

Chapter One

The Enlightenment Republic of Letters

The Party of Humanity

Rousseau's Enlightenment was the "high Enlightenment" of the Parisian *philosophes*. While many no longer think it intellectually respectable to focus on this often unrepresentative elite when discussing "the Enlightenment" in general, there is some justification for doing so in the particular case of Rousseau, who actually inhabited their world. I will deal exclusively with the Enlightenment in its French context, even though Rousseau was a citizen of Geneva. Notwithstanding this vital fact, he participated in, influenced and was influenced by a social, cultural, political, and philosophical environment that was predominantly French in an age when France was the dominant cultural force in Europe. However, as we shall see, his provincial background on the periphery of this world is crucial to understanding his attitude towards the dominant political and philosophical trends in France in the second half of the eighteenth century.

The term "the Enlightenment" only came into common use in English to designate a specific historical period long after the eighteenth century, and it was not until after World War II that it usurped the expression "the Age of Reason." Although the *philosophes* used the term "éclaircissement" and sometimes referred to themselves as "les hommes éclairés,"¹ this word refers to the general concept of enlightenment rather than to the specific historical movement we now call "the Enlightenment" (definite article, capital 'E'). However, the French expression "le siècle des lumières" was used from the late eighteenth century, while 'Lumières' on its own has been popular in French since the 1950s to refer to what is now known in English as the Enlightenment.²

As for there having been a single Enlightenment "project," this belief is most commonly held by its detractors, who have found it much more

convenient to dismiss one simplistic caricature than to deal with a complex and heterogeneous range of views. This tendency has provoked a backlash among *dix-huitièmistes* and some Enlightenment sympathizers. While the more nuanced and historically informed view of the Enlightenment they favor is a welcome improvement on many earlier definitions, it is still compatible with the idea that the *philosophes*—in France at least—were pursuing a common project, broadly defined.³ That is how Diderot characterized the *Encyclopédie*, “the text most representative of the French Enlightenment:”⁴ as a “project” (his word) that could “only be completed by a society of men of letters and arts” who were bound together “by the general interest of humanity and a sense of mutual goodwill.”⁵ The “society of men of letters” whose project this was in France were the *philosophes*.

It was around the middle of the eighteenth century—just as Rousseau was emerging as a leading European intellectual—that a group of writers in France formed themselves into a loose “society” with a broadly shared conception of enlightenment that they actively promoted.⁶ It was not until then that the *philosophes* in France started to think of themselves as an informal party—the “party of humanity”—devoted to the promotion of enlightenment understood in a particular sense. From about this time they came to view themselves as the self-appointed leaders of an “unofficial opposition” to the religious, political and philosophical establishment in France with a mission to “legislate for the rest of the nation in matters of philosophy and taste.”⁷ As Dena Goodman writes, by then they had come to conceive of themselves as a *corps*, “a status group within French society. This new French identity was overlaid upon the fundamental principles of the Republic of Letters: reciprocity, cosmopolitanism, status based on merit, and fidelity to truth.”⁸ In his “Reflections on the Present State of the Republic of Letters” (1760), d’Alembert describes this eighteenth-century “society” as follows:

Among the men of letters there is one group against which the arbiters of taste, the important people, the rich people, are united: this is the pernicious, the damnable group of *philosophes*, who hold that it is possible to be a good Frenchman without courting those in power, a good citizen without flattering national prejudices, a good Christian without persecuting anybody. The *philosophes* believe it right to make more of an honest if little-known writer than of a well-known writer without enlightenment and without principles, to hold that foreigners are not inferior to us in every respect, and to prefer, for example, a government under which the people are not slaves to one under

which they are. This way of thinking is for many people an unpardonable crime.⁹

In his *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795), Condorcet (1743–1794) characterizes the *philosophes* as, above all, popularizers concerned “less with the discovery or development of truth than with its propagation . . . [who] made it their life-work to destroy popular errors rather than to drive back the frontiers of human knowledge.”¹⁰

All of those who supported the general goals of the Enlightenment in France were loosely committed to the emancipatory project of liberating the mind and power of human beings from the fetters of prejudice, intolerance, and tradition, to exorcise the “idols of the human mind,” as Francis Bacon (1561–1626)—one of the heroes of the *philosophes*—phrased it. The *philosophes* wished to reorganize the world so that the individual would be capable of free and independent action, and to subject to human control those features of the social and natural environments that had formerly determined human existence. In its most general sense, the *philosophes* understood enlightenment as a process in which ignorance and superstition are replaced by truth and knowledge.¹¹ “That is why everything must be examined, everything must be investigated, without hesitation or exception,” Diderot explains in the *Encyclopédie*. “[P]uerile restrictions must be stamped out; any barriers not set up by reason must be overthrown. The arts and sciences must be granted the freedom which is so vital to them.”¹² The certain result of this process, they believed, would be the promotion of human well-being, although few believed that the road leading to this end was either straight or easy. It could only be achieved by first discovering the truth and then prudently disseminating it as widely as the maintenance of social, moral, and political order would allow, something requiring a constant struggle against powerful institutions, vested interests, and entrenched prejudices. Such knowledge can only be acquired and disseminated where “the yoke of authority and precedent comes to be shaken and to yield to the laws of reason” and facts are accepted on the basis of scientifically verifiable sensory evidence rather than tradition or the blind authority of others.¹³ Universal reason was to replace arbitrary and irrational beliefs and traditional institutions, and those aspects of moral, social, and political life that had previously been accepted unquestioningly would now be subjected to chronic revision in the light of their practical usefulness and new information made available through scientific investigation and discovery. Orthodox religious dogmas and abstruse metaphysical systems were regarded as nothing more than impediments to our direct experience of

