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2. Deism and Materialism

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2. Deism and Materialism

Abstract
The deification of Nature, including man and his science, established itself in the religious ideas of the Enlightenment. The concepts of the Enlightenment - science as the road to truth; an orderly, rational nature that included man; the moral and intellectual dignity of man; usefulness and reasonableness as the standards to which every belief and institution had to submit - forced men to reexamine their religious ideas and promoted the development of the religion of reason or deism. [excerpt]

Keywords
Contemporary Civilization, Deism, Enlightenment, Ethical Doctrine, Materialism

Disciplines
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Comments
This is a part of Section X: The Eighteenth Century Enlightenment. The Contemporary Civilization page lists all additional sections of Ideas and Institutions of Western Man, as well as the Table of Contents for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:
From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems. A second edition, retitled Ideas and Institutions of Western Man, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker ’66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

Authors

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Deism and Materialism

The deification of Nature, including man and his science, established itself in the religious ideas of the Enlightenment. The concepts of the Enlightenment -- science as the road to truth; an orderly, rational nature that included man; the moral and intellectual dignity of man; usefulness and reasonableness as the standards to which every belief and institution had to submit -- forced men to reexamine their religious ideas and promoted the development of the religion of reason or deism.

Deism is not only the result of the foregoing ideas, but it is also simply the expression of the Newtonian world view. The deist God was the designer and creator of the perfect Newtonian world-machine. The notion of the world as a machine led to the idea of an external God who was rather abstractly thought of in terms of a first cause and designer. In fact, the deist thought that there were perhaps only two arguments that could prove the existence of God: the argument from a first cause and the argument from design. By positing the existence of God as creator and by viewing the world as self-sufficient after its creation, deism was able to offer an answer to the eighteenth century man with religious demands.

God has designed man as a part of his machine and had given him reason so that he might know and use the laws of the universe. Newton had discovered the physical laws of the universe, and now the primary remaining task was to discover the laws governing the actions of men. The function of religion was to find and proclaim the ethical principles that God had implanted in man and that would offer him the same rational pattern of existence that the universe followed. Therefore the religious content of deism is almost exclusively ethical doctrine.

A more radical group of Enlightenment thinkers, the materialists, subjected deism as well as orthodox Christianity to a scientific analysis. They dismissed the deist arguments for the existence of God as rationally unacceptable, and saw no need to invent a God to act as first cause and designer. The materialists accepted matter and motion as eternal, and their existence and order as natural phenomena. Having dismissed God as unnecessary, they rapidly dispensed with the rest of Christian theology, and were left with the problem of ethics. At this point, a typical Enlightenment solution was adopted by many materialists. Accepting the idea that nature and man have a rational, orderly, and universal character, they held that ethical principles could be found by a scientific analysis of the nature of man and the conditions imposed on man by nature.

Although deism and materialism are the religious ideas associated with the Enlightenment, any thorough analysis of the state of religion in the eighteenth century would have to include all of the following groups: (1) orthodox Catholicism and...
Protestantism; (2) a conservative deism that retained the doctrine of the Incarnation and some other elements of Christian theology; (3) a radical deism that rejected the Incarnation and other elements of Christian theology; (4) materialism; (5) atheism; and (6) skepticism and agnosticism. There are, of course, no reliable statistics on the number of people to be found in these groups. However, we do know that the largest group was orthodox Catholicism and Protestantism, and that the others were restricted for the most part to educated men and women.

Elihu Palmer (1764-1806) was an American whose life was devoted to the problems of religion. At one time a Baptist minister, he rebelled against the ideas of orthodox Christianity and ended up as a writer, teacher, and organizer of deistical societies. Palmer was the most influential of a group of deists who flourished in the United States during the decade or more following the American Revolution. He believed that evil had its source in the environment, and not in man, and that a new and reformed society would allow man's goodness to flourish. He considered the American Revolution and the subsequent establishment of a republican government as the beginning of this ideal society. The following are the Principles of the Deistical Society of the State of New York drawn up by Palmer in 1794:

Proposals for forming a society for the promotion of moral science and the religion of nature -- having in view the destruction of superstition and fanaticism -- tending to the development of the principles of a genuine natural morality -- the practice of a pure and uncorrupted virtue -- the cultivation of science and philosophy -- the resurrection of reason, and the renovation of the intelligent world.

At a time when the political despotism of the earth is disappearing, and man is about to reclaim and enjoy the liberties of which for ages he has been deprived, it would be unpardonable to neglect the important concerns of intellectual and moral nature. The slavery of the mind has been the most destructive of all slavery; and the baneful effects of a dark and gloomy superstition have suppressed all the dignified efforts of the human understanding, and essentially circumscribed the sphere of intellectual energy. It is only by returning to the laws of nature, which man has so frequently abandoned, that happiness is to be acquired. And, although the efforts of a few individuals will be inadequate to the sudden establishment of moral and mental felicity; yet, they may lay the foundation on which a superstructure may be reared incalculably valuable to the welfare of future generations. To contribute to the accomplishment of an object so important, the members of this association do approve of the following fundamental principles:

1. That the universe proclaims the existence of one supreme Deity, worthy the adoration of intelligent beings.
2. That man is possessed of moral and intellectual faculties sufficient for the improvement of his nature,
and the acquisition of happiness.

