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# The Philosophy of the Enlightenment

The Christian Burgess and the  
Enlightenment

Lucien Goldmann



*Routledge Revivals*

## **The Philosophy of the Enlightenment**

In this reissue, originally published in English in 1973, French philosopher Lucien Goldmann turns his attention to the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, the great age of liberalism and individualism and analyses the 'mental structures' of the outlook of the *philosophes*, who showed that the *ancien regime* and the privileges of the Church were irrational anachronisms, and pleaded for institutions founded on reason.

In assessing the strengths and limitations of individualism, Goldmann considers the achievements and limitations of the Enlightenment. He discusses the views of Hegel and Marx and examines the relationship between liberal scepticism and traditional Christianity to point the way to the possible reconciliation of the two seemingly incompatible 'world visions' of East and West today.

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The Christian Burgess and the Enlightenment

**Lucien Goldmann**

*Translated by*  
**Henry Maas**



**Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group

Originally published in 1968 as  
Der christliche Bürger und die Aufklärung

First published in Great Britain in 1973  
by Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd

This edition first published in 2010 by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
by Routledge  
270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2009.

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ISBN 0-203-85430-6 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 13:978-0-415-57365-8 (hbk)

ISBN 13:978-0-203-85430-3 (ebk)

ISBN 10:0-415-57365-3 (hbk)

ISBN 10:0-203-85430-6 (ebk)

# *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*

By the same author

*The Hidden God*

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the Enlightenment*

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This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2009.

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© 1968 by *Hermann Luchterhand Verlag GmbH*  
*First published in Great Britain in 1973*  
*by Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd*  
*Broadway House, 68–74 Carter Lane*  
*London EC4V 5EL*

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ISBN 0-203-85430-6 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0 7100 7493 x

# Contents

Translator's Note	ix
Preface	x
I The Structure of the Enlightenment	1
<i>The Encyclopédie</i>	1
<i>Kant</i>	2
<i>Dialectical criticism</i>	3
<i>The economic and social background</i>	10
<i>Ethical theory</i>	15
<i>Religion</i>	20
<i>Politics</i>	21
<i>Inner structure of the movement</i>	23
<i>Criticism of bourgeois values</i>	26
II The Enlightenment and Christian Belief	31
<i>Christianity and the rationalized society</i>	32
<i>Attacks on Christianity</i>	40
<i>Alienation</i>	50
III The Enlightenment and the Problems of Modern Society	51
<i>The 'internal crisis'</i>	51
<i>Marxist criticism</i>	53
<i>Western society</i>	55
<i>Towards a synthesis</i>	58
Index	60

## *Translator's Note*

This essay was written in German and first published in 1968 under the title *Der christliche Bürger und die Aufklärung*. A French version (by Irène Petit) entitled *La Philosophie des Lumières* was included in Lucien Goldmann's collection of essays *Structures mentales et création culturelle* (Paris, 1970). This translation follows the original German text, incorporating further matter from the French edition and some additional corrections.

## *Preface*

The following essay was originally written in 1960, in response to a commission from a German publisher, as the chapter on 'The Enlightenment and Christianity' in a projected history of Christian thought. In the event the book did not appear, and the publisher restored the copyright to me.

But for the original commission I should probably never have written on the Enlightenment, and certainly not without lengthy research. I should also have given less space to the relation between it and Christianity.

None the less the manuscript, such as it is, possesses a certain interest and may be worth publishing so long as the reader understands how it came into being. Perhaps, too, he may feel that I have compensated for the lack of scholarly research to some extent by developing certain hypotheses that I should hardly have ventured to advance in a more substantial work.

L.G.

Paris, May 1967

# I

## *The Structure of the Enlightenment*

### *The Encyclopédie*

Eighteenth-century France is the country of the Enlightenment in its most fully developed and most thorough form; and the *Encyclopédie* directed by d'Alembert and Diderot is both a kind of symbol and a programme for the whole movement.

The *Encyclopédie* was of course only a part of a wider intellectual movement, and many important thinkers of the Enlightenment, including Voltaire, Rousseau, Helvétius and d'Holbach, made only occasional small contributions or none at all. None the less they maintained close links with the group that produced the *Encyclopédie* and though there are major differences between them, these concerned limited areas of their thought but not the idea itself of the *Encyclopédie* as central to the movement.

The *Encyclopédie* does not stand alone but is merely the bestknown and largest undertaking of a whole series, from Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* to Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique*. But if the *Encyclopédie* is specially representative of the movement, that is because both the contents themselves and the principles on which they are arranged express two leading features of the fundamental ideas of the Enlightenment:

- (a) the great importance attached to making knowledge as comprehensive as possible;
- (b) the idea that this knowledge is a *sum* of items of information to be conveyed in alphabetical order.

These of course are only approximations, and greater precision is needed if we are to avoid confusion. The writers of the Enlightenment always thought of knowledge in close connection with action. But they regarded human practice (*Praxis*), both in its effects on nature and in its social and historical consequences, as *individual* action, or the simultaneous action of individuals in large numbers, and as the application of knowledge acquired by the intellect. Knowledge, whether of nature or of society, is *autonomous*. Its existence and range depend on the practical experience of the individual; but it is not regarded as something whose content is determined by the collective action of mankind in history.

Thus human practice is seen as a socially important application of theoretical knowledge and moral principles. It is *not* seen as having an independent existence with the power to alter the content of knowledge and thus to bring about changes in human society. The thinkers of the Enlightenment in general lack all sense of the *dialectical* relation between knowledge and action, between self-awareness and practice.

The *philosophes* knew that the different fields of knowledge are interrelated, but this interrelation did not strike them as so fundamental as to make an internally organized presentation *indispensable* or *absolutely* preferable to the dictionary style of arrangement of information in separate items.

## 2 *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*

For them, the mission of man, which gives meaning to his life, lies in the effort to acquire the widest possible range of autonomous and critical knowledge in order to apply it technologically in nature and, through moral and political action, to society. Furthermore, in acquiring his knowledge, man must not let his thought be influenced by any authority or any prejudice; he must let the content of his judgements be determined only by his own critical reason.

### *Kant*

Kant, who adopted many of the basic ideas of the Enlightenment, and in some important respects went beyond them, began his essay *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* with the words:

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed minority. This minority is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. It is self-imposed if its cause lies not in a lack of understanding, but in the lack of courage and determination to rely on one's own understanding and not another's guidance. Thus the motto of the Enlightenment is 'Sapere aude! Have the courage to use your own understanding!' Idleness and cowardice are the reasons why so great a part of mankind, after nature has long since released them from the tutelage of others, willingly remain minors as long as they live; and why it is so easy for others to set themselves up as their guardians. It is most convenient to be a minor. If I have a book to reason for me, or a confessor to act as my conscience, or a physician to prescribe my diet, and so on, I need not take any trouble myself. As long as I can pay, I do not have to think. Others will spare me the tiresome necessity.

Needless to say, this attitude had already brought the Enlightenment into conflict with traditional Christianity. Any religion that depends on revelation must insist that perception and reason cannot suffice to give man the knowledge he needs in all the important questions of life; such knowledge requires correction, or at any rate needs to be supplemented by knowledge resting on the authority of revelation.

The *philosophes* were of course well aware that human knowledge has its limits. The difference between their attitude and the religious one lies not in their assuming that human thought is omnipotent and able to penetrate to the essential nature of things, but rather in the fact that they considered human reason, based on sense-perception, able to reach positive results in a whole range of questions fundamental to human life, results standing in no need of correction by faith; from this view the more radical thinkers of the Enlightenment, especially in France, proceeded to the assertion that the human intellect is capable of obtaining such results in *all* essential questions. If this is so, all knowledge given by revelation becomes superfluous, deceptive, and, in Kant's phrase, dangerous to human adulthood.

Kant continues:

I set the central achievement of Enlightenment—that is, of man’s emergence from his self-imposed minority—above all in matters of religion. I do so because our rulers take no interest in playing the guardian to their subjects in matters of art and science. Besides, this religious dependence is both the most damaging and the most humiliating of all.

Later in this essay which we have taken as our point of departure, Kant declares that it is vital to Enlightenment not merely that men should free their thinking from all authority, but also that they should make free *public* use of their reason, and that all should have unfettered rights to report the results of their thought in speech and writing.

On the other hand, Kant tells us, there may be practical limitations to this right that present no difficulties to Enlightenment ‘but are actually favourable to it’. These are limitations on the ‘private use’ that the individual may make of his reason in a civic capacity or *public* appointment.

The particular tone of Kant’s essay is of course determined by the concrete social and political situation in Germany in his time, and by the weakness of the middle class, as a result of which the German Enlightenment was necessarily much less radical than, for example, the French. The leading French thinkers could hardly have admitted the existence of such a division between thought and action. In pointing it out, Kant revealed one of the great weaknesses of the movement—even though he himself did not think it one. He is confirmed by the fact that any difficulties encountered by the *philosophes* came purely from the publication of their writings; they in no way resulted from any attempt to apply their ideas to their own professional activities. This is well illustrated by the case of Jean Meslier. In the eyes of his parishioners his career was that of a model priest, never touched by the least suspicion of heterodoxy or atheism; yet after his death he was found to have written one of the most radically anti-Christian and atheistic books of the time, and its publication caused an immense uproar.

This divorce between thought and action seems to reflect one of the basic ideas of the French Enlightenment—the notion that the unhampered advance of knowledge and general education would suffice, without any further action, to bring about the liberation of mankind and to end the great social evils of the day.

### *Dialectical criticism*

*Hegel* The Enlightenment—taking the word in the broadest sense as the individualist vision of the world, whether rationalist or empirical or composite and intermediate<sup>1</sup>—is one of the four important forms of thought<sup>2</sup> in the modern history of western civilization.