the world and the exercise and development of our mental faculties and powers. La Mettrie called on his readers to “[b]reak the chains of your prejudices and take up the torch of experience.”¹⁴ This general outlook is summarized very well by the Baron d’Holbach:

How could the human mind, haunted by frightening phantoms and guided by men interested in perpetuating its ignorance, make any progress? Man has been forced to vegetate in his primitive stupidity; he has been told only about invisible powers on which his fate was supposed to depend. Completely occupied with his fears and his senseless reveries, he has always been at the mercy of his priests who reserve for themselves the right to think for him and to regulate his conduct. . . . He [man] believed himself forced to groan under the yoke of his gods, whom he knew only through the fabulous accounts of their ministers. . . . The human mind, confused by theological opinions, failed to recognize itself, doubted its own powers, mistrusted experience, feared the truth, scorned its reason, and passed it by in order blindly to follow authority. Man was a simple machine in the hands of his tyrants and his priests, who alone had the right to regulate his movements. . . . Science, reason and liberty alone can cure them and make them happier. . . . Let minds be filled in good time with true ideas, let men’s reason be nurtured, let justice govern them, and there will be no need to oppose the helpless barrier of fear of the gods to the passions. . . . Worn out by an inconceivable theology, ridiculous fables, impenetrable mysteries, puerile ceremonies, let the human mind concern itself with natural things, intelligible subjects, tangible truths and useful knowledge. Once the vain fancies that obsess peoples are dissipated, soon rational opinions will come of themselves to win those human minds which have always been thought to be destined for error.¹⁵

The project that the French *philosophes* shared for promoting enlightenment—as they understood it—had negative and positive dimensions. Negatively, as we have already seen, it required tearing down the many obstacles to a clear and accurate perception of reality, such as superstition, dogma, and prejudice. The greatest of these obstacles, they thought, was the Church, the Enlightenment’s principal target in France. Organized religion was regarded as the chief culprit in the historical struggle between lightness and darkness, freedom and slavery, truth and ignorance, leading Voltaire famously to call for it to be crushed in the name of humanity. While the Pope himself had little more direct influence in France than he did in many Protestant countries, the eighteenth-century Gallican Church continued to enjoy much of the power and many of the

privileges that it had traditionally held: the Crown was still officially based on a divine right theory of monarchy; the Church continued to collect tithes and enjoyed special exemption from taxes, despite its enormous wealth; it exercised responsibility for much civil policy (in education, for example); and the eighteenth-century French state enforced, in a very sporadic and inconsistent manner, outward religious conformity through an imperfect regime of censorship, the regulation of public worship and criminal prosecution. This was particularly true following the assassination attempt on Louis XV in 1757, which fueled the establishment's mounting fear and intolerance of radical ideas. A decree was enacted in France that year sanctioning the death penalty for authors and publishers convicted of attacking religion or the state. In 1759 the *Encyclopédie* was suppressed as the source from which Helvétius had taken his atheistic ideas, and the Pope placed it on the Index of Forbidden Books, warning Catholics who owned it that they faced excommunication. Voltaire, Diderot, and several other *philosophes* had been incarcerated for their irreverent opinions, and Helvétius and La Mettrie narrowly escaped the same fate by fleeing into exile, as did abbé Raynal (1713–1796), who ended up in far-off St. Petersburg. As a result of this continuing ecclesiastical wealth, power, and persecution, the Enlightenment took on a markedly anticlerical cast in France not generally found among the *Aufklärer* in Germany or their kindred spirits in Britain.