3. That the religion of nature is the only universal religion, that it grows out of the normal relations of intelligent beings, and that it stands connected with the progressive improvement and common welfare of the human race.

4. That it is essential to the true interest of man, that he love truth and practise virtue.

5. That vice is everywhere ruinous and destructive to the happiness of the individual and of society.

6. That a benevolent disposition, and beneficent actions, are fundamental duties of rational beings.

7. That a religion mingled with persecution and malice cannot be of divine origin.

8. That education and science are essential to the happiness of man.

9. That civil and religious liberty is equally essential to his true interests.

10. That there can be no human authority to which man ought to be amenable for his religious opinions.

11. That science and truth, virtue and happiness, are the great objects to which the activity and energy of the human faculties ought to be directed.

Every member admitted into this association shall deem it his duty, by every suitable method in his power, to promote the cause of nature and moral truth, in opposition to all schemes of superstition and fanaticism, claiming divine origin. *

Voltaire (1694-1778) was recognized during his own lifetime as the foremost crusader for the fundamental ideas of the Enlightenment. Sometimes pictured as merely a wit and cynic, and certainly often vain and narrow-minded, he is revealed as a sincere and tireless humanitarian by his seventy volumes of fiction (he was a prolific playwright), verse, essays, and historical writings. Born into a middle-class Parisian family and named François Marie Arouet, he later adopted the name of Voltaire. He left the study of law to become a writer and established his reputation as a poet by the time he was twenty-two. His biting criticism of the authorities and institutions of French society resulted in imprisonments and exiles. A three year visit to England (1726-1729) made Voltaire a protagonist of the ideas of Newton and Locke, and a propagandist for the ideas of the Enlightenment in general. For the remainder of his life he made his home away from Paris: in Lorraine, Brussels, near Geneva, and elsewhere. He died in Paris during the first visit to that city in almost thirty years. Voltaire wrote continuously against what he regarded as the evils of religious superstition and political tyranny and extolled the benefits of intellectual freedom, civil liberty, and toleration. He scarcely had a formal philosophy, but based all his ideas on the belief that ethical

laws were universal and eternal, and that men could recognize and follow them. The following selection, illustrating his deism in typically satirical fashion, is taken from the article on the subject of religion in the Philosophical Dictionary (1764), a compilation of many of the articles which he contributed to the Encyclopédie:

I meditated last night; I was absorbed in the contemplation of nature; I admired the immensity, the course, the harmony of these infinite globes which the vulgar do not know how to admire.

I admired still more the intelligence which directs these vast forces. I said to myself: "One must be blind not to be dazzled by this spectacle; one must be stupid not to recognize the author of it; one must be mad not to worship Him. What tribute of worship should I render Him? Should not this tribute be the same in the whole of space, since it is the same supreme power which reigns equally in all space? Should not a thinking being who dwells in a star in the Milky Way offer Him the same homage as the thinking being on this little globe where we are? Light is uniform for the star Sirius and for us; moral philosophy must be uniform. If a sentient, thinking animal in Sirius is born of a tender father and mother who have been occupied with his happiness, he owes them as much love and care as we owe to our parents. If someone in the Milky Way sees a needy cripple, if he can relieve him and if he does not do it, he is guilty toward all globes. Everywhere the heart has the same duties: on the steps of the throne of God, if He has a throne; and in the depth of the abyss, if He is an abyss."

I was plunged in these ideas when one of those genii who fill the intermundane spaces came down to me. I recognized this same aerial creature who had appeared to me on another occasion to teach me how different God's judgments were from our own, and how a good action is preferable to a controversy.

He transported me into a desert all covered with piled up bones; and between these heaps of dead men there were walks of ever-green trees, and at the end of each walk a tall man of august mien, who regarded these sad remains with pity.

"Alas! my archangel," said I, "where have you brought me?"

"To desolation," he answered.

"And who are these fine patriarchs whom I see sad and motionless at the end of these green walks? they seem to be weeping over this countless crowd of dead."

"You shall know, poor human creature," answered the genius from the intermundane spaces; "but first of all you must weep."

He began with the first pile. "These," he said, "are the twenty-three thousand Jews who danced before a calf, with the twenty-four thousand who were killed while lying with Midianitish women. The number of those massacred for such errors and offences amounts to nearly three
hundred thousand.

"In the other walks are the bones of the Christians slaughtered by each other for metaphysical disputes. They are divided into several heaps of four centuries each. One heap would have mounted right to the sky; they had to be divided."