It has become usual in our day to accept the German idealist view of the Enlightenment as a limited type of thought largely superseded by the three other great world visions—the tragic, the romantic and the dialectical. There is some justification, it is true, in the dialectical critique and in criticism from the religious point of view generally; but it is my thesis that these criticisms need some revision in the light of twentieth-century experience.

<sup>1</sup> ‘Composite and intermediate’ describes most of the thinkers usually considered in France as the Enlightenment in the narrower sense.

<sup>2</sup> The three others are: the *tragic*, in Pascal and Kant; the *romantic*; the *dialectical*, in Hegel and Marx.

#### 4 *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*

As a preliminary step I shall outline the dialectical critique, and then give a general account of the Enlightenment as a whole.

The dialectical critique is most effectively expressed in the two outstanding works of dialectical philosophy, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* and Goethe's *Faust*.

Hegel begins his chapter on the Enlightenment (*Phenomenology*, 'Spirit in self-estrangement', section two; translation by J.A. Baillie) by asserting that the great theme of the Enlightenment is the struggle against religion: 'The peculiar object on which pure insight directs the active force of the notion is belief.' But he adds at once that because of the change in human consciousness at this stage of historical development (a Marxist would say, because of the rise of the bourgeoisie and its rationalist type of thought) the Faith with which the Enlightenment was battling had shrunk to a mere body of knowledge about God, a 'science of God', as restricted in scope as the rationalist view opposing it. This is Hegel's meaning in speaking of belief as 'a form of pure consciousness like itself [pure insight, i.e. the Enlightenment] and yet opposed to it *in that element*'.<sup>1</sup>

The Enlightenment however is not merely the battle against a faith shrunk to superstition and 'science of God'. It is also a critical conception of the world, a way of seeing man's relation to the world in terms of rational knowledge, *pure insight*.

But at the same time pure insight has a relation to the actual world, for like belief it is a return from the actual world into pure consciousness. We have first of all to see how its activity is constituted, as contrasted with the impure intentions and the perverted forms of insight found in the actual world.

The Enlightenment appears first as the critical spirit, as 'pure ingenious thought' tearing down everything that stands, and so breaking and destroying itself.

The sphere of culture has itself rather the most painful feeling, and the truest insight about itself—the feeling that everything made secure crumbles to pieces, that every element of its existence is shattered to atoms, and every bone broken: moreover it consciously expresses this feeling in words, pronounces judgement and gives luminous utterance concerning all aspects of its condition.

The rationalist view, however, lacks the essential content of historical knowledge—knowledge of the *process* of historical development itself, or (in Marxist rather than Hegelian terms) awareness of human development in history as a product of human action. It thus lacks the one content that can transform the nature of historical knowledge and change it from passive contemplation into active awareness, from knowledge of the object into consciousness of the human subject and awareness of the nature of human existence.

Pure insight therefore can have no activity and content of its own, and thus can only take up the formal attitude of truly apprehending this ingenious insight proper to the world and the language it adopts.

<sup>1</sup> My italics.

If knowledge is inactive and lacks the essential historical content it is ineffective. The reality implied in it can be comprehended only in a perspective that transcends it. The implicit content of the Enlightenment is the systematic interpretation of nature and its technical application. It is the subsequent general diffusion of this knowledge that has contributed to the transformation of society and thus fulfilled a genuine historical function.

Since this language is a scattered and broken utterance and the pronouncement a fickle mood of the moment, which is again quickly forgotten, and is only known to be a whole by a third consciousness, this latter can be distinguished as pure insight only if it gathers those several scattered traces into a universal picture, and then makes them the insight of all.

These words of Hegel's of course refer to the *Encyclopédie*. In the Enlightenment this is the real step forward towards effective action transcending purely theoretical knowledge. It is the first step taken on the road which, through the work of Diderot, leads to the awareness of content, which is the true activity of mind or (in Marxist terms) of man's consciousness of his historic role. The *Encyclopédie* was a collaborative enterprise which undertook to make a complete collection of knowledge, to make it available to all, and thus to advance from individualist 'parleying' to a historic whole.

By this simple means pure insight will resolve the confusion of this world. For we have found that the fragments and determinate conceptions and individualities are not the essential nature of this actuality, but that it finds its substance and support alone in the spirit which exists *qua* judging and discussing, and that the interest of having a content for this ratiocination and parleying to deal with alone preserves the whole and the fragments into which it falls. In this language which insight adopts, its self-consciousness is still particular, a self existing for its own sake; but the emptiness of its content is at the same time emptiness of the self knowing that content to be vain and empty. Now, since the consciousness placidly apprehending all these sparkling utterances of vanity makes a collection of the most striking and penetrating phrases [the *Encyclopédie*], the soul that still preserves the whole, the vanity of witty criticism, goes to ruin with the other form of vanity, the previous vanity of existence. The collection shows most people a better wit, or at least shows everyone a more varied wit than their own, and shows that better knowledge and judging in general are something universal and are now universally familiar. Thereby the single and sole interest which was still found is done away with; and individual light is resolved into universal insight.

In the *Encyclopédie* the unhistorical individualism of critical and intelligent reasoning found a means of historic expression adequate to its real nature. This expression was a collective one, both in the sense that the work was a collaborative production and in the variety of the social classes which it aimed to unite in a shared ideology.

But arrayed against the *Encyclopédie* there still stands faith, a faith superseded by history and inherently empty, a faith which has shrunk to a science of God. It is not so much the acquisition of knowledge and mastery over nature as the battle against faith that

## 6 *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*

is the real historic activity of the Enlightenment. 'But above empty knowledge there still stands fast the knowledge of the essence, and pure understanding first appears in its proper role when it challenges faith.' The following section deals accordingly with the 'battle of the Enlightenment against superstition'.

*Goethe* In Goethe's *Faust* we encounter a similar point of view. The opening of the play pleasantly presents the conflict between the highest ideals of the Enlightenment and the real content of the new dialectical thinking. The old scholar whom we meet at the beginning of the first act exactly embodies the human ideal of the Enlightenment. But precisely because his knowledge (as befits a realization of this ideal) is encyclopedic, Faust has become aware of its limitations and of the need to pass beyond them to the reality of life.

The theme of the play is Faust's path from the confident, critical scholar and researcher to the man who discovers the real meaning of life, a meaning that Goethe, without being Christian himself, poetically represents as the way to God. It would be no exaggeration to say that Faust's first words exactly express the human ideal of the Enlightenment:

I've studied now Philosophy  
And Jurisprudence, Medicine,—  
And even, alas! Theology,—  
From end to end, with labour keen.

(Translation by Bayard Taylor)

Through his studies Faust, the scholar, has become more cultivated than ordinary people, freeing himself not only from Christianity but from all religion.

I'm cleverer, true, than those fops of teachers,  
Doctors and Magisters, Scribes and Preachers;  
Neither scruples nor doubts come now to smite me,  
Nor Hell nor Devil can longer affright me.

But it is just this experience that has brought him to apply his critical approach to himself, to recognize the limits of pure knowledge and perceive its fundamental inadequacy and emptiness. He has sought in vain for the real meaning of life, and now he resorts to magic:

No dog would endure such a curst existence!  
Wherefore from Magic I seek assistance,  
That many a secret perchance I reach  
Through spirit-power and spirit-speech,  
And thus the bitter task forego  
Of saying the things I do not know,—  
That I may detect the inmost force  
Which binds the world and guides its course;  
Its germs, productive powers explore,  
And rummage in empty words no more!

Pure knowledge now seems to him alien to life and the real world:

Ah, me! this dungeon still I see,  
This drear, accursed masonry,  
Where even the welcome daylight strains  
But duskly through the painted panes.  
Hemmed in by many a toppling heap  
Of books worm-eaten, gray with dust,  
Which to the vaulted ceiling creep,  
Against the smoky papers thrust,—  
With glasses, boxes, round me stacked,  
And instruments together hurled,  
Ancestral lumber, stuffed and packed—  
Such is my world: and what a world!  
And do I ask, wherefore my heart  
Falters, oppressed with unknown needs?  
Why some inexplicable smart  
All movement of my life impedes?  
Alas! in living Nature's stead,  
Where God His human creature set,  
In smoke and mould the fleshless dead  
And bones of beasts surround me yet!

Faust's resort to magic should not be understood as a romantic conversion from intellect to mysticism or from reason to the irrational. The spirits that he summons up in his invocation and with whom he talks are the representatives of the two great visions of the world whose clash provides the theme of the play, the highest form of rationalism, as embodied in the Enlightenment, the world vision of Spinoza, and the Dialectic, whose vision of man transcends all Enlightenment and every kind of rationalism. The two spirits, the Macrocosm and the Earth-Spirit, are embodiments of these two visions: pure intellect and historic action.

Spinoza was the first philosopher to use reason to reach awareness of totality, of the Whole, a concept that remained more or less foreign to all the individualist philosophers. For this reason his philosophy appeared to the dialectical thinkers and poets as the highest form of rationalism, as the extreme limit to which pure reason can go. *Amor Dei Intellectualis*, the intellectual love of God, a God identical with the world, the intellectual love of the Whole.

The initial impression made on Faust by the Macrocosm is overwhelming:

How each the Whole its substance gives,  
Each in the other works and lives!  
Like heavenly forces rising and descending,  
Their golden urns reciprocally lending,  
With wings that winnow blessing  
From Heaven through Earth I see them pressing,  
Filling the All with harmony unceasing!

## 8 *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*

But he immediately recognizes the limitations of pure knowledge:

How grand a show! but, ah! a show alone.  
Thee, boundless Nature, how make thee my own?  
Where you, ye breasts? Founts of all Being, shining,  
Whereon hang Heaven's and Earth's desire,  
Whereto our withered hearts aspire,—  
Ye flow, ye feed: and am I vainly pining?