One way in which the *philosophes* sought to loosen the Church's grip on French society was by means of the gradual dissemination of new knowledge and ideas. Yet there was little agreement on how quickly this gradual rationalization and secularization of life could or should be achieved. Indeed, many had reservations about the possible consequences of hastily implemented reforms. Notwithstanding his bitter attacks on the Church and his enthusiastic support for science and for the *Encyclopédie*, Voltaire was typical of most *philosophes* in his eagerness to avoid revolutionary change and in his concerns about the potentially disruptive, if not disastrous, consequences of a precipitous spread of "enlightened" ideas among *le canaille*, as he often referred derisively to the ignorant majority.¹⁶

The moderation, even conservatism, of most *philosophes* can be seen in the popularity of deism. Although the French Enlightenment's humanistic objectives required the retreat of religion, the majority of *philosophes* stopped short of atheism. The deist conception of God as a remote and benevolent *primum mobile* who did not normally intervene in the human world was popular with the *philosophes*, since it avoided some of the disquieting implications of atheism while leaving them free to direct their critical efforts against established religious institutions and beliefs that they felt inhibited their broad emancipatory goals. Also, they took some comfort from the idea of a benign—if remote—providential force underwriting

natural and social laws and overseeing their orderly and harmonious operation. Hence Voltaire's remark that "if God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him."¹⁷ Some *philosophes* sought to undermine clerical power in France by means of the complete separation of church and state. "The distance between throne and altar can never be too great," Diderot wrote. "In all times and places experience has shown the danger of the altar being next to the throne."¹⁸ Naigeon, Condorcet, and Helvétius agreed. Others, such as Voltaire and d'Alembert, preferred an Erastian subordination of the church to a secular state, in addition to wholesale liberalization of laws governing religion. All favored greater religious tolerance.

The heart of the positive dimension of the Enlightenment project in France lay in building up a systematically organized store of objective, empirically verifiable knowledge that would facilitate the advancement of human understanding. This is what lay behind the *Encyclopédie*, which sought to bring together as much of the available knowledge of the arts and sciences then known in as clear and accessible a manner as possible and, in the process, impose order on a huge and rapidly expanding mass of disorganized information.

The eighteenth-century French understanding of enlightenment is epitomized by the *Encyclopédie*, "the central document of the Enlightenment" in France.¹⁹ Most of the *philosophes* contributed to, and all supported, this project. D'Alembert's *Preliminary Discourse* (1751) to it—which was a "manifesto of the French Enlightenment" in its own right²⁰—placed it at the heart of the conceptual revolution that Newton, Locke, Bacon, and Descartes had instigated in the seventeenth century. According to d'Alembert, their heirs in the eighteenth century—"the century of philosophy par excellence"—were the *philosophes*, who undertook to popularize the ideas of the seventeenth-century philosophical and scientific revolutions in works such as the *Encyclopédie*. By the time Diderot's involvement with this massive work of enlightenment ended, seventeen large volumes of very dense text had been published along with five volumes of plates. Several supplementary volumes followed, capped by a two-volume index in 1780. Some four thousand copies of the Paris edition of the *Encyclopédie* were issued, although it has been estimated that, by the outbreak of the French Revolution, over ten thousand sets of various editions were extant across Europe in one form or another. It went through seven editions before the end of the century, and included contributions from virtually all of the major and many of the minor luminaries of the Enlightenment in France. As John Lough writes, "for its editors, the *Encyclopédie* was not only a new reference work on a massive scale; at the same time, both for them and for like-minded contributors, it was also a means of propounding the ideas of the Enlightenment."²¹

The “great Bacon” had himself urged the creation of an ambitious dictionary that would bring together in an orderly fashion all of the practical knowledge that was known. D’Alembert, writing in the *Preliminary Discourse*, expressed the hope that the Enlightenment would become a sanctuary “where the knowledge of man is protected from time and from revolutions . . . let us do for centuries to come what we regret that past centuries did not do for ours. We daresay that if the ancients had carried through that encyclopedia, as they carried through so many other great things, and if the manuscript alone had escaped from the famous Library of Alexandria, it would have been capable of consoling us for the loss of the others.”²² This passing reference to the destruction of the Alexandrian Library is an obvious riposte to Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* in which he had remarked that, had the library contained works opposed to the Gospels and had Pope Gregory been in the position of the Caliph Omar, “the Library would still have been burned, and it would be perhaps the finest deed in the life of that Illustrious Pontiff” (*DSA*, 20 [OC III, 28]).²³ D’Alembert accurately perceived Rousseau’s essay as a kind of preliminary discourse to an anti-*Encyclopédie*, and saw his own essay as its mirror image.