"What!" I cried, "brothers have treated their brothers like this, and I have the misfortune to be of this brotherhood!"

"Here," said the spirit, "are the twelve million Americans killed in their fatherland because they had not been baptized."

"My God! why did you not leave these frightful bones to dry in the hemisphere where their bodies were born, and where they were consigned to so many different deaths? Why assemble here all these abominable monuments to barbarism and fanaticism?"

"To instruct you."

"Since you wish to instruct me," I said to the genius, "tell me if there have been peoples other than the Christians and the Jews in whom zeal and religion wretchedly transformed into fanaticism, have inspired so many horrible cruelties."

"Yes," he said. "The Mohammedans were sullied with the same inhumanities, but rarely; and when one asked amman, pity, of them and offered them tribute, they pardoned. As for the other nations there has not been one right from the existence of the world which has ever made a purely religious war. Follow me now." I followed him.

A little beyond these piles of dead men we found other piles; they were composed of sacks of gold and silver, and each had its label: Substance of the heretics massacred in the eighteenth century, the seventeenth and the sixteenth. And so on in going back: Gold and silver of Americans slaughtered, etc., etc. And all these piles were surmounted with crosses, mitres, croziers, triple crowns studded with precious stones.

"What, my genius! it was then to have these riches that these dead were piled up?"

"Yes, my son."

I wept; and when by my grief I had merited to be led to the end of the green walks, he led me there.

"Contemplate," he said, "the heroes of humanity who were the world's benefactors, and who were all united in banishing from the world, as far as they were able, violence and rapine. Question them."

I ran to the first of the band; he had a crown on his head, and a little censer in his hand; I humbly asked him his name. "I am Numa Pompilius," he said to me. "I succeeded a brigand, and I had brigands to govern; I taught them virtue and the worship of God; after me they forgot both more than once; I forbade that in the temples there should be any image, because the Deity which animates nature cannot be represented. During my reign the Romans had neither wars nor seditions, and my religion did nothing but good. All the neighbouring peoples came to honour me
at my funeral: that happened to no one but me."

I kissed his hand, and I went to the second. He was a fine old man about a hundred years old, clad in a white robe. He put his middle-finger on his mouth, and with the other hand he cast some beans behind him. I recognized Pythagoras. He assured me he had never had a golden thigh, and that he had never been a cock; but that he had governed the Crotoniates with as much justice as Numa governed the Romans, almost at the same time; and that this justice was the rarest and most necessary thing in the world. I learned that the Pythagoreans examined their consciences twice a day. The honest people: how far we are from them! But we who have been nothing but assassins for thirteen hundred years, we say that these wise men were arrogant.

In order to please Pythagoras, I did not say a word to him and I passed to Zarathustra, who was occupied in concentrating the celestial fire in the focus of a concave mirror, in the middle of a hall with a hundred doors which all led to wisdom. (Zarathustra's precepts are called doors, and are a hundred in number.) Over the principal door I read these words which are the precis of all moral philosophy, and which cut short all the disputes of the casuists: "When in doubt if an action is good or bad, refrain."

"Certainly," I said to my genius, "the barbarians who immolated all these victims had never read these beautiful words."

We then saw the Zaleucus, the Thales, the Aniximanders, and all the sages who had sought truth and practised virtue.

When we came to Socrates, I recognized him very quickly by his flat nose. "Well," I said to him, "here you are then among the number of the Almighty's confidants! All the inhabitants of Europe, except the Turks and the Tartars of the Crimea, who know nothing, pronounce your name with respect. It is revered, loved, this great name, to the point that people have wanted to know those of your persecutors. Melitus and Anitus are known because of you, just as Ravaillac is known because of Henry IV.; but I know only this name of Anitus. I do not know precisely who was the scoundrel who calumniated you, and who succeeded in having you condemned to take hemlock."

"Since my adventure," replied Socrates, "I have never thought about that man; but seeing that you make me remember it, I have much pity for him. He was a wicked priest who secretly conducted a business in hides, a trade reputed shameful among us. He sent his two children to my school. The other disciples taunted them with having a father who was a currier; they were obliged to leave. The irritated father had no rest until he had stirred up all the priests and all the sophists against me. They persuaded the counsel of the five hundred that I was an impious fellow who did not believe that the Moon, Mercury and Mars were gods. Indeed, I used to think, as I think now, that there is only one God, master of all nature.
The judges handed me over to the poisoner of the republic; he cut short my life by a few days: I died peacefully at the age of seventy; and since that time I pass a happy life with all these great men whom you see, and of whom I am the least.

After enjoying some time in conversation with Socrates, I went forward with my guide into a grove situated above the thickets where all the sages of antiquity seemed to be tasting sweet repose.