Knowledge independent of historic action is perhaps accessible to God, but even in its highest form it can give man nothing essential, no content to fill his life. Accordingly Faust turns to the Earth-Spirit, whose essence is *action* (working for that reason in *time*, while Spinoza's rationalism creates a timeless picture of the universe):

In the tides of Life, in Action's storm,  
A fluctuant wave,  
A shuttle free,  
Birth and the Grave,  
An eternal sea,  
A weaving, flowing  
Life, all-glowing,  
Thus at Time's humming loom 't is my hand prepares  
The garment of Life which the Deity wears!

Faust perceives that this message alone can reveal the meaning of life and the way to God:

Thou, who around the wide world wendest,  
Thou busy Spirit, how near I feel to thee!

But the answer is shattering:

Thou art like the Spirit which thou comprehendest,<sup>1</sup>  
Not me!

There is still an abyss between Faust and the Earth-Spirit, one that only a transformation of character can enable him to cross. Until he transcends his world vision, the pure scholar, the man of the Enlightenment, remains incapable of reaching beyond reason and intellect to the essence of life, historic action.

It is precisely the purpose of the play to present the crossing of this abyss: the course of a scholar of the Enlightenment from the spirit of knowledge, which he embodies at the beginning, to the spirit of action, which shows him the way to the Absolute, to God.

<sup>1</sup> 'Comprehend' is used deliberately. The passage is concerned precisely with the gap between pure 'comprehension' and historical 'action'.

Criticism of the Enlightenment reappears with the entry of Faust's assistant, Wagner, who represents the most limited form of the spirit of the Enlightenment. As he says, he has zealously devoted himself to study, acquired great knowledge, but still longs to know everything. His one anxiety is that life is too short for him to learn all he wants to know. For all his critical efforts, he often feels that 'in head and breast there's something wrong'.

How hard it is to compass the assistance  
Whereby one rises to the source!

Like all the thinkers of the Enlightenment he would of course like to use his knowledge to direct the world, but he realizes that the possibility is remote:

Ah, when one studies thus, a prisoned creature,  
That scarce the world on holidays can see,—  
Scarce through a glass, by rare occasion,  
How shall one lead it by persuasion?

This 'soulless sneak' understands nothing of Faust's invocation of the spirits. Hearing Faust speaking alone, he enters in dressing-gown and nightcap (symbol of an outworn creed), a light in his hand, in the belief that Faust is declaiming a Greek tragedy, an art from which he would gladly 'profit' (for a scholar is ceaselessly busy enlarging his culture).

It would, however, be wrong to think that Goethe saw only the negative side and the inadequacy of the Enlightenment. Once the problem is stated and the inadequacy made clear, two later scenes show—as Hegel does—the positive side of the movement. In the first, 'Before the city-gate', an old peasant expresses the people's gratitude to Faust for the skilled medical help he gave them during an outbreak of plague. The other is the scene in Part Two where Faust returns to his former laboratory. He encounters his old pupil, Wagner, who has taken his place, and carried on his work. He has earned the gratitude of the people, and become old, honoured and famous. He has advanced so far in scientific knowledge that he has succeeded in producing a synthetic human being, the Homunculus. Here too we can see the limits of pure knowledge. Wagner can bring the Homunculus to life, but he cannot control or direct him. Almost as soon as the Homunculus is living he prepares to go out into the world. When Wagner anxiously asks, 'And I?' the answer is:

You  
Will stay at home, most weighty work to do,  
Unfold your ancient parchments.

As this study is devoted to the Enlightenment, I shall not continue the detailed analysis of *Faust*. It is clear enough from what has been said that its theme is the replacement of the Enlightenment by the discovery of historic action, which is represented as the only way to God. One further scene may be quoted, since it makes the point particularly clear. Faust, left alone after Wagner's departure, and shattered by the Earth-Spirit's rejection of him, is on the point of suicide when the message of the Easter bells stays his hand. The lines are famous:

Why, here in dust, entice me with your spell,  
 Ye gentle, powerful sounds of Heaven?  
 Peal rather there, where tender natures dwell.  
 Your messages I hear, but faith has not been given;  
 The dearest child of Faith is Miracle.  
 I venture not to soar to yonder regions  
 Whence the glad tidings hither float;  
 And yet, from childhood up familiar with the note,  
 To Life it now renews the old allegiance.

‘Your messages I hear, but Faith has not been given.’ The philosophy of the Enlightenment was critical and anti-Christian. It had not merely turned faith into superstition; it had lost the capacity to feel the content of religion altogether, above all the content of Christianity. The bells seem to ring only for ‘tender natures’ (*weiche Menschen*), i.e. for the common people.

Though Faust leaves the ideal of the Enlightenment behind him, he does not become a Christian. But he does recover the capacity to understand the content of religion and its meaning for men; he perceives the need for an answer to the religious questions to which the Enlightenment completely closed its eyes. That is why the Easter bells are able to call him back to life, a life in which he can find the true meaning of the message. That meaning is action, which restores the reality of God and the Devil. Through the pact with the Devil, and *only* through this pact, action opens up man’s way to God.

#### *The economic and social background*

This critique of the Enlightenment by Hegel and Goethe is frequently echoed by later writers, though less sympathetically and with a less comprehensive grasp. Its purpose was to emphasize the essential problem of the relation between knowledge and historic action, between the Enlightenment and the Dialectic. After our brief sketch of it, the next task is to examine the nature of the knowledge with which the Enlightenment was concerned, or, more precisely, the fundamental categories determining its content.

We have long since learned from the social history of ideas that *every* mode of human thought and feeling is determined by mental structures which are closely related to the objective life of the particular society in which they develop. For this reason it is not enough for a modern scientific study of an intellectual movement to catalogue its still valid achievements and its limitations. The effort must be made to ground them in the general categorical structure of the movement if we are to understand the factors making the achievements possible and the limits inescapable.

In the whole history of ideas there are few subjects that have been so often or so thoroughly treated as the Enlightenment. But although there are good monographs on particular aspects of the movement, no satisfactory comprehensive study has yet been produced.

There are two main reasons for this. First (with one exception, to be discussed later) the modern method of genetic and structural investigation has not been applied to the Enlightenment. An undertaking of this sort would take years of detailed research, so that

in this essay it will barely be possible to do more than formulate some provisional general hypotheses, offered at the most as a starting-point for further research.

The second reason is that most of the leading books on the Enlightenment were written in a period ruled by values which the experience of western society in our time has forced us to question. When we speak of the Enlightenment and Christianity, the events of the past thirty years have made much that earlier passed as obviously true look very different now.

With these reservations, the territory of the subject may now be delimited. In the field of intellectual history there can of course be no such precise definitions as in the natural sciences. There are no classes to be defined by particular characteristics belonging to all their members and to nothing else. The scientific history of ideas is a structural and genetic description combining analysis and exposition. It can claim scientific exactness only when the analysis is sufficiently detailed.

It follows that a study of the Enlightenment must give not only a structural account of the movement as a whole, but must also reveal the structural organization of its various tendencies. This attempt has frequently been made at the empirical level, and it cannot on this occasion be raised to the level of a scientific study. None the less something, at least by way of hypothesis on the essential nature of Enlightenment thought, may be suggested now.

The accepted meaning of 'the Enlightenment' includes the various rationalist and empirical currents of thought of eighteenth-century Europe, especially France and England. In the perspective of intellectual history, these currents have their origins in earlier centuries, while their development has continued into our own time. On the other hand, as Hegel pointed out, and as Groethuysen fully demonstrated in his excellent book, there was a fundamental relation between the anti-Christian philosophers of the Enlightenment and those eighteenth-century thinkers who, for example in France, defended Christianity against the attacks of the Enlightenment.

In the perspective of social history the Enlightenment is a historically important stage in the development of western bourgeois thought, which, as a whole, constitutes a unique and vital part of human intellectual history. To understand the essential ideas of the Enlightenment, one must accordingly start by analysing the activity that was most important to the bourgeoisie and most influenced its social and intellectual evolution. This was the development of the economy, and above all its essential element, exchange.

In sociological terms, the history of the bourgeoisie is primarily economic history. The word is used here in a narrow sense, in which there is not an 'economy' in all human societies, at all times and in all places; it is used only of those groups in which the production and distribution of goods are not in any way controlled—no matter whether the control is rational, authoritarian, religious or traditional. Thus there is no economy in this sense in a medieval peasant family growing food for its own consumption, nor on a feudal estate living on its own produce and on natural abundance obtained without cultivation, nor in a large-scale system of planning like that of the present-day Soviet Union. In all these instances the commodities are produced and distributed—fairly or unfairly, in humane or barbarous manner—on principles governed by the *use-value* and actual qualities of the goods.

An economy in our sense exists only where economic activity is not governed by the use-value of the goods produced—the *use* of the goods to people, individually or socially—but by the possibility of selling the goods on the market and realizing their *exchange-value*.

## 12 *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*

Now as the organization of production and distribution based on exchange-value develops within the previously established framework of production and comes to supersede it, a progressive change in the people's manner of life and thought sets in. It is not easy to list the main features of this process of change, as the causally determined historical order in which they appear does not correspond with the systematic arrangement of their essential qualities. As the present work is not historical, we shall adopt a systematic enumeration and begin with a characteristic that appears on the surface only in developed exchange economies but forms the basis of all the others, and thus offers a direct means of making the intellectual history of the western European bourgeoisie comprehensible.