The *philosophes* believed that the best means of acquiring the useful knowledge that the *Encyclopédie* had assembled was through natural science.²⁴ It was this, above all, that distinguished their particular conception of enlightenment, which had an almost boundless confidence in science as a means for advancing human understanding and thereby happiness. No other conception of enlightenment accords to science and its dissemination the same exalted role. According to Condorcet, experience “also proves that in all countries where the physical sciences have been cultivated, barbarism in the moral sciences have been more or less dissipated and at least error and prejudice have disappeared.”²⁵ Bacon’s scientific method was widely believed by the *philosophes* to be the most reliable and effective means of ensuring the accurate perception of reality, since it explained nature as governed by a system of objective laws intelligible to reason via the senses, knowledge of which enables individuals to extend their powers over a very wide domain. The *philosophes* wished above all to extend the scientific and philosophical revolution inaugurated by Galileo (1564–1642), Newton (1642–1727), and Bacon to society and politics. D’Alembert alludes to the Enlightenment’s relationship to the seventeenth-century scientific revolution when he writes in the *Preliminary Discourse* that “the efforts of illustrious persons . . . are almost inevitably of no profit to their own centuries. It is reserved for following ages to receive the fruit of their enlightenment.”²⁶ The inductive method of experimentation and disinterested empirical observation developed by Bacon, “the father of experimental philosophy,”²⁷ was taken as the paradigm for all inquiry in the human and

natural sciences. The application of this methodology beyond the natural sciences became a central element of the Enlightenment project of maximizing human control of the world, the structure of which was held to be inherently rational and understandable.

As the architect of this scientific method, Bacon came to occupy a privileged place in the Enlightenment pantheon in France.²⁸ For d'Alembert, he was "the greatest, the most universal, and the most eloquent of philosophers."²⁹ Voltaire described Bacon's *Novum Organum* (1620) as "the scaffolding by means of which modern scientific thought has been built."³⁰ Diderot, the leading exponent of Bacon's thought among the *philosophes*, openly acknowledged the debt that the *Encyclopédie* owed to "that extraordinary genius." Its reliance on Bacon's famous "tree of knowledge" even led to accusations of plagiarism against its editors by their orthodox enemy the Jesuit priest Guillaume-François Berthier (1704–1784).³¹ This tree provided *encyclopédistes* with a model for the systematic organization of knowledge by showing, as Robert Darnton has written, "that knowledge was ordered, not random; that the ordering principle was reason working sense data; not revelation speaking through tradition; and that rational standards, when applied to contemporary institutions, would expose absurdity and iniquity everywhere."³²

Underlying the Enlightenment attitude towards the acquisition of knowledge was the sensationalist epistemology of "the sagacious Locke," according to which the mind is a *tabula rasa* on which sense impressions are imprinted. His enormously influential *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), in which this view was spelled out most fully, was translated into French in 1700, becoming a core text of the Enlightenment in France. If all our ideas are derived from sense-experience, it was thought, then widespread agreement on matters of truth is possible provided the exercise of these faculties is not impeded or distorted by social, political, and religious beliefs and institutions. D'Alembert put it succinctly when he wrote that "[a]ll our knowledge is ultimately reduced to sensations that are approximately the same in all men."³³ A clear, rational mind and the unimpeded ability to experience the world directly via one's own senses were regarded by the *philosophes* as the only prerequisites to the acquisition of knowledge, a necessary condition of human happiness. The immediate experience of the natural world via the senses was intended to replace traditional authority and mystical religious beliefs as the ultimate source of knowledge. Each individual, the *philosophes* believed, is endowed with the same basic faculties, which d'Alembert in his *Preliminary Discourse* labeled reason, imagination, and memory, corresponding to three forms of knowledge: philosophy, fine arts, and history. Of these faculties, he gave pride of place to the first, since this is "in conformity with the natural progress of the operations of the mind."³⁴ Although he concedes that, once imagination has

“made its first steps,” it moves “much faster than reason,” which frequently exhausts itself in “fruitless investigations,”³⁵ d’Alembert depicts reason as the glory of the human mind, and describes philosophy as “the dominant taste of our century.”³⁶

The Virtue of Selfish Sociability

Social contract theory was already in decline by the time Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality* was published in the mid-1750s. As J. W. Gough notes, the “late eighteenth century was a period when men were losing their belief in the older, naive contractarianism, which accepted the contract as literally true, yet they had not succeeded in finding a new theory of government to take its place.”³⁷ During the period between the middle of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, new ideas about the relationship between the individual and society emerged as part of the growing disenchantment with contractualism and its correlative conception of human nature as entirely given presocially.

In the eighteenth century, social contract theory was closely associated with the writings of Hobbes (1588–1672) and Locke (1632–1704) in particular, who had depicted society as the deliberate creation of individuals motivated by a self-interested desire to avoid the many hazards and inconveniences of the natural, presocial world. The arguments of Hobbes stimulated debate throughout Europe about the naturalness of society and it was in this context that the language of sociability first gained currency in France during the early Enlightenment.³⁸ The social atomism presupposed by the contractualist view assumes that individuals are related to each other only instrumentally and contingently. Society, on this view, is not regarded as constitutive of human identity; a person in the state of nature is presumed to have a pre-formed identity, interests, needs and desires, a free will, and a certain capacity for instrumental calculation. Society is not seen as either the necessary medium through which human identity is realized and developed or as essential to human agency.³⁹