I saw a man of gentle, simple countenance, who seemed to me to be about thirty-five years old. From afar he cast compassionate glances on these piles of whitened bones, across which I had had to pass to reach the sages' abode. I was astonished to find his feet swollen and bleeding, his hands likewise, his side pierced, and his ribs flayed with whip cuts. "Good Heavens!" I said to him, "is it possible for a just man, a sage, to be in this state? I have just seen one who was treated in a very hateful way, but there is no comparison between his torture and yours. Wicked priests and wicked judges poisoned him; is it by priests and judges that you have been so cruelly assassinated?"

He answered with much courtesy -- "Yes."
"And who were these monsters?"
"They were hypocrites."
"Ah! that says everything; I understand by this single word that they must have condemned you to death. Had you then proved to them, as Socrates did, that the Moon was not a goddess, and that Mercury was not a god?"
"No, these planets were not in question. My compatriots did not know at all what a planet is; they were all arrant ignoramuses. Their superstitions were quite different from those of the Greeks."

"You wanted to teach them a new religion, then?"
"Not at all: I said to them simply -- 'Love God with all your heart and your fellow-creature as yourself, for that is man's whole duty.' Judge if this precept is not as old as the universe; judge if I brought them a new religion. I did not stop telling them that I had come not to destroy the law but to fulfil it; I had observed all their rites; circumcised as they all were, baptized as were the most zealous among them, like them I paid the Corban; I observed the Passover as they did, eating standing up a lamb cooked with lettuces. I and my friends went to pray in the temple; my friends even frequented this temple after my death; in a word, I fulfilled all their laws without a single exception."

"What! these wretches could not even reproach you with swerving from their laws?"
"No, without a doubt."
"Why then did they put you in the condition in which I now see you?"

"What do you expect me to say! they were very arrogant and selfish. They saw that I knew them; they knew that I was making the citizens acquainted with them; they were
the stronger; they took away my life; and people like them will always do as much, if they can, to whoever does them too much justice."

"But did you say nothing, do nothing that could serve them as a pretext?"

"To the wicked everything serves as pretext."

"Did you not say once that you were come not to send peace, but a sword?"

"It is a copyist's error; I told them that I sent peace and not a sword. I have never written anything: what I said can have been changed without evil intention."

"You therefore contributed in no way by your speeches, badly reported, badly interpreted, to these frightful piles of bones which I saw on my road in coming to consult you?"

"It is with horror only that I have seen those who have made themselves guilty of these murders."

"And these monuments of power and wealth, of pride and avarice, these treasures, these ornaments, these signs of grandeur, which I have seen piled up on the road while I was seeking wisdom, do they come from you?"

"That is impossible: I and my people lived in poverty and meanness; my grandeur was in virtue only."

I was about to beg him to be so good as to tell me just who he was. My guide warned me to do nothing of the sort. He told me that I was not made to understand these sublime mysteries. Only did I conjure him to tell me in what true religion consisted.

"Have I not already told you? Love God and your fellow-creature as yourself."

"What! if one loves God, one can eat meat on Friday?"

"I always ate what was given me; for I was too poor to give anyone food."

"In loving God, in being just, should one not be rather cautious not to confide all the adventures of one's life to an unknown man?"

"That was always my practice."

"Can I not, by doing good, dispense with making a pilgrimage to St. James of Compostella?"

"I have never been in that country."

"Is it necessary for me to imprison myself in a retreat with fools?"

"Monasteries."

"As for me, I always made little journeys from town to town."

"Is it necessary for me to take sides either for the Greek Church or the Latin?"

"When I was in the world I never made any difference between the Jew and the Samaritan."

"Well, if that is so, I take you for my only master."

Then he made me a sign with his head which filled me with consolation. The vision disappeared, and a clear conscience stayed with me.

Paul Henri Thyry, Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789), was a scientist and philosopher best known for his thorough construction of the eighteenth century philosophy of materialism and public support of it. Of German extraction, he spent most of his life in Paris, where his house was one of the regular meeting places for many of the philosophes. He contributed a number of articles to the Encyclopédie. The following selection is from his most famous work, the System of Nature, which appeared in 1770:

In nature... there can be only natural causes and effects; all the motion excited in this nature follows constant and necessary laws: the natural operations to the knowledge of which we are competent, of which we are in a capacity to judge, are of themselves sufficient to enable us to discover those which elude our sight; we can at least judge of them by analogy. If we study nature with attention, the modes of action which she displays to our senses will teach us not to be disconcerted by those which she refuses to discover. Those causes which are the most remote from their effects, unquestionably act by intermediate causes; by the aid of these, we can frequently trace out the first. If in the chain of these causes, we sometimes meet with obstacles that oppose themselves to our research, we ought to endeavour by patience and diligence to overcome them; when it so happens, we cannot surmount the difficulties that occur, we still are never justified in concluding the chain to be broken, or that the cause which acts is supernatural. Let us then be content with an honest avowal, that Nature contains resources of which we are ignorant; but never let us substitute phantoms, fictions, or imaginary causes, senseless terms, for those causes, which escape our research; because, by such means, we only confirm ourselves in ignorance, impede our inquiries, and obstinately remain in error....

