

Chapter 1



The Enlightenment in Question

1. Enlightenment as an “Age of Criticism”

One of the difficulties encountered when reflecting about the Enlightenment is to determine first of all what the object is. This is not just a demand for geographical and historical precision, but also, importantly, for identifying the set of ideas under discussion, the content so to speak of the term. But therein lies the difficulty: “Enlightenment” is descriptively elusive. There is no date or concept that we can afford to take as our unproblematic, self-evident starting point. Taking our cue from the darkness-dispelling metaphor that is Enlightenment, however, we can begin by asking: How are darkness and light apportioned? How is illumination to be brought about? In terms of what we have come to view as the characteristic concerns and ambitions of the “Age of Reason,” the answer to these questions is obvious: the way to secure intellectual progress and human happiness is by eradicating superstition and by setting the various branches of human knowledge on a sound scientific footing. Familiarity with the aspirations of this optimistic, progress-oriented Enlightenment, however, has tended to obscure a strand of eighteenth-century thinking that offers a more cautious view of the future and questions the nature and achievements of both “enlightenment” and “civilization.” The aim of this chapter is to flesh out the questions this critical Enlightenment raises about the social and cultural context of reasoning, the reliability of reason as a guide for human action, and, finally, the nature, powers, and limitations of human rationality.

In his now classic study of the period, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, Ernst Cassirer observes that “‘Reason’ becomes the

unifying and central point of the century, expressing all that it longs and strives for, and all that it achieves.”¹ Cassirer marks the intellectual distance that separates his own age from the Enlightenment by focusing on the concept of reason itself. He points out that while for us reason is a variable, often vague concept with a distinctive history of its own, eighteenth-century thinkers were “imbued” with the belief that reason is immutable, “the same for all thinking subjects, all nations, all epochs, all cultures.”² The works with which I begin my discussion in this chapter, however, treat the claim that reason is immutable as *problematic*, rather than as axiomatically true. The concerns and aspirations of the critical Enlightenment examined here do not fit our preconceptions about the Age of Reason, they are more appropriately seen as representing an Age of Criticism. Cassirer too employs the term *Zeitalter der Kritik*, which he uses to describe the remarkable growth of literary and aesthetic criticism that took place during the eighteenth century. Developing an argument made originally by Alfred Baeumler,³ Cassirer maintains that while restricted in its scope and domain of application, literary and aesthetic criticism had important consequences for the age as a whole. Art, Cassirer argues, presented a unique challenge to the “fundamental propensity of the century toward a clear and sure ordering of the details, toward formal unification and strict logical concatenation.”⁴ Constrained to acknowledge the existence of “an irrational element”⁵ that it cannot encompass, reason is awakened to its limitations and the age of reason to the limits of its rationalistic aspirations. Although the problematic of the limits of reason is central to the works I want to examine here, Cassirer’s account of its emergence is at best partial. To appreciate this, we need to broaden our view of the Age of Criticism, to encompass not only the criticism of art, but also of religion, morality, politics, philosophy, and of Enlightenment itself, that took place during the eighteenth century. This is well captured by Kant who, in the process of introducing his own project of a criticism of reason in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, observes that “Our age is, in especial degree, the *age of criticism*, and to criticism everything must submit” (*CPR* A xii). The criticism of “everything,” however, presents us with a different philosophical problem than the one alluded to in Cassirer’s analysis of aesthetic criticism. Cassirer’s account of the encounter between reason and the irrational obscures the less dramatic, but, I will be arguing, very fruitful, *internal* questioning of reason, which ushers the Kantian thematic of a “critique” of reason. It is the conditions and themes of this internal criticism of Enlightenment reason that I want to outline in this chapter.

The philosophical questions that are raised within the critical Enlightenment are not of course free floating; they are rooted in a particular historical context. A helpful way of looking at this context is suggested by Dena Goodman in her study of the patterns of sociability and the discursive practices developed in eighteenth-century France. Goodman links the emergence of these practices to the efforts of the participants in the “Republic of Letters” to “work out a way of maintaining citizenship in the political and geographical states that define their nationality without compromising their primary allegiance to the values of the republic.”⁶ She points out that the “critical position of the citizen of the Republic of Letters, first articulated by Pierre Bayle at the end of the seventeenth century and then translated into the social and discursive practices of conversation and epistolarity by the *philosophes* and the *salonnières* of the Enlightenment, is a product of the tension this dual citizenship generates.”⁷ In this chapter I want to focus precisely on what Goodman calls here the “critical position” of the citizen of the Republic of Letters. However, my aim is not to analyze the discursive practices that this critical position generates, but rather to examine the philosophical problems it brings forth.