With almost no exceptions, the *philosophes* either ignored or dismissed the contractualist view. Most shared the opinion expressed by Montesquieu (1689–1755) in *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) that human beings were simply “[m]ade for living in society.”⁴⁰ Condorcet contrasted contract theory, which he viewed as an extension of the rationalistic, a priori systems of the seventeenth century, with the inductive empiricism of his own century. Hobbes was imitating Plato, he wrote, “in deducing from certain general principles a plan for a whole system of social order and in constructing a model to which all practice was suppose to conform.”⁴¹ The influence of David Hume (1711–1776) on the trend away from concepts

such as the state of nature, the social contract, and natural law was considerable at this time. His 1748 essay “Of the Original Contract”⁴² presents a powerful skeptical case against what he elsewhere refers to as the “fallacious and sophistical” theory of the social contract.⁴³

Related to this eighteenth-century decline in contract theory was the growing appeal of the idea of human beings as naturally sociable, a view that enjoyed almost unanimous support among the *philosophes*. As Robert Mauzi writes, “never has man been conceived of less as a solitary being” than during the French Enlightenment.⁴⁴ In his *Persian Letters* (1721) Montesquieu relates this belief to a rejection of the contractarian idea of a presocial state of nature. “Every discussion of international law that I have ever heard,” he writes, “has begun with a careful investigation into the origin of society, which seems to me absurd . . . they [human beings] are all associated with each other at birth.”⁴⁵ Diderot also believed in the natural sociability of human beings. In his *Encyclopédie* article ‘Société’ (1765) he quotes Seneca’s *De Beneficiis* in support of the view that, in compensation for our natural weakness, we have been endowed with “two gifts to make him superior to animals, I mean reason and sociability [*rationem et societatem*].” He asserts that sociability is “the foundation of collective order,” the absence of which, as Seneca had written, “will destroy the union of the human species on which the conservation and all the happiness of life depend.”⁴⁶ Although he eventually gave up his belief in God, Diderot never wavered from his conviction that men “were never isolated. They carried within them the seed of sociability which tended continually to be developed . . . all these facts and arguments seem to prove that man has a natural tendency to sociability.”⁴⁷ Louis de Jaucourt (1704–1780) wrote the *Encyclopédie* article on ‘Sociabilité’ (1765), which he defined as a principle of natural law “engraved in the human heart.” “Remove sociability,” he warned, “and you will destroy the union of the human species on which the conservation and all the happiness of life depend.” Voltaire concurred. “It seems clear to me,” he wrote to Frederick the Great, “that God designed us to live in society—just as he has given bees the instincts and the power to make honey.”⁴⁸ Baron d’Holbach writes in *La Morale universelle* (1776) that “what is called the state of nature would be a state contrary to nature.”⁴⁹ He describes man in this work as “a sensible, intelligent, reasonable, sociable being.”⁵⁰

The French term “sociabilité,” referring to the natural tendency of humans to embrace society without the need for external prompting or intervention, was coined in the eighteenth century by Nicolas Delamare (1639–1723) in his *Traité de police* (1705), and the *Encyclopédie* was the first dictionary to register it in French.⁵¹ Both quoted from the same ancient source as Diderot had on the subject, Seneca’s *De Beneficiis*.

Delamare was also building on the work of modern natural law writers such as Hugo Grotius (1582–1645) and Samuel Pufendorf (1632–1694) on sociability, both of whom had quoted from the same section of Seneca’s *De Beneficii* as had Diderot and the *Encyclopédie*. Grotius held—against Hobbes—that human beings are unique among animals in possessing a natural “desire for society.” In the 1646 edition of his *On the Law of War and Peace* (first published 1625) he writes:

But among the traits characteristic of man is an impelling desire for society [*appetitus societatis*], that is, for social life—not of any and every sort, but peaceful, and organized according to the measure of his intelligence, with those who are of his own kind; this social trend the Stoics called “sociableness.” Stated as a universal truth, therefore, the assertion that every animal is impelled by nature to seek only its own good cannot be conceded.⁵²

Pufendorf’s position lies somewhere between Grotius and Hobbes. On the one hand, he agreed with the latter that human beings are naturally selfish. Man, he writes in *Elements of Universal Jurisprudence* (1660), is a being who “loves himself to the highest degree” and seeks “to preserve himself in every manner.”⁵³ On the other hand, he agreed with Grotius that the individual enjoys “living in the society of those similar to himself. . . . Nothing is more miserable for man than perpetual solitude.”⁵⁴ However, he asserted that our sociability is artificial rather than natural; there is no innate social instinct. Pufendorf thought that these two apparently contradictory tendencies “should by no means be opposed to one another,”⁵⁵ since society is the means by which individuals can best promote their selfish ends; it arises not from a natural instinct to associate but from our natural selfishness and the realization that society is the best means by which to advance our interests. “[I]n order to be safe,” he asserts in *On the Duty of Man and Citizen According to Natural Law* (1673), “it is necessary for him [man] to be sociable; that is, to join forces with men like himself and so conduct himself towards them that they are not given even a plausible excuse for harming him, but rather become willing to preserve and promote his advantages [*commoda*].”⁵⁶