...We cannot go beyond this aphorism, matter acts, because it exists, and exists, to act. If it be enquired how, or for why, matter exists? we answer, we know not: but reasoning by analogy, of what we do not know, by that which we do, we should be of opinion, it exists necessarily, or because it contains within itself a sufficient reason for its existence. In supposing it to be created or produced by a being distinguished from it, or less known than itself, which it may be, for anything we know to the contrary, we must still admit that this being is necessary, and includes a sufficient reason for his own existence. We have not then removed any of the difficulty, we have not thrown a clearer light on the subject, we have not advanced a single step; we have simply laid aside a being of which we know some few of the properties, but of which we are still extremely ignorant, to have recourse to a power of which it is utterly impossible we can, as long as we are men, form any distinct idea; of which, notwithstanding it may be a truth, we cannot by any means we possess, demonstrate the existence....

It will, no doubt, be argued, that as nature contains
and produces intelligent beings, either she must be herself intelligent, or else she must be governed by an intelligent cause. We reply, intelligence is a faculty peculiar to organized beings, that is to say, to beings constituted and combined, after a determinate manner; from whence results certain modes of action, which are designated under various names, according to the different effects which these beings produce: wine, has not the properties called wit and courage; nevertheless, it is sometimes seen, that it communicates those qualities to men who are supposed to be in themselves entirely devoid of them. It cannot be said nature is intelligent, after the manner of any one of the beings she contains; but she can produce intelligent beings, by assembling matter suitable to form the particular organization, from whose peculiar modes of action will result the faculty called intelligence; that shall be capable of producing those effects, which are the necessary consequence of this property. I therefore repeat, that to have intelligence, designs and views, it is requisite to have ideas: to the production of ideas, organs or senses are necessary: that is what is neither said of nature, nor of the causes supposed to preside over her actions. In short, experience warrants the assertion, it does more, it proves beyond a doubt, that matter which is regarded as inert and dead, assumes sensible action, intelligence, life, when it is combined after certain, when it is organized after particular, modes....

If it be wished to draw man to virtue, let the natural philosopher, let the anatomist, let the physician, unite their experience; let them compare their observations, in order to shew what ought to be thought of a substance, so disguised, so hidden, under a heap of absurdities, as not easily to be known. Their discoveries may perhaps teach moralists the true motive-power that ought to influence the actions of man -- legislators, the true motives that should actuate him, that should excite him to labour to the welfare of society -- sovereigns, the means of rendering their subjects truly happy; of giving solidity to the power of the nations, committed to their charge. Physical souls, have physical wants, demand physical happiness. These are real, are preferable objects, to that variety of fanciful chimeras, each in its turn giving place to the other, with which the mind of man has been fed, during so many ages. Let us, then, labour to perfect the morality of man; let us make it agreeable to him; let us excite in him an ardent thirst for its purity: we shall presently see his morals become better, himself become happier; his soul become calm and serene; his will determined to virtue, by the natural, by the palpable motives held out to him. By the diligence, by the care which legislators shall bestow on natural philosophy, they will form citizens of sound understandings; robust and well constituted; who, finding themselves happy, will be themselves accessory to that useful impulse, so necessary for their soul. When
the body is suffering, when nations are unhappy, the soul cannot be in a proper state. Mens sana in corpore sano, a sound mind in a sound body, will be always able to make a good citizen.

The more man reflects, the more he will be convinced that the soul, very far from being distinguished from the body, is only the body itself, considered relatively to some of its functions; or to some of the modes of existing or acting, or which it is susceptible whilst it enjoys life. Thus, the soul is man considered relatively to the faculty he has of feeling, of thinking, of acting in a mode resulting from his peculiar nature; that is to say, from his properties, from his particular organization; from the modifications, whether durable or transitory, which the beings who act upon him cause his machine to undergo.*

One of the opponents of Holbach's views called his book the Bible of atheism, and the deist Voltaire issued a blast against it. Holbach replied in 1772 with Good Sense, a work which was similar in its scope to the System of Nature, yet written more concisely and in a more popular vein. It was printed in Amsterdam, beyond the reach of French censorship. The following excerpt from Good Sense illustrates Holbach's concern with constructing a system of morality grounded in the facts of nature and human nature as analyzed by his science.

When we coolly examine the opinions of men, we are surprised to find that even in those opinions which they regard as the most essential, nothing is more uncommon than common sense; or, in other words, nothing is more uncommon than a degree of judgment sufficient to discover the most simple truths, or reject the most striking absurdities, and to be shocked with palpable contradictions. We have an example of it in Theology, a science revered in all times and countries by the greatest number of men; an object regarded by them the most important, the most useful, and the most indispensable to the happiness of society. An examination, however slight, of the principles upon which this pretended science is founded, forces us to acknowledge, that these principles, formerly judged incontestable, are only hazardous suppositions, imagined by ignorance, propagated by enthusiasm or knavery, adopted by timid credulity, preserved by custom which never reasons, and revered solely because not understood. "Some," says Montaigne, "make the world think that they believe what they do not; others, in greater number, make themselves think that they believe what they do not, not knowing what belief is."....