*The autonomy of the individual* The most important consequence of the development of a market economy is that the individual, who previously constituted a mere partial element within the total social process of production and distribution, now becomes, both in his own consciousness and in that of his fellow men, an independent element, a sort of monad, a *point of departure*. The social process of course continues and implies a certain regulation of production and exchange. This process was not only objectively present in the earlier social structure but also *consciously realized* in the traditional, religious and rational rules governing people's behaviour; these rules now begin to fade from consciousness. The regulation of the market is now *implicit*, governed by the blind forces of supply and demand. The total social process is seen as resulting mechanically and independently of the individual will from the action of countless autonomous individuals on each other and in response to each other, behaving as rationally as possible for the protection of their private interests and basing their actions on their knowledge of the market with no regard for any trans-individual authority or values.

It was thus inevitable that the development of a market economy, starting as early as the thirteenth century, should progressively transform western thought. This development seems to be the social foundation of the two great world visions characteristic of the European outlook, that dominated it up to the time of Pascal, of Kant, and even longer, and have persisted alongside the tragic, the romantic and the dialectic visions. They are the rationalist and the empirical traditions, and their synthesis, the French Enlightenment.

At first glance rationalism and empiricism seem to be so opposed in their philosophical approach, and to give such opposite answers to every philosophical question, that one may well ask how they can possibly both be derived from the development of the bourgeoisie, and how most of the eighteenth-century writers of the Enlightenment in France managed without any special difficulty to adopt a position half-way between the two extremes.

The answer seems to be that these two philosophies share the same fundamental concept: the treatment of the individual consciousness as the *absolute origin* of knowledge and action. Pure rationalism finds this origin in clear innate ideas existing independently of experience; pure empiricism, rejecting entirely the notion of innate ideas, finds the origin in sense-perceptions more or less mechanically organized into conscious thought.

The majority of the thinkers of the French Enlightenment occupied a third position, intermediate between rationalism and empiricism. They were sharply anti-Cartesian, laughed at Descartes' physics (his 'romance of vortices', as they called it) and found their great examples in Newton and Locke, denying, with the latter and all the empiricists, the existence of innate ideas, and holding that individual consciousness is invariably based

on experience. None the less they generally acknowledged, expressly or by implication, the active role of reason in collecting the knowledge which has been acquired through perception and preserved in the memory, organizing it in the form of thought and science, and directing action, under the influence of feeling, towards the greatest satisfaction and happiness of the individual.

For all the differences between these three philosophical systems, it is none the less clear that we have before us three forms of the same individualism, and that the temporary dominance of one form or another was determined largely by the objective social situation in different countries at different times.<sup>1</sup>

It seems self-evident that there is a close relation between the development of the market economy, in which every individual appears as the autonomous source of his decisions and actions, and the evolution of these different philosophical visions of the world, all of which treat the individual's consciousness as the absolute origin of his knowledge and action. Likewise, the disappearance from human consciousness of all trans-individual authority regulating production and distribution is matched by the fundamental claim of all the writers of the Enlightenment that individual reason must be recognized as the supreme arbiter and subjected to no higher authority.

This is by no means the only relation between the Enlightenment and the bourgeoisie. All the fundamental categories of Enlightenment thought have a basic structure analogous to that of the market economy, which constitutes in its turn the social basis of the evolving bourgeoisie. It will be enough to mention the most important of them.

*Contract* Every act of exchange requires the participation of at least two parties. There is a set abstract relation between them which may be defined as follows: the agreement of two autonomous individual wills creates a mutually binding engagement; this engagement may be altered only if a new agreement is made, or if it is proved that the will of either of the parties was not autonomous at the time of the agreement, as a result either of deception (causing a hindrance to knowledge) or of physical constraint (restricting action). This relation is inherent in every act of exchange and constitutes the sole interpersonal relation implied by the transaction. This is the relation of *contract*.

It is natural enough, then, that all individualist thinkers, and particularly those of the Enlightenment, should think of society as a contract between large numbers of autonomous individuals combining to establish a community, a nation, a state. The contract is the basic mental category in which the Enlightenment thought of human society and especially the state. We meet this concept in a succession of entirely diverse thinkers stretching from Hobbes and Locke to Grotius and Diderot, and above all in Rousseau's *Social Contract*.

*Equality* This is the place to ask why Rousseau's concept of the social contract put all others into the background; why, since its publication, other versions of the theory have been relegated to academic study.

The answer to this question lies in the historical and political ideas of the Enlightenment. For the moment we may say that most of the other theories of social contract, both those

<sup>1</sup> See my *Mensch, Gemeinschaft und Welt in der Philosophie Immanuel Kants* (Europa Verlag, Zürich, 1946).

deriving from seventeenth-century politics and those originating in the Enlightenment's preference for monarchy in the eighteenth century, regarded the social contract as a contract establishing the state by the *subjection* of its members. Rousseau, by contrast, saw the contract from the start as bound up with the other basic value of the Enlightenment, that of equality. In his view the social contract is an agreement between *free* and *equal* individuals, all undertaking to put themselves entirely under the general will. The essence of the social contract is defined thus: 'Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will, and, in our corporate capacity, we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole' (Book I, chapter 6).

The social contract creates the general will in which 'all citizens are equal' (Book III, chapter 6), and the general will then determines the form of government.

Furthermore Rousseau was the first to relate (though only in abstract terms) the theory of social contract with the distinction between the individual will and the general will. (This distinction becomes fundamental in Hegel and Marx in the analysis of the private and state spheres of social life, and of their relations in modern society.)

To continue our analysis of the act of exchange: the transaction of course postulates *equality* between the parties as an essential condition of the contract. However great the differences in rank or wealth that distinguish them in the rest of their social life, in the act of exchange, as sellers and buyers of goods (also when the goods are in the abstract form of money), the parties to the transaction are strictly equal. The act of exchange is essentially *democratic*. Needless to say, its democratic element is purely formal, and implies nothing as to the real content of the exchange. (This is why the Marxist critique of formal democracy fastens chiefly on a privileged act of exchange, the sale and purchase of human labour.) But within the framework of the transaction all economic distinctions between the parties are disregarded. The equality of all actual and potential parties to a contract is a fundamental condition of its mere existence.

*Universality* Next, exchange generates the idea of *universality*. The buyer uses the market to find a seller, and vice versa, but is not concerned with the personal character of the other. In principle, if the conventions of the exchange are sufficiently developed, the behaviour of the parties towards each other is fixed by general rules completely independent of who the parties actually are.<sup>1</sup> Thus the category of universality (which is implicit in any catalogue offering goods for sale at stated prices to any customer) increasingly becomes the effect as well as the condition of the exchange of goods.

*Toleration* A fourth category of thought which is both produced by exchange and furthers its development is *toleration*. It is hardly necessary to justify the assertion. Exchange entirely disregards the religious and moral convictions of the parties just as it disregards their other objective qualities. These convictions are irrelevant to the act of exchange, and it would be absurd to take them into account. Whether the other party is a Christian, Jew or Mohammedan makes no difference to his ability to transact the exchange validly. This analysis is confined also by the historical fact that the development of commercial relations has always worked against fanaticism and wars of religion.

<sup>1</sup> This of course is valid only for a liberal economy and not for a monopoly economy, in which elements of collective planning are beginning to appear.

*Freedom* We now come to the two most important categories which, like the others, are both the condition and the result of the development of exchange: freedom and property.

Exchange is possible only between parties that are equal and free. Any restriction on freedom of will or action automatically destroys the possibility of an act of exchange. A slave or serf cannot of course sell his possessions on his own account. On the other hand it is unthinkable for a merchant, every time he makes a sale or purchase, to be obliged to inquire into the previous life or civil status or rights of his client. This problem arose in a concrete form in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries at the high point of the agricultural period of the European economy, when the towns were beginning to develop; and it brought legal complications in its train. The commercial activity which provided the foundation of the newly growing towns was very frequently held back by the feudal structure of the countryside. For example, it became increasingly difficult to accept that purchases or sales made in the town could suddenly be declared null and void simply because the client was a runaway serf who did not possess the right to buy or sell. As a result special laws were enacted for market days, the *jus fori*, and in this way the towns began to gain their freedom, though often only after a long and bitter struggle. This freedom is implied in the words 'There is freedom in town air', meaning that in general all trace of previous serfhood could be eliminated by the acquisition of citizenship of a town or sometimes merely by sufficiently long residence within its boundaries.

*Property* Lastly, an exchange can take place only if the two parties have rights of disposal over the goods they intend to exchange, or, more precisely, if they enjoy the unlimited rights of ownership under the law of *jus utendi et abutendi*.

With this we conclude the list of the principal mental categories necessary to the development of a society founded on exchange, categories which also acted to further its development: individualism, entailing the disappearance of all trans-individual authority; the contract, forming the basis of all human relations; equality; universality; toleration; freedom; property.

### *Ethical theory*

Anyone who knows the eighteenth century in France will see that this list (and it is no coincidence) is identical with the fundamental categories of the thought of the Enlightenment.

Whatever differences there were in other respects between the philosophers of the Enlightenment, these categories (with a few exceptions, to which we shall return) were accepted by the majority of them and held as the natural fundamental values of human and social existence. Critical individualism, freedom, the equality of all men, the universality of law, toleration and the right to private property: these are what may be called the common denominator of the thought of the Enlightenment, a common denominator challenged only at one or two points, for example the right to private property, by the members of the extreme wing of the movement like Morelly and Mably. It is on the basis of these fundamental values which they held in common that the thinkers of the Enlightenment proceeded in their individually different ways to construct their concept of the world.

The scientific part of this concept had already been developed in the seventeenth century by Galileo, Descartes and Newton, and the French Enlightenment of the eighteenth century was generally content to adopt their results. Although this is a digression from the subject, it is worth mentioning that the development of modern natural science is one of the great successes to be credited to rationalist and empiricist thought. The idea that nature is a book written in mathematical language, that the entire universe is governed by general laws that know no exception; the elimination of all that is mysterious or strange or unusual, and the virtual elimination (although many scientists cautiously refrained from making this part of their theory explicit) of the miraculous; the assumption of constant, unchanging natural laws conforming to reason (Malebranche, who was a priest as well as a philosopher, held that God worked only through general laws); the assertion that these laws require confirmation by experience: these were the scientific advances of the seventeenth century inherited by the age of the Enlightenment.