The ideas of Grotius and Pufendorf were transmitted to eighteenth-century France largely through the work of Jean Barbeyrac (1674–1745), who translated the latter’s *On the Law of Nature and Nations* (1672) into French in 1706.⁵⁷ It is likely that Barbeyrac’s edition of Pufendorf’s book “did more than any other text to inject the language of sociability into eighteenth century French philosophy.”⁵⁸ His Genevan disciple Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui (1694–1778) also helped to popularize Pufendorf’s ideas, which reached Rousseau at a tender age.⁵⁹ In the process of disseminating Pufendorf’s thought, his translators modified it in favor of a more

optimistic conception of human nature, stressing our natural sociability and benevolence toward others.⁶⁰

This conception of sociability—“the mutual sociability of selfish agents,” as Istvan Hont calls it—was an important precursor of eighteenth-century theories of “doux commerce.”⁶¹ Commerce was understood very broadly in Enlightenment France, referring not merely to economic activity but to a wide range of voluntary forms of mutual exchange and reciprocity. The Enlightenment proponents of “doux commerce” argued that trade softened and refined manners and luxury promoted gentleness (*douceur*) and civility. An advanced commercial civilization based largely on the trade in luxury goods was thought to be a beneficial (or, at worst, harmless) expression of man’s selfish sociability.⁶² As Daniel Gordon writes in his study of Enlightenment sociability, “the ‘polite’ or ‘polished’ individual (*l’homme poli*, *l’homme policé*) was the individual who did not need to be coerced in order to be content, because he knew how to find happiness in reciprocity. Sociability thus meant self-police.”⁶³

A deeply rooted stigma against both commerce and luxury had long existed in the West.⁶⁴ However, in the early eighteenth century some writers began to challenge this prejudice. Bernard Mandeville’s (1670–1733) famous *The Fable of the Bees* (1714), which was translated into French in 1740, led the way by developing the idea that “publick benefits” arise unintentionally from the free play of “private vices” such as selfishness, as Pufendorf had earlier claimed. Jean-François Melon’s (1675–1738) *Essai politique sur le commerce* (1734) made a similar argument in opposition to Christian moralists who proscribed commerce. It was “extraordinary sumptuousness,” he thought, that benefitted rich and poor alike and provided the state with the wealth it needed to be strong and secure. Voltaire weighed in on the side of Melon and “doux commerce” with his poem *Le Mondain* (1736), a verse defense of luxury, and in his essay *Observations sur M. M. Jean Law, Melon et Dutot, sur le commerce, le luxe, les monnaies, les impôts* (1738), which defends the advantages of modern commercial civilization. It was commerce, after all, that helped to make the English free.⁶⁵ The new civilization of modernity, of which England was the prototype, would be a sumptuous commercial civilization based on trade and luxury, not self-sufficiency and asceticism. Its ancient antecedent is liberal Athens rather than austere Sparta; it is “[n]ot heroism but hedonism [that] is the motor of history.”⁶⁶ In an article on “Luxe” in his *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764), Voltaire wonders aloud what Sparta ever did for Greece, particularly compared to its rival Athens:

Did it ever have Demosthenes, Sophocles, Apelles, and Phidias? The luxury of Athens produced great men in every sphere; Sparta had a few captains, and even those in smaller number than the other cities. Fine! Let a small republic like Lacedaemon preserve its poverty. We reach death by lacking everything as well as by enjoying whatever can make life agreeable.⁶⁷

This view of the benevolent effects of luxury, which Diderot credited with contributing to “the happiness of humankind,”⁶⁸ was widespread among the *philosophes*. In general, they tended to take the side of the rising new class of bankers, parvenus, and self-made men who supported commercial civilization against *les grands*, the traditional landed nobility and clerical establishment that was more skeptical, and in many cases openly hostile, to meritocracy and commerce.⁶⁹

David Hume’s influential essay “Of Commerce,” arguing for “the pleasures of luxury and the profits of commerce,” was translated into French in 1752. In it, he writes that societies that “abound with industry and that are employed upon delicacies and luxuries” and are animated by “a spirit of avarice and industry, art and luxury” are much more likely to be rich, powerful, and happy than more austere or unproductive societies such as ancient Sparta, which Hume regarded as a completely inappropriate model for modern civilization.⁷⁰ In his essay “Of Refinement in the Arts,” he argues that “the ages of refinement are both the happiest and the most virtuous” and that the “more these refined arts advance, the more sociable men become.”⁷¹ He expanded on this theme in his *History of England* (1762), which Adam Smith admired, depicting commerce and trade as modern substitutes for more antiquated notions of virtue. “When the tempers of men are softened as well as their knowledge improved, this humanity appears still more conspicuous, and is the chief characteristic which distinguishes a civilized age from times of barbarity and ignorance. Factions are then less inveterate, revolutions less tragical, authority less severe, and seditions less frequent.”⁷²