Oppressed by the double yoke of spiritual and temporal power, it has been impossible for the people to know and

pursue their happiness. As Religion, so Politics and Morality became sacred things, which the profane were not permitted to handle. Men have had no other Morality than what their legislators and priests brought down from the unknown regions of heaven. The human mind, confused by its theological opinions ceased to know its own powers, mistrusted experience, feared truth and disdained reason, in order to follow authority. Man has been a mere machine in the hands of tyrants and priests, who alone have had the right of directing his actions. Always treated as a slave, he has contracted the vices of a slave.

Such are the true causes of the corruption of morals, to which Religion opposes only ideal and ineffectual barriers. Ignorance and servitude are calculated to make men wicked and unhappy. Knowledge, Reason, and Liberty, can alone reform them, and make them happier. But every thing conspires to blind them, and to confirm them in their errors. Priests cheat them, tyrants corrupt, the better to enslave them. Tyranny ever was, and ever will be, the true cause of man's depravity, and also of his habitual calamities. Almost always fascinated by religious fiction, poor mortals turn not their eyes to the natural and obvious causes of their misery; but attribute their unhappiness to the anger of the gods. They offer up to heaven vows, sacrifices, and presents, to obtain the end of their sufferings, which in reality, are attributable only to the negligence, ignorance, and perversity of their guides, to the folly of their customs, to the unreasonableness of their laws, and above all, to the general want of knowledge. Let men's minds be filled with true ideas; let their reason be cultivated; let justice govern them; and there will be no need of opposing to the passions such a feeble barrier as the fear of the gods. Men will be good when they are well instructed, well governed, and when they are punished or despised for the evil, and justly rewarded for the good, which they do to their fellow citizens.

In vain should we attempt to cure men of their vices, unless we begin by curing them of their prejudices. It is only by showing them the truth, that they will perceive their true interests, and the real motives that ought to incline them to do good. Instructors have long enough fixed men's eyes upon heaven; let them now turn them upon earth. An incomprehensible theology, ridiculous fables, impenetrable mysteries, puerile ceremonies, are too fatiguing to be any longer endured. Let the human mind apply itself to what is natural, to intelligible objects, sensible truths, and useful knowledge. Let vain chimeras be banished; and reasonable opinions will of their own accord enter into heads thought to be destined to perpetual error.

Does it not suffice to annihilate or shake religious prejudice, to show, that what is inconceivable to man cannot be made for him? Does it require anything but
plain common sense to perceive, that a being incompatible with the most evident notions -- that a cause continually opposed to the effects which we attribute to it -- that a being, of whom we can say nothing, without falling into contradiction -- that a being, who, far from explaining the enigmas of the universe, only makes them more inexplicable -- that a being, whom for so many ages men have so vainly addressed to obtain their happiness, and the end of their sufferings -- does it require, I say, anything but plain, common sense, to perceive -- that the idea of such a being is an idea without model, and that he himself is merely a phantom of the imagination? Is anything necessary but common sense to perceive, at least, that it is folly and madness for men to hate and torment one another about unintelligible opinions concerning a being of this kind? In short, does not everything prove that Morality and Virtue are totally incompatible with the notions of a God, whom his ministers and interpreters have described, in every country, as the most capricious, unjust, and cruel of tyrants, whose pretended will, however, must serve as law and rule to the inhabitants of the earth?...

Is it not more natural and intelligible to draw universal existence from the bosom of matter, whose existence is demonstrated by all the senses, and whose effects we experience every moment, which we see act, move, communicate motion, and incessantly generate, than to attribute the formation of things to an unknown power, to a spiritual being, who cannot derive from his nature what he has not himself, and who, by his spiritual essence, can create neither matter nor motion? Nothing is more evident than that the idea they endeavour to give us, of the action of mind upon matter, represents no object, or is an idea without model.

Whence comes man? What is his origin? Is he then the effect of a fortuitous concourse of atoms? Did the first man spring, ready formed, from the dust of the earth? I know not. Man appears to me, like all other beings, a production of nature. I should be equally embarrassed to tell whence came the first stones, the first trees, the first lions, the first elephants, the first ants, the first acorns, etc., as to explain the origin of man. We are incessantly told to acknowledge and revere the hand of God, of an infinitely wise, intelligent and powerful maker, in so wonderful a work as the human machine. I readily confess that the human machine appears to me surprising. But as man exists in nature, I am not authorized to say that his formation is above the power of nature....