A clear expression of the tension of the dual citizenship Goodman describes can be found in d’Alembert’s “Essai sur la société des gens de lettres et des grands.” The intellectuals, or *gens de lettres*, d’Alembert argues, find themselves occupying an odd position, for they are under obligation to remain autonomous, free among equals “in the community of men of letters,” while, at the same time, they have no power to enforce the conditions under which this freedom can be realized. This predicament cannot be satisfactorily resolved because the demands of the pursuit of truth are different and possibly irreconcilable with the demands of the state or the patrons (*les grands*). Sharpening the contrast, d’Alembert concludes that “anarchy, which destroys states, on the contrary supports and maintains the republic of letters.”⁸ D’Alembert’s text raises two sorts of questions. First, it seeks to define the social role and duties of the intellectual. As we shall see, this quest for a social justification of intellectual pursuits is central to the German debate about the nature of enlightenment and of its social and political consequences. Secondly, d’Alembert’s account of the awkward social position of the *gens des lettres* raises a question about the kind of authority and legitimacy that can plausibly be claimed for intellectual pursuits, especially when these provide the basis for criticizing prevalent usage or accepted doctrine. This question can be phrased as follows: how can reason help us vindicate the legitimacy of our critical choices, if “everything” is to be subjected to criticism? The different

approaches to this problem range from Diderot's skepticism about the possibility of providing a satisfactory answer to this question, to Mendelssohn's prudential limitation of the scope of criticism. These arguments serve as a conceptual foil for Kant's interpretation of enlightenment and his own solution to the problem of criticism. Equally though, they enable us to see how criticism of traditional authority and the authority of tradition—which is an intrinsic element of the rationalist program of the Enlightenment—ultimately led to a constructive debate about the limits of this program itself.

2. Diderot, Rousseau, and the Tasks of Criticism

In his article on "Fact" in the *Encyclopédie*, Diderot writes the following: "Facts may be divided into three classes: divine acts, natural phenomena, and human actions. The first belong to theology, the second to philosophy, and the last to history properly speaking. All are equally subject to criticism" (*Enc* VII:298). Criticism of facts is central to both Diderot's and Rousseau's understanding of their philosophical tasks. As I will be arguing in this section, morally motivated social criticism forms a central part of their work and shapes the logic of their positive claims, namely, that if criticism is necessary to identify what is wrong, then what is right must be immune to criticism. In the next two sections, I will be exploring the limitations of this logic and the false trails to which it leads. Apart from providing us with a *via negativa* to the resolution of the problem of criticism, this exploration brings to light elements of an exemplary examination of the role of the philosopher as critic and of the normative assumptions implicit in this self-given task that can serve as a critical counterpoint to the conception of the philosopher as educator we consider in the final section of this chapter.

Before turning to examine the particular projects pursued by each author, however, I want to dwell for a moment on some shared features of their conception of philosophical authorship. As already mentioned, criticism is central to this conception. Diderot views criticism as performing an important emancipatory task: it identifies the "wrong habits" that hold us "captive" (*De la poésie dramatique*, X:331). For this reason, he suggests elsewhere, criticism must be recognized as an almost natural force like death, from which nothing escapes but "everything must bow to its law" (XIV:27, *Salon I* 6). This belief in the value of criticism is underscored by an awareness of the fragility of culture, which Diderot views as subject to the same processes of decay as those that affect the life of natural organisms. In his play "The Natural Son,"

the heroine, Constance, confidently declares: “Barbarians exist still, without doubt. But the times of barbarism are gone. The age has enlightened itself” (*Le fils naturel*, Act IV, scene iii, X:65). Yet a recurring theme in Diderot’s work is the difficulty of sustaining such an optimistic belief and the conviction that no human achievement is secure or unassailable. This is precisely why he views criticism as the best available means to resist the onset of exhaustion by identifying the “barbarians” that threaten the fragile gains of this “enlightened age.” At the same time, he is highly aware of the difficulty of carrying out this critical program. What he seeks to formulate is a critically vindicated defense for the values that he sees endangered in contemporary society. This is a pressing task for him, because in the absence of such a defense, his civic and moral commitments and indeed his criticism can appear ad hoc and contingently motivated. Although Diderot often invokes the idea of an authorizing public on whose name he undertakes his critical work, the public is also the target of his criticism. The strain of this relation is at the heart of his growing sense of philosophical isolation that is in evidence especially in late pieces such as *Essay on the Reigns of Claudius and Nero*, where Diderot argues that those who choose the philosophical life remain essentially at odds with the world they inhabit.⁹