Consequently, while there were several important scientists among the thinkers of the eighteenth century, especially Buffon and d'Alembert, the French Enlightenment was primarily concerned with questions of moral philosophy, religion and politics. Its task was to find answers to these questions in terms of the values listed above.

First the moral question. Once the adult and completely independent status of individual reason has been proclaimed and all trans-individual authority rejected, the problem is to establish a set of binding rules of conduct based only on the recognition of their validity by the individual conscience. The problem has remained unsolved to this day, though the progress of historical development has made it ever more urgent. To give it its modern name, it is the problem of *nihilism*.

Traditional Christian thought based the rules governing human conduct on the will of God, or (in the semi-rationalized form of this view) on natural reason, which God has implanted in the human soul.

The leading philosophers of the dialectical school, Hegel, Marx, Lukács and Heidegger, however much they differ on other questions, hold in common the fundamental view that man is an active part of the Whole (totality or being). Thus human values are part of existing reality, and are derived from it; at the same time reality itself becomes a value and a criterion of value.

Between the age of traditional Christianity and the beginning of dialectical philosophy there grew up the great individualist traditions which have continued to develop to this day: rationalism, empiricism and the Enlightenment. These traditions dispensed with all trans-individual concepts of God, community, totality and being. In doing so, they completely separated the two forms of individual consciousness, knowledge of facts and judgement of values. Science had become 'morally neutral' in the seventeenth century, and the problem of the Enlightenment was to find some other objective basis for value-judgements. The individualist perspective allows only three possible answers:

(a) The denial that value-judgements or general rules can in any way be based on the individual conscience. This view is content to assert that if every individual rationally pursues his self-interest and greatest happiness, society will function satisfactorily of itself.

(b) The assertion that rules in conformity with the general good can be based on human reason, which is held to be identical in all people.

(c) The hypothesis that every individual's own pursuit of his own greatest satisfaction can provide the basis of a number of rules promoting the general good. These rules claim no universal validity, but at least they make practical agreement possible and ensure the satisfactory working of social institutions.

The difference between the first of these answers and the two others is that the first explicitly renounces the possibility of generally accepted trans-individual standards. The two others set themselves the impossible task of grounding such standards in the individual reason or the individual pursuit of the greatest satisfaction.

The first answer, the most radical one, was formulated in seventeenth-century France: by Descartes, in a brief passing comment, and much more definitely by the individualist poet, Corneille. It is the assertion that the divorce between knowledge and value-judgement removes all possibility of justifying any moral values as universally binding.

When Princess Elizabeth of the Palatinate asked for generally valid rules of conduct, Descartes' first answer ran:

There is another truth whose knowledge seems to me most useful. It is that, although each of us is a person distinct from all others, whose interests are consequently to some extent different from those of the rest of the world, we must always remember that none of us could exist alone, and each one of us is in fact one of the many parts of the universe, and more particularly a part of the earth, the state, the society, and the family to which we belong by our domicile, our oath of allegiance, and our birth. And the interests of the whole, of which each of us is a part, must always be preferred to those of our individual personality. (15 September 1645)

This rule, he added, should be obeyed 'with measure and discretion'.

The subtle princess replied that, without in any way doubting the validity of these rules, she could still not see exactly how to base them on Descartes' philosophy or bring them into harmony with the rest of his thought. This was a crucial question, and it forced Descartes to retreat. Three weeks later he sent her the following reply, which is strongly characteristic of his thought:

I grant that it is difficult to measure exactly the extent to which reason bids us devote ourselves to the public interest; but it is not a matter calling for great precision. It is enough to satisfy one's conscience, and in doing so one can still leave much room for one's own inclination. For God has so established the order of things, and so closely bound men together in society, that even if every man acted only in his own interest and had no fellow-feeling for others, he would still not cease in the ordinary way to be acting in their interests as much as in his own, provided that he was prudent, particularly if he was living in an age whose morals were not corrupted. (6 October 1645)

We have here a schema often repeated in the Enlightenment: the assertion that the private and the public interest coincide. The inference, generally not drawn explicitly but still implicit in the Enlightenment, and later one of the fundamental concepts of the classical

economists, is that it suffices to act in one's own interest without paying any regard to the general interest.

Compared with Descartes, the men of the Enlightenment were too deeply committed to the struggle with the existing political order (and compared with the classical economists, they were not yet sufficiently detached from the struggle)—a struggle undertaken in the name of the general good—to allow a concept so important to them to disappear completely.

Apart from the exchange of letters quoted, Descartes was content with a provisional ethic and made no attempt to develop his promised definitive moral system based on his philosophical premises. The ethic of nobility (*générosité*) postulates only the autonomy of the will and implies no particular principle of conduct towards others.

In the same way France's greatest individualist poet, Corneille, after four celebrated plays with 'noble' heroes (*Le Cid*, *Horace*, *Cinna* and *Polyeucte*) suddenly found that the same dramatic structure was suitable when the hero was self-seeking and vicious. Before tackling the composition of such plays (e.g. *Attila*) he wrote two transitional dramas (*Rodogune* and *Héraclius*) whose chief characteristic is that virtue and vice are treated as morally equal.

The argument is not that the individualist view is incompatible with any moral system, but, on the contrary, that it is compatible with *all* moralities, and thus entirely neutral between them. This is precisely why, on the basis of individualism, no system of values can be established as necessarily valid.

This problem is more immediate than ever in modern western industrial society. In this society an immense growth of scientific knowledge has given men vast power over nature. But at the same time it becomes constantly more clear that this rational knowledge is morally neutral and can contribute nothing to the establishment of any moral position or any scale of values. As I have said, the impossibility of establishing the necessity of any values within the dominant rationalist world vision is the structural basis of nihilism.

It must be constantly stressed that the fundamental moral neutrality of the individualist approach refers only to values of *content*, to relations of love, hate or indifference to others. In contrast to these are the *formal* values already listed—freedom, equality, toleration—and the concept of justice, which, as will be seen, is closely linked with them. In history these are intimately bound up with individualism, and, so long as they can be realized *without difficulty*, still retain their dominant position in western capitalist society. But, just because individualism in the last resort is morally neutral, there is always the danger that in a serious crisis they may be displaced by the opposite values. National Socialism in Germany was the greatest and most frightening instance of this, but unfortunately not the only one.

The subject of this essay, however, is not present-day society but the individualist thought of the eighteenth century and the French Enlightenment. Its thinkers were engaged in a fierce struggle with religion, tyranny and despotism. It was thus important for them to show that the values actually accepted by the bourgeoisie of the time could best be derived, quite independently of religious authority, from individual reason. It is not surprising that the great thinkers of the period totally failed to perceive the difficulty of basing these generally accepted values on the individual conscience. The only exception—and he stands on the fringe of the Enlightenment—is the Marquis de Sade, who developed a fully rational

and systematic attitude to the world based on scorn and hatred. On the radical wing of the movement writers like Mably and Morelly based their values on reason. Some of the Encyclopedists, for instance d'Holbach and Helvétius, asserted simply that moral laws come from the individual's pursuit of his own happiness, and that it is in his interest to promote the general welfare since his own happiness depends on other people. If, therefore, men are immoral, it is generally through ignorance and a mistaken view of their true interests.<sup>1</sup>

Helvétius, who incidentally is one of the founders of sociological thought, was clearer-sighted and understood that things are more complicated. He agreed with d'Holbach's view that moral laws are to be derived from private interest. But he saw that private interests vary from one social group to another. He accordingly drew the distinction between society as a whole and social sub-groups. We may quote a chapter heading from his book *De l'Esprit* (Essay II, 'The Mind relatively to Society'):

It is proposed to prove in this discourse that the same interest which influences the judgement we form of actions, and makes us consider them as virtuous, vicious, or allowable, according as they are useful, prejudicial, or indifferent with respect to the public, equally influences the judgement we form of ideas; and that, as well in subjects of morality as in those of genius, it is interest alone that dictates all our judgements; a truth that cannot be perceived in its full extent without considering probity and genius relatively, 1. to an individual, 2. to a small society, 3. to a nation, 4. to different ages and countries, and 5. to the whole world.

By inquiring into the relation between the interests of a social group and its dominant morality, Helvétius laid the foundations of social science. Had he pursued the inquiry to its furthest limits he would have transcended the thought of the Enlightenment and reached the philosophy of history. But he was too much a man of his time and was too much under the influence of the Enlightenment to go more than half way. He decided accordingly that there exists in every man, besides the system of thought and value-judgement produced by his education and suitable for his social group, the possibility of more objective judgement and valuation, which in the last resort allows him to put the general interests of mankind above those of his own group. On this basis he distinguishes between 'virtues of prejudice' and 'true virtues'. The former reflect the interests of particular groups, the latter look to the interests of all mankind. By this roundabout way we are brought back to d'Holbach's line of argument.

Diderot adopted the same basic principles, but, as he usually did, he had a clearer awareness of their limitations, and wavered between the various views, which seemed to him equally justifiable but irreconcilable. The more moderate thinkers of the Enlightenment, particularly the English philosophers and Rousseau, assumed an inborn sense of fellowship or love of others, which allowed them to build up society and morality from single individuals' pursuit of their own happiness, or at least allowed them to think this possible in particular circumstances.