Nature uniformly follows the same round; that is, the same causes produce the same effects, as long as their action is not disturbed by other causes, which force them to produce different effects. When the operation
of causes, whose effects we experience, is interrupted by causes, which, though unknown, are not the less natural and necessary, we are confounded; we cry out, a miracle! and attribute it to a cause much more unknown than any of those acting before our eyes.

The universe is always in order. It cannot be in disorder. It is our machine alone that suffers when we complain of disorder. The bodies, causes, and beings which this world contains, necessarily act in the manner in which we see them act, whether we approve or disapprove of the effects. Earthquakes, volcanos, inundations, pestilences, and famines are effects as necessary, or as much in the order of nature, as the fall of heavy bodies, the courses of rivers, the periodical motions of the seas, the blowing of the winds, the fruitful rains, and the favourable effects, for which men praise God and thank him for his goodness.

To be astonished that a certain order reigns in the world, is to be surprised that the same causes constantly produce the same effects. To be shocked at disorder, is to forget, that when things change, or are interrupted in their actions, the effects can no longer be the same. To wonder at the order of nature, is to wonder that anything can exist; it is to be surprised at one’s own existence. What is order to one being, is disorder to another. All wicked beings find that everything is in order, when they can with impunity put everything in disorder. They find, on the contrary, that everything is in disorder, when they are disturbed in the exercise of their wickedness.

...It is more than two thousand years, since, according to Lactantius, the sage Epicurus observed: "either God would remove evil out of this world, and cannot; or he can, and will not; or he has not the power nor will; or, lastly, he has both the power and will. If he has the will, and not the power, this shows weakness, which is contrary to the nature of God. If he has the power, and not the will, it is malignity; and this is no less contrary of his nature. If he is neither able nor willing, he is both impotent and malignant, and consequently cannot be God. If he be both willing and able (which alone is consonant to the nature of God) whence comes evil, or why does he not prevent it?" Reflecting minds have been waiting a reasonable solution of these difficulties for more than two thousand years; and our divines tell us they will be removed only in a future life.

Many people make a subtle distinction between true religion and superstition. They say, that the latter is only a base subordinate fear of the Deity; but that the truly religious man has confidence in his God, and loves him sincerely; whereas, the superstitious man sees in him only an enemy, has no confidence in him, and represents him to himself as a distrustful, cruel tyrant, sparing of his benefits, lavish of his chastisements. But, in reality, does not all religion give us the same ideas of God? At the same time that we are told that God is infinitely good,
are we not also told that he is very easily provoked, that he grants his favours to a few people only, and that he furiously chastises those to whom he has not been pleased to grant them?

If we take our ideas of God from the nature of things, where we find a mixture of good and evil, this God, just like the good and evil which we experience, must naturally appear capricious, inconstant, sometimes good, and sometimes malevolent; and therefore, instead of exciting our love, must generate distrust, fear, and uncertainty. There is then no real difference between natural religion and the most gloomy and servile superstition: If the theist sees God only in a favourable light, the bigot views him in the most hideous light. The folly of the one is cheerful, that of the other is melancholy; but both are equally delirious.

Are not theologians strange reasoners? Whenever they cannot divine the natural causes of things, they invent those which they call supernatural; such as spirits, occult causes, inexplicable agents, or rather words, much more obscure than the things they endeavour to explain. Let us remain in nature, when we wish to account for the phenomena of nature; let us be content to remain ignorant of causes too delicate for our organs; and let us be persuaded, that, by going beyond nature, we shall never solve the problems which nature presents....

It is objected against us, that materialism makes man a mere machine, which is thought very dishonourable to the whole human species. But, will it be much more honourable for man, if we should say, that he acts by the secret impulses of a spirit, or by a certain I know not what, that animates him in a manner totally inexplicable.

It is easy to perceive, that the supposed superiority of spirit over matter, or of the soul over the body, has no other foundation than men's ignorance of the nature of this soul, while they are more familiarized with matter, with which they imagine they are acquainted, and of which they think they can discern the springs. But the most simple movements of our bodies are to every man who studies them, enigmas, as inexplicable as thought.

The high value which so many people set upon spiritual substance has no other motive than their absolute inability to define it intelligibly. The contempt shown for matter by our metaphysicians, arises only from the circumstance that familiarity begets contempt. When they tell us that the soul is more excellent and noble than the body, they only say that, what they know not at all must be far more beautiful than what they have some feeble ideas of.

The dogma of another life is incessantly extolled as useful. It is maintained, that even though it should be only a fiction, it is advantageous, because it deceives men, and conducts them to virtue. But is it true that this dogma makes men wiser and more virtuous? Are the nations who believe this fiction remarkable for purity of morals? Has not the visible world ever the advantage over
the invisible? If those who are intrusted with the instruction and government of men had knowledge and virtue themselves, they would govern them much better by realities than by fictions. But legislators, crafty, ambitious and corrupt, have everywhere found it shorter to amuse nations with fables than to teach them truths, to unfold their reason, to excite them to virtue by sensible and real motives, in fine, to govern them in a rational manner. Priests undoubtedly had reasons for making the soul immaterial; they wanted souls and chimeras to people the imaginary regions, which they have discovered in the other life. Material souls would, like all bodies, have been subject to dissolution. Now, if men should believe that all must perish with the body the geographers of the other world would evidently lose the right of guiding men's souls towards that unknown abode; they would reap no profits from the hope with which they feed them and the terrors with which they oppress them. If futurity is of no real utility to mankind, it is, at least, of the greatest utility to those who have assumed the office of conducting them thither.