The theme of intellectual solitude is yet more prominent in Rousseau’s thought. This is captured in the line from Ovid’s *Tristia*, which he chooses as the epigraph of the *First Discourse*: “Here I am the barbarian, because no one understands me.” That both Diderot and Rousseau fashion their philosophical identities on classical models is a sign of the intellectual distance they seek from their age, a distance that they consider necessary in order adequately to perform their tasks as critics. For both, the philosopher is a Socratic gadfly who goads the city to wakefulness, identifying “wrong habits,” or shattering complacent assumptions of progress and civilization. For Rousseau in particular there is an important methodological dimension to intellectual solitude as a necessary correlate of criticism. He makes this clear in the *First Discourse*, when he anticipates the unpopularity of his thesis that “our souls have been corrupted in proportion to the advancement of our sciences and arts towards perfection” (III:9–10, *Discourse I* 39–40).¹⁰ Although he prefaces these remarks with a direct appeal to the academy—“I defend virtue in front of virtuous men . . . what do I have to fear?” (III:5, *Discourse I* 34)—he recognizes that his consignment to intellectual solitude is inevitable given that the views he propounds are intended to provoke the complacent assumptions of received opinion. Seen in this light, Rousseau’s refusal to collect the prize he won for the

essay can be interpreted as an emphatic reassertion of the inevitability of this fate: his criticism of “our enlightened age” (III:9, *Discourse I* 38) simply *must* be incompatible with the approval of one of its most prominent institutions—the academy.

In trying to get a clearer idea about how each author conceives of his philosophical tasks, it is worth pausing to ask whether the frequent invocation of criticism is anything more than mere intellectual posturing. Writing generally about the role of the *philosophes* within the French Enlightenment, Norman Hampson warns us to be cautious about claims to radicalism. He questions the effectiveness of the *philosophes* as political and social critics, on the grounds that they were politically and socially isolated. He points out that they mainly operated within the *salon*, which attracted members of the nobility and the clergy and from which the commercially active classes were firmly excluded. The *salon*, Hampson argues, replicated thus the “gulf” that separated polite society from commerce and also cultural and intellectual life from the practice of politics.¹¹ Because they were at a further remove from both politics and commerce, the *philosophes* “operated in a kind of void,” which, instead of having a liberating effect, encouraged abstraction.¹² Hemmed in by the *salon* conventions, which placed on them demands for wit and originality, rather than depth and systematicity, Hampson concludes, the *philosophes* pursued intellectual curiosity as an end in itself, neglecting practical issues; they saw themselves as “a kind of perpetual opposition, with a tendency towards generalised and abstract criticism.”¹³

The picture Hampson presents gives us a very partial view of the social position and intellectual reach of the *philosophes*. The claim that the *philosophes* operated in a kind of void can only be seen as an exaggeration. We should distinguish between intellectual solitude as a methodological and critical device, and isolation as a social predicament. By the middle of the eighteenth century the *philosophes* had achieved both recognition and a degree of representation in and influence on the Académie française. Moreover, they were not sheltered from the world of commerce; publishing was, then as now, also a commercial enterprise. A good example here is the most ambitious publishing project of the French Enlightenment, the *Encyclopédie*. This financially as well as intellectually risky project was initiated by a publisher-bookseller, André-François Le Breton, who, seeking to emulate the commercial success of Ephraïm Chambers’ *Cyclopaedia*, undertook to translate the work into French. In the event, however, under the joint editorship of Diderot and D’Alembert, the *Encyclopédie* developed into an entirely new project, running into several volumes, includ-

