and calculate. But, like Rousseau, he saw no such need for the children of agricultural laborers: "The cultivation of the land required only a very common kind of intelligence." He mocked the *Frères des Ecoles Chrétiennes* who made it their mission to establish schools in the countryside, praised the author of one book on education that opposed schooling for the masses, and assured the misguided author of another, who supported a system of national education, that the people would never have the capacity to learn. "They will die of hunger before they become philosophers. It seems to me essential that they be ignorant beggars."<sup>74</sup> To d'Alembert, he

wrote, "We have never pretended to enlighten shoemakers and servants; that is the job of the apostles."<sup>75</sup>

Diderot's contribution to the subject came not in the *Encyclopédie* but in private letters to Catherine the Great for the reform of Russia, in one of which he suggested that publicly supported schools be established in the cities and villages. When Catherine protested that it was impossible to educate a large population, he replied that he did not know of any country, however populous, that could not have small schools for poor children where they would be fed as well as taught reading, writing, arithmetic, and "the moral and religious catechism."<sup>76</sup> It is ironic that Diderot's proposal for schools in Russia resembled those run by the church in France, which is perhaps why he never recommended any such public system for his own country. In any case, his communications with Catherine were private (the correspondence was not published until 1920), so that this proposal was not available to his countrymen. What was public, enshrined in the *Encyclopédie*, was his image of the "ignorant and stupefied" multitude, whose voice was that of "wickedness, stupidity, inhumanity, unreason, and prejudice."<sup>77</sup>

The argument kept coming back to this—the great enemy, *l'infâme*. The people were uneducable because they were unenlightened. They were unenlightened because they were incapable of the kind of reason that the *philosophes* took to be the essence of enlightenment. And they were incapable of reason because they were mired in the prejudices and superstitions, the miracles and barbarities, of religion. Moreover, the very idea of popular education was suspect because the institutions of education were in the hands of the church, so that the expansion of education would only further stupefy and stultify the people.

If some of the poor did in fact become educated in pre-revolutionary France, it was not because of the *philosophes*, the historian Daniel Roche points out, but in spite of them.

"Most Enlightenment thinkers opposed teaching peasants how to read and write, while the Church and especially the lower clergy favored it."<sup>78</sup> Early in the century, ordinances had been passed making schooling compulsory—not, to be sure, out of solicitude for education but as part of the campaign against Protestantism. Although these rules were not always carried out, literacy rates (defined as the ability to sign one's name) rose from 29 percent in 1700 to 37 percent in 1790, as a result of the church-run schools for which the *philosophes* had such contempt.<sup>79</sup> It is also ironic, Alan Kors observes, that the church had not only educated the *philosophes* (most, like Voltaire, attended Jesuit schools), but had created the reading public for the *Encyclopédie*.<sup>80</sup>

The *Encyclopédie* prided itself on its treatment of the "mechanical arts." It included copious drawings, diagrams, and plates illustrating those arts, and professed great respect for the artisans who practiced them. But it exhibited little patience and less regard for the great mass of the people who were not artisans, and its pages contain few practical proposals to alleviate their condition. In a very brief article on the "Indigent," Diderot protested against the division of society into the opulent and the miserable, concluding with the cryptic observation, "There are no indigent among savages."<sup>81</sup> But he did not explain why that was so or how civi-

\* Tocqueville once made a similar statement, not about savages but about poorer countries. There were more indigent, he explained, in England than in Portugal, partly because the standard of indigence (what was regarded as necessary for bare existence) was higher in England, and partly because the English were more desirous of relieving the condition of the indigent, thus permitting more people to qualify as indigent.<sup>82</sup> Diderot may have meant something like this in his statement about savages and the indigent.

lized society could cope with its indigents. Other articles complained about the gross inequalities in society and the unfortunate situation of the very poor, without offering any practical proposals for reform.