Whatever view one adopts, the problem remains that of basing the dominant bourgeois morality on the individual conscience. It remains unsolved, but the men of the Enlightenment,

<sup>1</sup> This question is rather more complex, as will be seen below.

absorbed in their struggle against religion and despotism, were generally never aware of the fact.

Their moral teaching, despite the diversity of their systems, contains many similar elements, for its content reflects the dominant moral concepts of the middle and upper bourgeoisie of the time.<sup>1</sup> But there is the important distinction that Rousseau and the radicals saw the division between the individual and the general interest, and based the values they adopted on 'reason' or 'nature', while d'Holbach and the Encyclopedists inclined to the view that the general good is in harmony with the interests of the individual.

### *Religion*

Passing to the religious ideas of the Enlightenment, we must start by distinguishing two problems to be treated separately:

(a) the religious ideas of the *philosophes* derived from the writers' own mental categories;

(b) the relation between the Enlightenment and Christianity.

For all their differences on religious questions (needless to say, within a limited area of divergence), all the writers of the Enlightenment are united in their hostility to traditional Christianity and the Church.

For the moment, however, we are not concerned with this hostility, but with the examination of the philosophers' own religious views. At first glance there seem to be three fundamental concepts: the atheism of the leading Encyclopedists, Voltaire's deism, and the theism of Rousseau and Mably. It might be thought that theism and deism are merely trivially different forms—adopted as concessions to prevailing opinion—of a fundamentally atheist world vision. Traditional Christianity had often treated them in these terms, and this was the view taken by Pascal, Garasse and several other seventeenth-century apologists. Another suggestion that has been made with some reason is that deism and theism constitute the first ideological concessions by the bourgeoisie to their fear of the people. Religion, a superfluity in addressing an educated audience, could still be useful, perhaps even necessary, if the uneducated masses of the poor were to be kept in check.

But though the god of Voltaire and Rousseau may have little in common with the transcendent god of Christianity, and though the *philosophes* often admitted the need for a double standard of truth, depending on whether they were addressing the cultivated classes or the uneducated masses, it remains clear none the less that their religious thought has its origin in the structure of their philosophical conception of the world.

I have already said that all the leaders of the Enlightenment regarded the life of a society as a sort of sum, or product, of the thought and action of a large number of individuals, each of whom constitutes a free and independent point of departure. This view inevitably raises the question of how to obtain at least the minimum of agreement needed to make society as a whole function tolerably smoothly, if not perfectly. All the *philosophes*, however critical

<sup>1</sup> The morality of the two groups has much in common; they diverge on a number of important points, e.g. on the question of pleasure and self-denial, and therefore on sexual morality in general. On the other hand they share the values of compassion, feeling for one's fellow men, respect for the human person and, subject to legal qualifications, respect for the rights of property.

they were of the existing order of politics and society, were convinced that it was at least possible to base an ideal social order on freedom, equality and toleration.

They thought of the physical and the social world as a vast machine, consisting of separate, independent parts more or less well put together. There was nothing strange about such a machine; it was merely a greatly enlarged version of the machines that had become common in their time and had so impressed the Encyclopedists.

The 'machine' however could function only if, like any other, it was built by a competent mechanic on a deliberately worked out plan. Hence the image of God as the great clock maker, the designer and builder of the universe, and its constant recurrence in the literature of the Enlightenment.

Thus the deist or theist god of the Enlightenment is no mere concession to tradition, no mere bogey to frighten the uneducated, but *an essential part of the inner theoretical structure* of any rationalist or even semi-rationalist vision of the world. (The empiricists were confronted by the same problem, but it was possible for them to dismiss it as insoluble without contradicting themselves.)

The question had already arisen in the seventeenth century, and even then the individualist philosophers, in considering the principle that holds the separate constituent parts of the universe together, had been obliged to place it outside the universe in the will of a transcendent god. Leibnk's pre-established harmony, Malebranche's sole efficient cause working solely through general laws, Spinoza's psycho-physical parallelism—these are answers to a problem that continued to occupy the philosophers of the eighteenth century, and in its popularized form it led to the image of the great clock maker. It is worth adding that in several of the philosophers of the Enlightenment this image is tinged with optimism. The great clock maker has constructed no ordinary machine, but one that is *wonderful*, one that makes it possible for people, if only they will be sensible, to lead contented, happy lives. This optimism is connected with the objective conditions in which the *philosophes* were conducting their struggle. Furthermore the same line of thought appears in the defenders of Christianity. This explains the amazing popularity of the physico-theological Argument from Design.

### *Politics*

At first glance the political principles of the Enlightenment seem a simple matter: freedom, equality, general application of the law, rejection of arbitrary rule, toleration, regard for the common good. The general attitude is clear, even if there are differences. The radicals wanted economic as well as political equality, advocating, as did Morelly and Mably, the abolition of private ownership of land, or, following Rousseau, its limitation. The moderates, on the other hand, were interested only in equality before the law.

In fact the problem is more complicated. When the *philosophes* examined the political order as it was and asked what it should be, they found themselves faced with another contradiction whose origins lay at the very centre of their thought. The view of man adopted by individualist thought, particularly in the Enlightenment, is *static* and entirely lacks the historical dimension. It acknowledges only one form of society, the 'natural' one.<sup>1</sup> All political and social systems that depart from this pattern were considered corrupt in proportion to the extent of their divergence. The corruption seemed all the greater as

the mechanistic conception of nature and society adopted by many of the *philosophes*, especially the Encyclopedists, led them to think of the human will as determined by the natural and social environment.

On the other hand the *philosophes* were fighting a social and political system which they more or less completely rejected as basically corrupt. They were accordingly obliged to face a series of questions to which their system of thought offered no easy solution. Whether they followed Rousseau and placed the state of nature at the beginning of history or considered it something inherent in man as a reasonable being, they could not escape the question how mankind had departed from this ideal condition and fallen into corruption. In general the *philosophes* had a simple answer: it was fear, they said, in the hearts of the earliest men, that enabled tyrants and priests to destroy their freedom and keep them in ignorance, deceive them with prejudices and thus corrupt their morals. This state of things could be changed only by the removal of prejudice and the diffusion of knowledge. (Most of the *philosophes* were opposed to the idea of a revolt that would transform the nature of society, not only because they were themselves bourgeois, but also because the idea invoked a concept of *historical* reality that was alien and even hostile to the structure of their thought.)

It must be added that the social background to the optimism of the *philosophes* was the actual development of French society as it moved with increasing speed toward the Revolution. How history advanced was a question the *philosophes* could easily ignore or answer superficially, since at the time it was not a question of acute urgency for French society to resolve. By contrast the discovery of the systematic philosophy of history in German idealism (from Kant's writings on historical philosophy to the true philosophy of history in Hegel) was more than anything a reflection of the fact the German bourgeoisie was much too weak to transform society and adapt it to its own interests.

There was a second, much harder question. How was prejudice to be overcome if the corrupted thought of the time, itself determined by prejudice, was the inevitable product of a corrupt social situation which could be made healthy or abolished only by sane thought untainted by prejudice? At this point the thought of most of the *philosophes* fell into a vicious circle from which there was no easy escape. Generally they took refuge in the hope of a 'miracle', an 'educator', a 'law-giver', above all an enlightened, educated government founded on law, which would create the new social and political conditions needed for the advance of society. This was certainly a contradiction in their philosophy. How could the good teacher or legislator appear in times that were fundamentally bad? Had not the *philosophes* themselves repeatedly shown that men are corrupted by unlimited power? Social history helps to explain the contradiction. Enlightened monarchies, particularly in the less advanced states of Europe like Prussia, Austria and Russia, were fulfilling a modern, progressive role which strongly favoured the development of the middle class against the resistance of outworn traditional forms of society.

This explains how the *philosophes*, who were paving the way to the French Revolution, came to support the absolute rulers of Central and Eastern Europe, building great hopes

<sup>1</sup> The importance attached in the eighteenth century to the concept of the 'natural' is well known. It lies behind the stereotype of the 'noble savage', which is among those that best exemplify the thought of the period.

on Frederick II, Catherine the Great and even Maria Theresa. The close relations between Voltaire and Frederick, like those between Diderot and the Empress Catherine, are generally known. Later, of course, both Voltaire and Diderot were forced to admit that the actual policies of these monarchs, whom they had earlier idealized, hardly lived up to their expectations or their principles. But no other solution to the problem was possible while philosophical thought clung to individualism and did not advance to the historical dialectic. The 'alliance' of *philosophe* and despot became an established commonplace of history, despite Voltaire's subsequent breach with Frederick, and despite Diderot's late *Essay on the Reigns of Claudius and Nero*, a despairing defence of the Roman philosopher Seneca, who remained a Councillor at Nero's court and covered up the tyrant's misdeeds to the very day that the Emperor commanded him to commit suicide. Diderot's oft-repeated argument runs: Would it really have been better for Seneca to leave merely because he could have no prospect of destroying Nero's tyranny? If he stayed, there was still the hope of preventing some of his crimes.

Finally there is a fundamental contradiction in the social and political ideals of the Enlightenment which had important consequences both for the internal structure of the movement and for the future social and political development of Europe. This is the contradiction in a society based on private property, and thus, in the individualist view of the world, between two essential mental categories of the Enlightenment, freedom and equality. In such a society, either of these values, if fully accepted, entails a definite restriction on the other. Complete freedom, unlimited by certain essential restraints, is bound to produce extensive economic and social—and therefore political—inequality. On the other hand an individualist society cannot establish social equality without sharply limiting the freedom to accumulate wealth or abolishing private ownership altogether.