"But, it will be said, is not the dogma of the immortality of the soul comforting to beings who are often very unhappy here below? Though it should be an error, is it not pleasing? Is it not a blessing to man to believe that he shall be able to survive himself, and enjoy hereafter a happiness which is denied him upon earth?"

Thus, poor mortals! you make your wishes the measure of truth; because you desire to live for ever, and to be happier, you at once conclude, that you shall live for ever, and that you shall be more fortunate in an unknown world than in this known world where you often find nothing but affliction! Consent therefore to leave, without regret, this world which gives the greater part of you much more torment than pleasure. Submit to the order of nature, which demands that you, as well as all other beings, should not endure for ever. But what will become of me? asketh thou, 0 mortal! Thou wilt be what thou wast, millions of years ago. Thou wast then, I know not what; thou wast millions of years ago; return peaceably to the universal mass, from which without thy knowledge, thou camest in thy present form, and pass away without murmuring, like all the beings who surround thee....

To found morality upon a God, whom every one paints to himself differently, composes in his way, and arranges according to his own temperament and interest, is evidently to found morality upon the caprice and imagination of men; it is to found it upon the whims of a sect, a faction, a party, who will believe they have the advantage to adore a true God to the exclusion of all others.

To establish morality or the duties of man upon the divine will, is to found it upon the will, the reveries and the interests of those who make God speak without ever fearing that he will contradict them. In every religion,
priests alone have a right to decide what is pleasing or displeasing to their God; we are certain, they will always decide that it is what pleases or displeases themselves....

We are perpetually told that without a God there would be no moral obligation; that the people and even the sovereigns require a legislator powerful enough to constrain them. Moral constraint supposes a law; but this law arises from the eternal and necessary relations of things with one another; relations which have nothing common with the existence of a God. The rules of man's conduct are derived from his own nature which he is capable of knowing, and not from the divine nature of which he has no idea. These rules constrain or oblige us; that is, we render ourselves estimable or contemptible, amiable or detestable, worthy of reward or of punishment, happy or unhappy, according as we conform to or deviate from these rules. The law which obliges man not to hurt himself is founded upon the nature of a sensible being, who, in whatever way he came into the world, or whatever may be his fate in a future one, is forced by his actual essence to seek good and shun evil, to love pleasure and fear pain. The law which obliges man not to injure, and even to do good to others, is founded upon the nature of sensible beings, living in society, whose essence compels them to despise those who are useless, and to detest those who oppose their felicity.

Whether there exists a God or not, whether this God has spoken or not, the moral duties of men will be always the same, so long as they retain their peculiar nature, that is, as long as they are sensible beings. Have men then need of a God whom they know not, of an invisible legislator, of a mysterious religion and of chimerical fears, in order to learn that every excess evidently tends to destroy them, that to preserve health they must be temperate; that to gain the love of others it is necessary to do them good, that to do them evil is the sure means to incur their vengeance and hatred.

"Before the law there was no sin." Nothing is more false than this maxim. It suffices that man is what he is, or that he is a sensible being, in order to distinguish what gives him pleasure or displeasure. It suffices that one man knows that another man is a sensible being like himself, to perceive what is useful or hurtful to him. It suffices that man needs his fellow-creature, in order to know that he must fear to excite in him sentiments unfavourable to himself. Thus the feeling and thinking being has only to feel and think, in order to discover what he must do for himself and others. I feel, and another feels like me; this is the foundation of all morals.

We can judge of the goodness of a system of morals only by its conformity to the nature of man. By this comparison, we have a right to reject it, if contrary to the welfare of our species. Whoever has seriously meditated religion and its supernatural morality; whoever has carefully weighed their advantages and disadvantages, will be
fully convinced, that both are injurious to the interests of man, or directly opposite to his nature....

...Conscience is the internal testimony, which we bear to ourselves, of having acted so as to merit the esteem or blame of the beings with whom we live; and it is founded upon the clear knowledge we have of men, and of the sentiments which our actions must produce in them. The conscience of the religious man consists in imagining that he has pleased or displeased his God, of whom he has no idea, and whose obscure and doubtful intentions are explained to him only by men of doubtful veracity, who, like him, are utterly unacquainted with the essence of the Deity, and are little agreed upon what can please or displease him. In a word, the conscience of the credulous is directed by men who have themselves an erroneous conscience, or whose interest stifles knowledge.... *