Turgot was the rare *philosophe* who was also a reformer. As intendant of Limoges, one of the poorest provinces in France, he introduced new agricultural methods and crops, promoted local free trade, encouraged industry, and provided measures of relief for the poor. Later, in his brief tenure as France's comptroller-general of finance, he tried to enact reforms on a larger scale, abolishing some sinecures and monopolies, immunities from taxation, guild privileges, and compulsory labor on the roads. (After his forced resignation, most of these reforms were repealed.) As a prominent physiocrat, he advocated a policy of free trade, which would have been (as Smith also pointed out) to the ultimate advantage of the poor as well as to the national economy. He was unsympathetic, however, even hostile to charity, not only because it was administered by the church but also because he deplored its practical effects. The poor, he wrote in the *Encyclopédie*, had "incontestable rights on the abundance of the rich," and charitable foundations were meant to alleviate their miseries. The result of such endeavors, however, was unfortunate, for those countries where charity was most abundant were also those where misery was most widespread. The reason was simple: "To permit a large number of men to live free of charge is to encourage laziness and all the disorders that follow; it is to render the condition of the idler preferable to that of the man who works. . . . The race of industrious citizens is replaced by a vile population composed of vagabond beggars free to commit all sorts of crimes."<sup>83</sup>

Diderot echoed these sentiments, criticizing the *hospitaux* (poorhouses as much as hospitals) as refuges for professional beggars. Nor was the situation outside the poorhouses much better, for there were masses of "young and vigorous idlers

who, finding in our ill-conceived charity easier and more generous sustenance than they could get by work, fill up our streets, our churches, our grand boulevards, our market-towns, our cities, and our countryside"; they were the "vermin" produced by a state that did not value real men.<sup>84</sup> Jaucourt was one of the few contributors to the *Encyclopédie* who made a point of distinguishing between beggars—"vagabonds by profession . . . who demand alms for idleness and sloth, rather than earn their livelihood by work"—and those who were indigent because of sickness or old age. Unlike Diderot, he recommended that workhouses be established for the needy in conjunction with the *hôpitaux*.<sup>85</sup> In another article, making a similar distinction between beggars and the common people, he disputed the prevalent idea that the latter would work and be docile only if they were kept in poverty.<sup>86</sup>

It is interesting that no serious thought was given to the English example of the Poor Laws. D'Holbach did mention them, only to criticize them for the same reasons that he disapproved of religious foundations and charities in general, because they encouraged laziness and idleness.<sup>87</sup> Even Montesquieu, otherwise so well disposed to the English, was opposed to the English system. At one point he seemed to favor something like a state provision for the poor: "The alms given to a naked man in the street do not fulfil the obligations of the state, which owes to every citizen a certain subsistence, a proper nourishment, convenient clothing, and a kind of life not incompatible with health." He went on, however, to argue not only against a state system of relief but also against organized, private charitable institutions. Transient help, he insisted, was much better than permanent foundations. "The evil is momentary; it is necessary, therefore, that the succor should be of the same nature, and that it be applied to particular accidents."<sup>88</sup>

Being wary of charity and charitable institutions (and not just because they were administered by the church), the

*philosophes* produced neither the community of philanthropists nor the multitude of private societies that were so prominent in Britain. The article on "Philanthropy" in the *Encyclopédie* consisted of one short paragraph distinguishing between two kinds of philanthropies: the first designed to make oneself loved for one's virtues, and the second, common in polite society, meant to gain the approval of others; in the latter case, "it is not men that one loves but oneself."<sup>89</sup> The *philosophes* were fond of the word *bienfaisance*, but they themselves (with the notable exception of Turgot) were not personally involved in benevolent enterprises or practical reforms. Just as there was no "Age of Reason" in Britain, so there was no "Age of Benevolence" in France.

## ENLIGHTENMENT AND REVOLUTION

It is often said that the *philosophes* did not foresee or want revolution, that they preferred to have change come about by means of an enlightened monarch rather than an unenlightened mob. On one occasion, however, when he was feeling especially aggrieved, Voltaire confessed that he looked forward to a popular revolution.