Most *philosophes* in France shared this benign conception of self-interested commercial civilization, in which individuals naturally and peacefully interact to their mutual benefit in civil society, below the level of the state. The selfish pursuit of one’s own interests was not thought to be socially destructive; indeed, it was actually seen as a form of sociability. As Pufendorf had put it: “although someone primarily has his own advantage before his eyes when he joins himself to some particular society . . . this does not prevent him from being bound to strive after his own advantage in such a way that the advantage of society is not hurt or injury

inflicted on its individual members, or, now and then, to care for the good of society by considering his own advantage as less important.”⁷³

For the *philosophes*, polite sociability was the “hallmark of civilization” itself.⁷⁴ Most proudly believed that it was actually a distinguishing feature of French social life, a view that many thought was widely shared outside of France.⁷⁵ “Most of our writers brag about our nation’s spirit of society, and indeed, foreigners see us as the most sociable in Europe,” wrote Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (1737–1814).⁷⁶ It was also thought that this civilized sociability was facilitated by the many forms of voluntary association and social “commerce” that abounded in eighteenth-century France, such as clubs, theaters, concerts, *cafés*, learned academies, masonic lodges, and private educational and literary societies known as *lycées* or *musées*. While the French state and church were the more or less exclusive domain of the king and the aristocratic *grands* and senior clerics who surrounded him, the *philosophes* dominated in the realm of civil society, a sphere that is, according to Diderot, “a divinity on earth” which God honors “by his probity, by a scrupulous attention to his duties, and by the sincere desire not to be a useless or burdensome member of it. He is ‘kneaded,’ as it were, with the leavening of order and rule; he is filled with ideas of the good of civil society, of which he knows the principles better than other men.”⁷⁷

Of the many voluntary associations that made up eighteenth-century French civil society, the preferred habitat of the Enlightenment *société de penser* were the salons, “the civil working spaces of the project of Enlightenment.”⁷⁸ The most prominent of these in Paris after 1750 was that of the Baron d’Holbach, whose biweekly dinners at his home earned him the title of “*maître d’Hotel de la Philosophie*.” Rousseau derisively dubbed the *salonnières* who made up these weekly gatherings, in which he participated for a time, the “*côterie holbachique*,” most of whom were contributors to the *Encyclopédie*, which was “largely a Parisian creation, unmistakably shaped by the lively intellectual life of that city in the mid-eighteenth century.”⁷⁹ The salon of Mlle de Lespinasse (1732–1776)—the “*muse of the Encyclopédie*”—was also popular with leading *philosophes*, regularly attracting d’Alembert, Chastellux, Marmontel, Turgot, Morellet, Saint-Lambert, La Harpe, Suard, abbé Arnaud, Malesherbes, Diderot, Grimm, Condillac, Duclos, Raynal, Damilaville, and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. This salon served as the “unofficial campaign headquarters for the execution of d’Alembert’s reforming strategy,”⁸⁰ whereas d’Holbach’s salon in the rue Royale tended to be popular with more radical *philosophes*.

The salons were enclaves of “*amiable and easy*” sociability—*la bonne compagnie*—that provided an alternative to the political sphere from

which the *philosophes* were, with very few exceptions, excluded in *ancien régime* France. As Dena Goodman writes in her study of the eighteenth-century French salon, it was, at its best, a “serious discursive space in which others could develop and exchange ideas, share and criticize one another’s work, collaborate on the collective projects characteristic of the Enlightenment.”⁸¹ The salon was a place where the art of polite conversation was both cultivated and displayed, since it is the “sweetest bond” of social life, as Claude Buffier (1661–1737) put it in his *Traité de la société civile* (1726).⁸² Women, who were barred entirely from the world of public affairs, often enjoyed a powerful, and in some cases dominant, role in the private world of the salon, in part because many viewed them as more polished and sociable than men.