ing twelve volumes of illustrations alone.¹⁴ The question of political participation is also less clear-cut than Hampson suggests. The wave of Anglophilia that swept the *salons* during this time, taking the form of often uncritical admiration for the English political institutions, can certainly be seen as an expression of frustration with the narrow political confines suffered at home. However, exclusion from formal politics did not stop the *philosophes* from having a political role or from concerning themselves with practical matters (the most famous case is perhaps Voltaire's involvement in the "affaire Calas").¹⁵ As for the *salons*, the question of their composition becomes more complex once we look at it from the perspective of gender. The *salons* were unique among Enlightenment institutions—including German societies and English clubs—in being open to men and women alike, and indeed in being mainly run by women. Nor were the activities of the *philosophes* limited to the *salon*. Alternative, informal settings for discussion and debate were provided by the coffeehouse, the theater, and the exhibitions of art held annually or biennially at the Louvre, the Salons, which were open to the public, attracting vast numbers of visitors from most diverse social backgrounds.¹⁶ The patterns of belonging and exclusion, engagement and detachment that form the social context in which Diderot and Rousseau pursue their critical projects are more complex than Hampson admits. The charge of abstraction, however, touches on the important question of the *philosophical* resources they bring to these tasks.

Rousseau and Diderot probe into the ambiguities and contradictions that lay beneath a supposedly enlightened society, showing the coarseness, shallowness, and servility they found coexisting alongside intellectual and aesthetic refinement. From within the thematic variety of their social criticism a distinctive philosophical project takes shape whose overarching aim is to identify and vindicate the elusive *volonté générale*. For both authors the problematic of the general will is intimately connected to the way in which each conceives of his authorial role and the constituency he addresses. Historically, the growing importance of these issues can be related, as Keith Michael Baker observes, to the emergence of the rhetoric of public spirit, public good, and public opinion, which designated a "new source of authority, the supreme tribunal to which the absolute monarchy no less than its critics was compelled to appeal."¹⁷ What I want to examine here is the different ways in which Diderot and Rousseau grapple with the problem of *justifying* the normative force of this newly invoked source of authority. As we shall see, characteristic of Diderot's approach is doubt about the very possibility of providing such a justification. Corresponding to his diagnosis of

a society that is profoundly divided and thus cannot sustain a genuinely common conception of the good is a diagnosis of a philosophical reason that lacks the requisite authority to guarantee the workings of the “supreme tribunal” of the public. Rousseau shares both Diderot’s diagnosis and his skepticism about rationalist and naturalist accounts of the good. This leads him to argue that a sustainable conception of the common good is only possible within a radically reformed and strongly interventionist society. Only in this context can the appeal to that which is shared, common, and general confer authority and legitimacy to individual choices. The different paths that they take on this issue reflect an inherent ambiguity in the use of the term “public.” As Mona Ozouf points out, “public” has a “rather hazy” association with notions of public good and public interest, which give it a particular emotional charge and yet, at the same time, in order “to believe in the goodness and rationality of the ‘public voice,’ one first had to define it in a negative way as the opposite of common opinion.”¹⁸ As we shall see, it is Diderot’s recognition of the heterogeneity of public voice and the plural and individualized conceptions of the good that ultimately blocks his attempts to formulate a convincing conception of this alternative source of authority and thus to authorize his critical choices. Eschewing the public—quite literally in the case of *Rameau’s Nephew*, which only found a public posthumously—he stakes his claim as a citizen in the Republic of Letters by appealing to the distant past or to a wiser posterity. Rousseau, by contrast, persists on the task of addressing the “common opinion” with the aim of showing how it can be reformed, unified, and, as a result, made truly public.

3. Diderot’s Normative Impasse

Diderot’s lack of systematicity—what Lester Crocker termed the “chaotic order”¹⁹ of his thought—together with his broad range of interests and sheer versatility complicate the task of forming a unified and cohesive view of his philosophical position. The reader is confronted with the task of fitting together strands of his thinking that seem to pull to different directions. In the *Encyclopédie* “Prospectus,” written in 1750, Diderot includes among the aims of the forthcoming publication the provision of a comprehensive survey of the “latest advances” in all branches of human knowledge, the dissemination of the “principles of clear thinking,” and, generally, “the progress of human knowledge” (*Enc* V:104). By contrast, *Rameau’s Nephew* con-