Everything I observe [he wrote to a friend in 1764] is sowing the seeds of a revolution that will inevitably come to pass and which I shall not have the pleasure of witnessing. The French always get there late but at last they do arrive. By degrees enlightenment has spread so widely that it will burst forth at the first opportunity, and then there will be a grand commotion. The younger generation are lucky; they will see some great things.<sup>90</sup>

Of the better known *philosophes*, only Condorcet was "lucky" enough to see the Enlightenment burst forth into

revolution. Helvétius died in 1771, Voltaire and Rousseau in 1778, d'Alembert and Diderot in 1783 and 1784, Holbach in 1789 on the eve of the Revolution (but he had been ill and inactive for several years before that). Condorcet did live to see the Revolution and had the highest hopes for it, until he was forced to flee from the Terror and died in jail in 1794. A number of lesser contributors to the *Encyclopédie* survived. A dozen or so participated in the local assemblies that drew up the *cahiers*, the letters of grievance submitted to the States-General in May 1789, but they expressed no desire to abolish the nobility or monarchy. They were not, in fact, revolutionaries or republicans, and were disaffected very early in the course of the Revolution. Some fled from Paris or emigrated; four were imprisoned by the Terror; one was executed.<sup>91</sup>

Yet the ideas of the Enlightenment did have resonance in the Revolution, if not quite that which their creators might have desired. The most obvious legacy of the Enlightenment was anti-clericalism. The *philosophes* would surely have approved of the disestablishment of the church, the emancipation of Protestants and Jews, and the legalization of civil marriage and divorce. But they might have had cause for disquiet about some of the other consequences of the disestablishment. They had been opposed to the charities run by the church, but the elimination of those charities left the indigent with no resources at all. The remedies hastily improvised by the Revolution—workshops and laws regulating prices, wages, and the production of food—proved unwieldy and ineffectual, leaving the poor, most historians agree, worse off at the end of the Revolution than at the beginning.<sup>92</sup>

Similarly, the church-run schools were abolished with nothing to replace them. In 1791, Condorcet wrote a report for the Assembly recommending the establishment of village schools, but it was put off for discussion, perhaps because of the outbreak of war the following year. When he returned to the subject, in his *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of*

*the Human Mind* (written while he was in hiding from the Terror and published posthumously), he devoted a single paragraph to the purposes of such an education, starting with the management of the household and concluding with the ability to exercise one's rights and reason, but containing no concrete proposal for schooling. In 1793, Robespierre presented a plan for compulsory education in boarding schools, where the children would be protected from the insidious influence of reactionary parents. Although this was passed by the Convention, its essential provisions were eliminated. Only after Thermidor did the Directory promulgate an educational code providing for a minimal elementary education to be paid for by parents.

One cannot fairly saddle the Enlightenment with responsibility for all the deeds, or misdeeds, of the Revolution. Yet there were unmistakable echoes of the *philosophes*, of Rousseau especially, at every stage. The famous pronouncement by the abbé Sieyès in the pamphlet published on the eve of the Revolution, *What Is the Third Estate?*, might have been coined by his hero Rousseau. "The nation," Sieyès declared, "is prior to everything. It is the source of everything. Its will is always legal; indeed it is the law itself."<sup>93</sup> The first sessions of the National Assembly in 1789 were devoted to drafting the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, which included references to the social contract taken almost verbatim from Rousseau's book. The following year, a bust of Rousseau was installed in the Assembly Hall, together with a copy of the *The Social Contract*, and a law was passed calling for the erection of a statue of him. Effigies, busts, and images of him were common, and items reputedly belonging to him (his walking stick, for example) were sold many times over. When Paris was divided into electoral districts, one section was named "*Contrat Social*." And when his body was transferred to the Panthéon, it was together with a copy of *The*

*Social Contract* resplendent on a velvet cushion. A member of the National Convention reported on this event: "It is not the *Social Contract* that brought about the Revolution. Rather, it is the Revolution that explained to us the *Social Contract*."<sup>94</sup>

Rousseau's influence on Robespierre was even more pronounced. The opening lines of *Emile*, "Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man," were echoed by Robespierre: "Man is good, as he comes from the hands of nature . . . if he is corrupt, the responsibility lies with vicious social institutions."<sup>95</sup> Robespierre might also have been invoking the general will when he contrasted the "people" to "individuals": "The people is good, patient, and generous. . . . The interest, the desire of the people is that of nature, humanity, and the general welfare. . . . The people is always worth more than individuals. . . . The people is sublime, but individuals are weak."<sup>96</sup>