Rousseau came to detest the salon culture of Paris, not least for its “feminine” quality. “[E]very woman at Paris,” he complains in his *Letter to d’Alembert*, “gathers in her apartment a harem of men more womanish than she” (*LA*, 101 [OC V, 93]). In his attack on the decadence of Parisian life in his novel *Julie, Or the New Heloise* (1761), he singles out the dominance of *les dames*, the “frivolous, devious, wily, foolish, fickle” women of the French capital, and the hegemony of “feminine” values, as among the principal causes of the city’s moral decay, in contrast to the rough Spartan manliness of Geneva. “French gallantry,” he laments, “has given women a universal power that requires no tender sentiment to perdure. Everything depends on them; nothing is done that is not by or for them; Olympus and Parnassus, glory and fortune are equally under their power . . . they decide sovereignly about the highest knowledge, as well as the most agreeable. Poetry, Literature, history, philosophy, even politics, one can notice right away by the style of all books that they are written to amuse pretty women” (*JNH*, 226 [OC II, 276]). For Rousseau the salons of Paris were nothing more than “voluntary prisons” and breeding grounds for *amour-propre* and inauthenticity, like the modern theater, which the Spartans had wisely banned. He proposed alternative forms of sociability, such as the *cercles* of Geneva, which have “something simple and innocent which suits republican morals,” unlike the sophisticated artificiality of the Parisian salons (*LA*, 100 [OC V, 91]). Rather than cultivating the mind and polite manners or engaging in witty banter and clever debates about abstruse and contentious matters like the urban *salonnières*, the simple citizens of Rousseau’s provincial *cercles* restricted themselves to modest pleasures such as gambling, chatting, drinking, and smoking, which they pursued in the open air and in the public gaze. Unlike the enclosed and shadowy world of the *salonnière*, “hiding his conduct from the public eye,” the transparency of Geneva meant that “individuals, always in the public eye, are born censors of one another and where the

police can easily watch everyone” (*LA*, 58-59 [OC V, 54]). Rousseau was the Diogenes of his age, representing the “ideal of rude dignity” against the “ideal of polite sociability” favored by the *philosophes*.⁸³

Virtually all of the *philosophes* not only took human sociability for granted, but also viewed social order as a reflection of the spontaneous order of nature. There was a broad consensus, following the revered Newton, that nature is an orderly, self-regulating system governed by uniform laws. There was more than a hint of providentialism in this view, albeit of a remote kind compatible with the deism widely favored among the *philosophes*. The Newtonian Voltaire linked the harmony of nature directly to his deist conception of God as “the eternal machine-maker,” a view very widely held among the *philosophes*. For Condorcet, the flux and disorder that is apparent in nature and in human society obscures a deeper regularity. “Everything goes to prove that the whole of nature is subject to regular laws; every apparent disorder conceals from our eyes an order that we have been unable to perceive. This order can only be known by the observation of facts, the mass or succession of which are necessary to make it perceptible to our feeble sight.”⁸⁴ Since the *philosophes* also believed society to be natural, it too was held to reflect this harmony. Thus, by allowing society freely to operate in accordance with the laws of nature, the harmony of the natural order would be reflected in the social, economic and political life of human beings. There is, on this view, a spontaneous order in both the natural and human worlds. Positive laws, institutions, and beliefs are therefore unnecessary to produce the general harmony of nature in society, although steps are sometimes required to eradicate or regulate forces that disrupt this natural harmony, such as religious conflict. This French Enlightenment conception of the spontaneous order of nature and society is consistent with its rejection of contract theory, at least in its more pessimistic Hobbesian form, according to which order is the intentional product of human will.

After almost two decades of relatively peaceful coexistence, the various factions within the “society” that made up the *philosophes* became increasingly polarized in the 1770s and 1780s between those who wished to see it extended and radicalized, and those who wished to contain it.⁸⁵ The radicals took empiricism to a materialist, utilitarian extreme, denying the very existence of God and propounding a view of man as a soulless machine. They pressed for a rejection of the deistic compromise of separating God from man and the material world in favor of a monistic view of man as “a being purely physical,”⁸⁶ as Baron d’Holbach thought, and for an outright rejection of the belief in God. Such extreme views deepened the rift between the “moderate” and “radical” elements within the society of the *philosophes*, which widened considerably with the publication in 1770 of Holbach’s *Système de la nature*, the “atheists’ Bible.”⁸⁷

Diderot increasingly gravitated toward the Baron's circle, while his former coeditor on the *Encyclopédie* inclined in the opposite direction. D'Alembert denounced Holbach's work as a "detestable stupidity" and collaborated more and more with deists such as Voltaire, who condemned the *Système* for playing directly into the hands of their orthodox enemies, who branded all *philosophes* as atheists and materialists. Voltaire complained to Grimm about "[t]his damned *Système de la nature* [which] has done irreparable harm"⁸⁸ and told d'Alembert that it "has made all the *philosophes* execrable in the eyes of the King and the whole court. . . . The publisher of this fatal work has destroyed philosophy forever in the minds of all the magistrates and all the heads of families who sense how dangerous atheism can be for society."⁸⁹

Notwithstanding these deepening divisions within the ranks of the *philosophes*, Rousseau found himself increasingly at odds with both factions. Indeed, many of his most bitter clashes were with moderates such as Voltaire, with whom he fought an increasingly acrimonious public war for over a decade. The differences between radical and moderate *philosophes* in the second half of the eighteenth century were differences *within* the Enlightenment, whereas their differences with Rousseau were differences between the Enlightenment and someone who came to reject its fundamental assumptions and goals.