tains a paradigmatic portrayal of the vanity of these aspirations.²⁰ The time lapsed between the composition of the two works does not fully account for the marked difference of perspective. Although Diderot came to view the *Encyclopédie* as a great “burden” (XIV:26, *Salon I* 6), he never considered the project as misguided or ill-conceived. I believe that we can form a more coherent view of Diderot’s work if we view it from the perspective opened to us by the related problems of criticism and philosophical authority. What motivates both the educative zeal of the “Prospectus” and the self-mocking irony of *Rameau’s Nephew* is Diderot’s profound sense of the precariousness of human achievement. The philosophical correlate of this conviction is the thesis that all attempts at reflective justification of our normative commitments ultimately fail. To appreciate the nature and the force of Diderot’s doubts, we need to retrace the paths that lead him to this essentially skeptical conclusion.

Diderot’s diagnosis of philosophical impotence bears a complex relation to his materialist and determinist metaphysics. One way of looking at this relation is in terms of a conflict between his metaphysical commitments and the moral and aesthetic values he seeks to defend. Speaking of Diderot’s “metaphysical commitments” stands in need of explanation, given his well-advertised opposition to metaphysics, which he describes as an essentially pointless pursuit burdened with the “arid subtleties” of ontology.²¹ The contrast here, however, is between metaphysics as a body of a priori knowledge, which Diderot rejects, and the natural sciences, which provide us with “facts” and knowledge based on “experiences” (*Enc* V:97). Underpinning the epistemic claim that only experiences provide reliable knowledge, however, is a materialist ontology, which admits of no purely normative facts that can be used to justify particular moral judgments. It is adherence to this position that sums up Diderot’s own metaphysics. Conflict arises because Diderot does not want to reduce norms and values to facts about human behavior or psychology because he considers such “facts” to be intractable and not reliably distinguishable from the values we attach to them. Evidence of this tension can be found in Diderot’s criticisms of Helvetius’s *De l’Homme*. While remaining sympathetic to the materialist principles on which Helvetius bases his analysis, Diderot expresses profound reservations at his portrayal of humanity. “It may well be true,” he argues, “that physical pain and pleasure are the only principles of animal behavior (*les actions de l’animal*), but are they also the only principles of human action?” (*Réfutation*,

566).²² Diderot returns to this question on several occasions, seeking a definition of the human being such that would allow the dimension of values to be taken into account:

What is a man? . . . An animal? . . . Without doubt. Yet a dog is an animal too. And so is the wolf. A man, however, is neither wolf nor dog. . . . How can we have a notion of good and evil, beauty and ugliness, kindness and wickedness without having a preliminary notion of man? (XVI:205–6, Salon II 107)

The philosophical interrogation of what it is to be a human being and to hold certain values, which leads Diderot to dismiss both nature and reason as providing plausible answers to these questions, is framed by a diagnosis of pervasive value-skepticism, which renders equally unconvincing the appeal to communal or shared values.²³

These issues are most forcefully raised in work Diderot produced after his involvement with the *Encyclopédie* had come to an end, and it is to this work I now turn.²⁴ In particular, I will be focusing on his reviews of the Salons exhibitions at the Louvre, and his philosophical dialogues, or “fictions” as they are often called,²⁵ where he reveals himself as an exploratory and self-questioning thinker, who is most at home in the dialogical rather than the declamatory mode. He uses the flexibility of the dialogical form to examine different social perspectives and philosophical ideas and to make vivid their limitations. Sometimes he adopts an intimate, almost confessional, tone, and sometimes, as in the polemic he inserts in the *Salon of 1767* entitled “Satire against Luxury in the Mode of Persius,” a more theatrical idiom. Because of its bold, almost brutal, style, the “Satire” is a good place to start our investigation of the relation between Diderot’s social and philosophical criticism. The polemic is in the form of a dialogue between two differently minded observers, one of whom represents a critical viewpoint and the other a complacent one:

My friend, let us love our country; let us love our contemporaries; let us submit ourselves to an order of things that, by chance, could have turned out better or worse; let us enjoy the privileges of our position. If we see faults, which doubtlessly exist, let us wait for our masters, in their experience and wisdom, to remedy them, and let us stay here. (XVI:552, Salon II 79)