Robespierre explicitly paid tribute to Rousseau when he proclaimed the Festival of the Supreme Being ushering in the "Republic of Virtue" (the euphemism for the Terror). In the *Encyclopédie*, Rousseau had called for the establishment of "the reign of virtue" that would make "particular wills" conform to the "general will."<sup>97</sup> He did not use the expression "reign of virtue" in *The Social Contract*, but he did introduce, in the final chapter of that work, the idea of a civil religion that would inaugurate, in effect, such a reign. That religion was to be based on a "civil profession of faith" prescribing the "social sentiments without which a man cannot be a good citizen or a faithful subject." No one, Rousseau added, would be compelled to believe the dogmas of that religion, but anyone who did not believe them would be banished from the state—banished not for impiety but as an "anti-social being, incapable of truly loving the laws and justice, and of sacrificing, at need, his life to his duty."<sup>98</sup> And anyone who, after professing to believe those dogmas, acted as if he did not

believe them, would be put to death. The dogmas themselves seem banal, even innocent: the existence of an almighty and beneficent deity, immortality, the happiness of the just and punishment of the wicked, and the sanctity of the social contract and laws. But the idea of a civil religion, with all the solemnity and strictures attached to it, was anything but innocent, for it was meant to carry out the purpose of the new regime, as Rousseau understood it, which was nothing less than the radical reshaping not only of society but of humanity:

He [the sovereign, or "legislator"] who dares to undertake the making of a people's institutions ought to feel himself capable, so to speak, of changing human nature, of transforming each individual, who is by himself a complete and solitary whole, into part of a greater whole from which he in a manner receives his life and being; of altering man's constitution for the purpose of strengthening it; and of substituting a partial and moral existence for the physical and independent existence nature has conferred on us all.<sup>99</sup>

It was as if Robespierre, in instituting the Republic of Virtue, were responding to Rousseau's challenge, taking upon himself, as the supreme legislator, the task of "changing human nature" and "transforming each individual." "I am convinced," Robespierre said of his proposal for the education of the young in boarding schools, "of the necessity of bringing about a complete regeneration, and, if I may express myself so, of creating a new people."<sup>100</sup>

This was Tocqueville's reading of the Revolution: "The idéal the French Revolution set before it was not merely a change in the French social system but nothing short of a regenera-

tion of the whole human race." And again: "They [the revolutionists] had a fanatical faith in their vocation—that of transforming the social system, root and branch, and regenerating the whole human race."<sup>101</sup> A modern French historian agrees. The idea of "regeneration," Mona Ozouf says, was a key concept of revolutionary discourse. "People began to speak only of regeneration, a program without limits, at once physical, political, moral, and social, which aimed for nothing less than the creation of a 'new people.'" This idea, so fervently affirmed by Rousseau, was often invoked by the revolutionists, which was "one of the reasons why the Revolution was all his from the beginning."<sup>102</sup>

An alternative view of the Revolution stops short of the idea of a regenerated human nature, seeing it instead as a thoroughgoing social revolution. For Hannah Arendt, the Revolution was "born out of compassion" for the "low people," *les misérables*. First articulated by Rousseau and carried out by his disciple Robespierre, this "passion for compassion" inevitably culminated in the Terror, for compassion responded only to "necessity, the urgent needs of the people," leaving no room for law or government, for liberty or even reason.<sup>103</sup> This is a moving but, I believe, fanciful reading of history. The French Revolution was not a social revolution, and the Terror was instituted not out of compassion for the poor but for purposes of "public safety," the safety of the regime. *Le peuple*, in whose name Robespierre established the republic, was not the people in any ordinary sense, still less *les misérables*, but a singular, abstract people, represented by an appropriately singular and abstract general will.

"Ah," Robespierre proclaimed, in paying homage to Rousseau, "if he had witnessed this revolution of which he was the precursor and which has carried him to the Pantheon, who can doubt that his generous soul would have embraced with rapture the cause of justice and equality?"<sup>104</sup>

"Justice and equality"—not, notably, "liberty." One wonders how Rousseau, or for that matter the other *philosophes*, would have fared had they been "lucky" enough (as Voltaire put it) to live to see that Revolution. Not well, to judge by the fate of Condorcet and some of the *Encyclopédistes*, who lived to see it—and to die from it. And, of course, there was Robespierre himself, the disciple of Rousseau, who became the victim of his own Terror.