#### *Inner structure of the movement*

That completes the general description of the fundamental categories of the Enlightenment and their internal relations. But in addition, the Enlightenment, like every ideological movement, had an inner structure in which various tendencies can be distinguished. It is regrettable that we are still far from possessing the knowledge needed for the structural and sociological analysis of these tendencies. But we can at least say that the structure of the movement as a whole takes its pattern from the internal contradictions in its thought described above.<sup>1</sup>

The first major grouping of the thinkers of the French Enlightenment comprises those who place the main emphasis on equality. This approach led them to take a pessimistic view of historical development and to adopt a sharply critical attitude to the existing individualist social order. They accordingly worked out a programme for an ideal society based on reason. The group includes the radical wing, Mably, Morelly and Meslier, who,

<sup>1</sup> But it should be observed that these internal contradictions do not provide a sufficient explanation in themselves for the division of the movement into separate currents. The currents appear only when the contradictions become *consciously known to men*. Such conscious knowledge in its turn is based on *social* causes; in the case of the Enlightenment these have not yet, to the best of my knowledge, been analysed.

to ensure the equality of all members of society, not only called for major restrictions on freedom, but also abandoned one of the other basic ideas of the Enlightenment, the private ownership of land, which they denounced as a great evil.

There is, it is true, a certain similarity between this view and that of modern socialism, but there are also fundamental differences. In the first place, the *philosophes* attempted no historical analysis of the kind that might have laid bare the true historical forces working towards their ideal; second, their attitude led them to base their social ideal on ‘nature’ or ‘reason’, so that fundamentally they are believers in ‘spirit’, while modern socialist thought is essentially materialist, and therefore closer to that of the less radical wing of the Enlightenment.

The great differences separating figures like Mably or Morelly from modern socialist thought can be made clear by the fact that Mably based his social ideal on the aristocratic constitution of Sparta and was sharply critical of the Periclean democracy of Athens, while Morelly, in his *Code de la nature*, proposed to ban all research and speculation on world visions and the nature of spirit, hoping by these means to establish government on his principles once and for all.

I said earlier in this essay that the *philosophes* had moved away from the rationalism of Descartes and tended to favour Locke’s empirical approach. It would be more accurate to say that the radical thinkers mentioned above were those whose view of the world retained more elements of Cartesianism than any of the others. If dualism of perception and reason, and of body and soul, is one of these elements, then Rousseau belongs to the radical wing. Although he did not advocate the abolition of private property, he placed great emphasis on equality and was a severe critic of the inequalities in modern society. Unlike the radicals, however, Rousseau did not abandon the idea of freedom, on which he based his theory of the social contract, or the right to own property; but he too encounters the problem of the relation between private property, freedom and inequality, and is thus led to consider the possibility and necessity of preventing excessive private wealth. Rousseau’s ideal seems to be a kind of *petit-bourgeois* democracy, whose members are both free and equal, and none very rich or very poor.

Rousseau thus stands half-way between the radical opponents of private property on the one side and the Encyclopedists and Voltaire on the other. Despite considerable differences, he had much in common with the radicals: the rejection of materialism, the ideal of a social order based on reason, a critical attitude to the process of historical development that had created inequality, and the desire to reduce the economic effect of this inequality; but he joins the other main current of the Enlightenment, that of Voltaire and the Encyclopedists, in accepting fundamental limitations to the ideal of equality in order to safeguard freedom.

The leading figures of the group formed by the Encyclopedists, Diderot, d’Holbach and also Helvétius (who belongs to them although he was not a contributor), are above all empiricists inclining towards materialist monism. Their great exemplar is not Descartes but Locke. They take a positive view of historical development, particularly of the technology of craftsmanship and industry. For obvious reasons it is among them that the extreme atheists are to be found—those thinkers whose *social* ideas were the most radical needed some authority on which to found their ideal society (as opposed to existing society), and consequently inclined to deism or even theism.

In considering the religious views of the Encyclopedists it is important to distinguish between the ‘official’ point of view adopted in the *Encyclopédie* and their real opinions, as

expressed in their other writings. Intellectually the *Encyclopédie* was a powerful attack on the prejudice and ignorance of the *ancien régime*; but it was also a large-scale economic enterprise, requiring heavy investment and dependent on the support of highly placed officials sympathetic to progressive ideas and ready to protect the publication against the suspicions of the authorities. Thus it had to find a large enough body of subscribers and to count on escaping the censor's ban through the help of friends in the machinery of government. (The ban was twice imposed and twice withdrawn.) Both the support of subscribers and the toleration of the authorities were conditional on moderation of language. Hence numerous articles in the *Encyclopédie* emphatically affirm the truth of Christianity and the positive character of the French monarchy, particularly in its existing form. This in no way prevented informed readers from realizing that the true purpose of these articles was to call these assertions into question and encourage the opposite opinions. The device was not new. Bayle had used it in his *Dictionnaire*, and the authorities were well acquainted with it, so that it could no longer be used so blatantly. Even so, together with the writings of d'Holbach, Rousseau and Helvétius (most of Diderot's critical works remained unknown during his lifetime), it is the *Encyclopédie* that did most to shake old habits of thought in the mass of the educated bourgeoisie and to construct the new mental categories pointing the way to the French Revolution.

Voltaire's philosophical opinions and his vision of the world were more moderate, but, perhaps for that very reason, more emphatic and polemical when they came into conflict with the reality of his time. Although he rejected the radical social ideas of Mably and Rousseau, as he did the materialist philosophy of Diderot, d'Holbach and Helvétius, and though he found it much easier than they to accept the enlightened despotism of Frederick the Great and often felt that his attitude was in harmony with his own; though he believed (as he wrote in *Le Mondain*) in paradise (transferring it from heaven to the Paris of his day), he was still, with his light, witty, pointed style, one of the fiercest of the fighters against religious intolerance and the Catholic Church in general. Voltaire's work represents perhaps only a small section of the total composite view of the Enlightenment; but it is an essential part of the struggle, and, both for its extent and for its excellence, of primary importance to this aspect of the movement.

The 'economists'—or, more exactly 'physiocrats'—belong to the most moderate part of the movement, associated with it less by the actual content of their opinions than by the mental categories from which those opinions derive. They defended 'despotism' (their name for absolute monarchy), but, in place of the old theory of Divine Right and respect for tradition and revelation, they developed a monarchical theory founded on the rationalist mental categories of the Enlightenment and shaped in terms of those same categories. They are of great importance in the history of the social sciences, not merely because they established political economy as an objective science, but also because in the 'Tableau Économique' they worked out the first *complete model* of the total economic process. The bourgeois classical economists, still working within the structure of fundamental individualism, could not have grasped the significance of this total process. The conceptual model regains its strength in Marx's *Capital*, in the work of the later Marxists and, since Schumpeter, in bourgeois academic economics.

The principal idea of the physiocrats was that, in a country where capital was chiefly invested in agriculture rather than industry, the removal of all restrictions on private wealth

and the establishment of a fully free economy would produce a large enough national income to allow the existence of both a third estate, living on earned income and profit, and a strong landowning class (they meant of course ‘aristocracy’), living on continuously rising rents. The co-existence of a strong bourgeoisie and a strong nobility could then be made the basis of a modern enlightened monarchy. The physiocrats were naturally the *bête noire* of the radicals, especially Mably, who denounced their ‘economism’ in the name of ‘spirit’ and Virtue’. This once again shows the difficulty of drawing any parallels between the radical wing of the Enlightenment and later socialist thought, and the care needed in handling the similarities as well as the differences in this area.

*Criticism of bourgeois values*

*Rousseau* The foregoing is an attempt to outline the general structure of the French Enlightenment. Naturally each of the *philosophes* gives his own version of the thought contained within this general structure; and although it is beyond the scope of this essay to consider them individually in detail, it should be noted that two of the outstanding thinkers of the movement, Rousseau and Diderot, in contrast to all the others, recognized and understood its negative aspects and inner contradictions. Rousseau emphasized those of bourgeois society, Diderot those of the Enlightenment itself. This explains why Kant, Goethe and Hegel, the leaders of the German idealist school which superseded the philosophy of the Enlightenment, rated their contributions the highest.

The ideal society conceived by many of the *philosophes*, particularly the group round d’Holbach and Helvétius, and by moderates like Voltaire, was an idealized form of existing bourgeois society. Some of them indeed, for example d’Holbach, pushed this ‘socio-centrism’ to the point where they could hardly see the possibility of divergence between private interest and public good. Rousseau however was sharply critical of a society built up on conflicting private interests. His two celebrated tracts, the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* and the *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes*, use arguments that turn precisely on the contrast of the non-antagonistic life of men living in a state of nature independently of each other (or the first communities of shepherds) with that of modern society, constructed as it is on rivalry, antagonism, boundless egoism and *amour propre*. This established the fundamental concept of his world vision—that in terms of human morality the development of society is not progress but its reverse. Voltaire and other *philosophes* do not seem justified in criticizing him for wanting to restore society to its primitive state; Rousseau knew well enough that this was impossible. But in seeking an alternative to this negative evolution he did not choose the kind of historical analysis that could have shown him the forces working against social deterioration and capable perhaps of changing its course to a progressive direction. Instead, in his *Social Contract* he depicts an ideal society based on the essential categories of the Enlightenment—freedom, equality, toleration and contract; he believed it possible to realize such a society through the moral forces inherent in men and capable of development under the influence of a good government and a good educator. At this point he meets the same difficulty as all the other *philosophes*: since society has fallen from grace and become corrupt, he cannot say where good legislation and a good educator are to be found. But it is to his credit that his fundamentally democratic convictions made him prefer to leave the question unanswered

rather than follow Voltaire and Diderot in acclaiming a Frederick the Great or an Empress Catherine and hoping to find a solution in despots of their sort.

It is also important to note the significance of Rousseau's abstract and purely schematic distinction between the 'bad', purely self-seeking member of existing society and the 'good' citizen participating in the general will and ready to place himself in total submission to a society constructed on the social contract. This distinction enabled Rousseau to see more clearly than the other *philosophes* the division of the individual in bourgeois society into the concrete self-centred private person on the one hand, and the abstract 'citoyen' serving the general interest on the other. This division is a basic characteristic of modern man. But Rousseau developed the distinction within the framework of the categories of the Enlightenment; he was able to make an abstract contrast between the two roles of the individual, but he did not understand that they act upon each other and really form two parts—simultaneously complementary and contradictory—of a single concrete totality.

It is only in German idealism, starting with Kant, that Rousseau's analysis of the relation between private man and 'citizen', selfish interest and the general good, 'Vice' and 'Virtue', is first transcended. Though Kant maintains the abstract form of the distinction, he no longer treats it as the expression of two different forms of society, the real and the ideal, but as a contradiction in the individual conscience of every man between the demands of self-gratification and morality. The fact that both philosophers based their thought on this abstract distinction is probably one of the main reasons for Kant's high opinion of Rousseau.

It remained for dialectical thought to find the real analysis of the relations between bourgeois society and the state, the private man and the 'citoyen', and to see that these were merely different but mutually conditioned aspects of a particular form of social organization.

*Diderot* Diderot seems to me to occupy as important a position as Rousseau—perhaps a more important one—in the history of western thought. In the first place, he resolutely defended the values of the Enlightenment one by one against those who actually opposed the bourgeoisie socially and politically, and against theoretical critics. But in addition to this, both in some of his minor published works and in some major writings that he himself did not publish, he set about questioning the value not only of bourgeois society and its ideology but also of many of the fundamental categories of the Enlightenment itself. This made it possible for him to be simultaneously the organizer and guiding spirit of the *Encyclopédie*, with which his name is so closely linked that one can hardly think of them apart, and one of the greatest essayists in the intellectual history of western Europe.

There is of course a definite relation between the *Encyclopédie* and the essay form; otherwise a figure like Diderot would be unthinkable. But there is more fundamentally a decisive contradiction within the relation. It would be almost impossible to imagine an essay by d'Holbach or Helvétius, while Diderot is above all one of the three or four great essayists in literary history. How can we explain the difference?

The *Encyclopédie* belongs to the quintessential nature of the Enlightenment. The essay first appears at the beginning of the rise of individualist thought in that incomparable model for all essayists, Michel de Montaigne, *grand seigneur* and member of the *Parlement*, who questioned all the values of the traditional world vision. At the end of the period, when the first steps were being taken forward from the Enlightenment towards dialectical

thought, the outstanding essayist is the amiable Denis Diderot, son of a small-scale knife manufacturer, who gave the bourgeois world vision its most remarkable expression in the *Encyclopédie*, and then began to doubt and question that vision himself.

The great difference between the *Encyclopédie* and the essay is like that between the knowledge which answers questions and the kind of question to which at the time there is no knowledge capable of giving an answer. The *Encyclopédie* is above all a collective enterprise which undertook to make the sum of existing knowledge available to the public and to future generations. The Encyclopedists of course realized that this knowledge constituted only a small part of what generations to come would add to the amount hitherto amassed. The progress of knowledge knows no limits. Wagner's remark in *Faust*, 'Much though I know, I would know all', is only a parody (though not a completely unfair one) of the Encyclopedists' motto, which could be more exactly put as: 'Though I know something, I would know far more, and advance as far as possible along a road on which our successors will far outstrip us.' The true form of the rationalist concept of knowledge is the image, well known in the Middle Ages and often recalled later, of dwarfs riding on a giant's back and, small as they are, able to see farther than the giant himself. None the less the Encyclopedists considered the fundamental categories listed earlier in this essay as definitive achievements of the human mind; and it was these categories—the individual consciousness as the arbiter of truth, the generality of all laws, the natural freedom and equality of all men, human nature as the basis of private property—that Diderot questioned.

A word is needed on the literary classification of the essay. If an essay were not more than a theoretical examination of particular truths, it would cease to be a literary form of its own kind and would be classified as a type of philosophical treatise. The opponents of scepticism had long since shown that radically sceptical thought is self-contradictory, since, if it is to be consistent, it can make no claim to be true; if you say that nothing is true, you cannot claim truth for that statement either.

But though the inspiration is generally sceptical, its point of departure lies in an attitude far removed from scepticism. What matters to the essayist is not the actual process of examining the theoretical basis of particular truths or values. Instead he is concerned with showing that such an examination is both possible and necessary, and, at the same time, that it is both important and yet impossible to give answers. He is looking for theoretical answers to a series of questions fundamental to human existence which can have no prospect of ever being answered from his point of view.

That gives the essay form its originality. Literary works are complex worlds of their own, created and constructed by the writer's imagination out of particular people and things and concrete situations; philosophical works are abstract and conceptual expressions of particular world visions. The essay is both abstract and concrete. Its nature, like that of philosophy, is chiefly to raise certain conceptual questions fundamental to human life; but, unlike most philosophy, it has neither the desire nor the ability to answer them. Like literature, it puts these questions not in a conceptual form but attaches them to the 'occasion' of a concrete person or situation taken both from literature and (as the greatest essayists do) from real life. The true essay thus necessarily inhabits two worlds, and is necessarily ironic: it seems to be talking about particular people and situations, but these are mere 'occasions' for the essayist to raise crucial abstract questions. In this way it is Diderot's habit to use

concrete situations as ‘occasions’ for questions that treat the thought of the Enlightenment as a problem in itself.

His best-known essay, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, is one of those he did not publish. After his death it was discovered by Goethe, who issued it in a German translation. It was then used by Hegel in the *Phenomenology* as one of the figures of Mind.

The philosopher encounters the great composer’s nephew in a café. He cuts a curious figure, a tall, gaunt parasite living on the rich bourgeois whom he despises. He judges society and his own position completely without hypocrisy, and by doing so in the light of his own experience he calls into question all the apparently established truths of bourgeois society. During the conversation it becomes increasingly difficult to know which of the men is right: the philosopher, whose defence of the ‘general principles’ of the bourgeois order and its morality becomes increasingly half-hearted, or the sponger, using his actual experience of this order and its morality to show what they really look like in a particular case and to demonstrate the inadequacy, and often the complete falsity, of seemingly unshakeable truths.

It will be best to use Hegel’s own words to show the limits of the thought of the Enlightenment and the manner in which it is transcended.

On the one side we have

the content uttered by spirit and uttered about itself.... This style of speech is the madness of the musician ‘who piled and mixed up together some thirty airs, Italian, French, tragic, comic, of all sorts and kinds’...the inversion and perversion of all conceptions and realities, a universal deception of itself and others. The shamelessness manifested in stating this deceit is just on that account the greatest truth.

The philosopher on the other hand is

a placid soul that in simple honesty of heart takes the music of the good and true to consist in harmony of sound and uniformity of tone...regards this style of expression as a ‘fickle fantasy of wisdom and folly, a mêlée of so much skill and low cunning, composed of ideas as likely to be right as wrong’.

But this talk of ‘simple placid consciousness of the good and the true’ is inevitably ‘monosyllabic’ in comparison with the other view, ‘for it can say nothing to the latter that the latter does not know and say.... Its very syllables “disgraceful”, “base”, are this folly already’, the folly of thinking one is saying something different or new to an interlocutor who ‘already says it of himself’.

As to the answer that ‘the good must not lose value because it may be linked with what is bad or mingled with it, for to be thus associated with badness is its condition and necessity, and the wisdom of nature lies in this fact’—this is no decisive answer but only a trifling summary of the other’s assertion that ‘the so-called noble and good is by its very nature the reverse of itself, or what is bad is, conversely, something excellent’. Nor can this argument be answered by proving ‘the *reality* of what is excellent, when it produces an example of what is excellent, whether in the form of a fictitious case or a true story, and thus shows it not to be an empty name’. For in being forced to rely on an example the philosopher admits

that this reality is exceptional, ‘constitutes merely something quite isolated and particular, merely an “*espèce*”, a *sort* of thing. And to represent the existence of the good and noble as an isolated particular anecdote, whether fictitious or true, is the bitterest thing that can be said about it.’ Hegel then shows that, in writing this essay, Diderot moved beyond the view which he was purporting to represent.

In other essays, for instance in the *Entretien d’un père avec ses enfants*, Diderot uses the ‘occasion’ of particular concrete cases to raise questions like the following: If a general law is recognized as necessary and justified in itself, must it be obeyed here and now in every particular instance? Might not such obedience produce great injustice? The law must be general. For example, it is right that husband and wife must not inherit each other’s property, for this prohibition is the only way to ensure harmony in marriage. But if a man has spent his entire fortune to care for his sick wife, and after her death finds money that belonged to her about which no one else knows, must he then obey the law and give it to her rich relatives and live in poverty himself? Or has he the right to appropriate the sum and thus compensate himself in part for the fortune he has given away? Diderot adduces similar cases but offers no answer. In *Les deux Amis de Bourbonne* he shows us two men who have come into conflict with the law. Their conduct towards each other is inspired entirely by altruism and love, and they are men of the noblest character, but society condemns them as worthless criminals.

Diderot’s most comprehensive essay, *Jacques le fataliste*, consists of a long conversation between the fatalistic servant Jacques and his master. They exchange long accounts of their adventures, and we are constantly made to see how reality contrasts with common sense and prudence, how the servant is often really the master, and the master is dependent on the servant.

Diderot was the only *philosophe* to understand that, while men’s behaviour may be determined by their social circumstances, these circumstances themselves result from the actions of men.

Although he came no nearer than Rousseau did to sketching even the outline of a dialectical philosophy (we do not find the elements of it before Kant), he was more aware than any of the other *philosophes* how complex the social world is; and it was with justice that not only Lessing but also Hegel and Goethe considered him one of the outstanding figures of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century.