Alongside this conciliatory voice, which preaches prudence and quiet acceptance of the deliverances of “chance” (*hazard*), Diderot places an opposing view of someone who responds with pained anger to the spectacle of contemporary French society: “Stay here! Me! Me! Let him stay who can watch patiently a people who pretends to be civilized, the

most civilized on earth, auction civil posts to the highest bidder” (XVI:552). Money is the source of corruption: “cursed be he who made gold the idol of the nation . . . he who planted the seeds of this insolent ostentation of wealth” (XVI:553, *Salon II* 80). This heartfelt protest against venality becomes part of a more sophisticated view of social ills, which Diderot presents in fragmentary form throughout the *Salon of 1767*. Interspersing art criticism and social criticism, Diderot uses a topical debate on the effects of luxury on society to argue that economic servitude is as insidious as political servitude. He coins the term “tyranny of luxury” to draw a parallel between the effects of the tyrannical power of money and those of political tyranny, arguing that both systems are socially divisive and, ultimately, destabilizing. He argues that political tyranny brings about the dissolution of social bonds, often as a result of a deliberate policy of the despots, who adopt as their maxim the motto “divide and rule” in order to create a society of “solitary,” “isolated, and hence more vulnerable,” individuals (*Oeuvres Politiques*, 305). Because they offer no sustainable conception of the common good and erode social cohesion, tyrannical regimes contrive to bringing people back to their original “state of savagery” (*Oeuvres Politiques*, 306).²⁶ Diderot’s aim is to show that economic tyranny has similarly catastrophic consequences: gross inequalities in wealth endanger social cohesion and the common good and create a “tyranny of luxury.”

The main argument, presented as a dialogue between Diderot and Grimm, the editor of the *Correspondance littéraire*, in which Diderot’s reviews appeared, concerns the difference between wealth, or *le bon luxe*, and its nefarious manifestation in the tyranny of luxury. Diderot accepts that wealth promotes the general good, by creating the conditions for the material well-being of the people and for the flourishing of the arts. The tyranny of luxury, by contrast, is divisive because it is based on blatant economic inequality: “a small portion of the nation gluts itself with wealth, while the greatest number languishes in indigence” (XVI:167, *Salon II* 80). This general indictment aside, however, he offers no argument about the causes for the creation of the economic oligarchies he despises. Thus the transition from the idyllic condition of *le bon luxe*, which is associated here with a vaguely distant agricultural existence, to the tyranny of luxury remains mysterious. Diderot returns to this issue in a subsequent work, the *Apologia for Galiani*, which contains one of his most detailed discussions of economic policy. Here he argues that agricultural income is devalued by the application of laissez-faire economic theories propounded by the physiocrats and aimed to inhibit the formation of monopolistic forces in the economy.

Diderot contends that policies inspired by such theories tend to produce the opposite effect because they encourage the creation of an “artificial agricultural surplus, which benefits the owners of large estates,” while the majority of the small farmers and the “*petit peuple*” are left in a state of “continuing misery and hardship” (*Oeuvres Politiques*, 101). Against the physiocrats’ appeal to what they claimed to be objectively valid natural laws, Diderot adopts an emphatically personal stance, writing as a witness of the effects of rural poverty. He describes how farmers remained indebted to landowners right to the end of their lives: “Dead or alive, [the farmer] remains indigent. . . . To hell with your generalities!” (*Oeuvres Politiques*, 95). The outrage and sense of urgency of these remarks is fueled not only by Diderot’s sympathy with the predicament of the poor, but also the fear that the exacerbation of existing inequalities brought about by such economic policies would deepen the desperation of the dispossessed leading to insurrection and, finally, to anarchy.

Though Diderot saw rightly that political and social order would continue to be threatened by grain shortages,²⁷ the most compelling aspect of his analysis of the tyranny of luxury is his description of the *gradually* destabilizing effects of inequality. In the *Salon of 1767*, he uses his criticism of the self-indulgent and venal behavior, and the sheer bad taste, of those who can afford displays of opulence, to show how the power of money is neither impersonal nor occult but wielded by those who possess it. He argues that private choices do not remain private but have broader repercussions by showing how wealthy patrons of the arts who possess poor taste are nonetheless able to influence artistic production through commissioning works of art. The upshot, for Diderot, is that art becomes subordinated to the “whim and caprice of a handful of rich, bored, fastidious men whose taste is as corrupt as their morality” (XVI:168, *Salon II* 77). The artist who succeeds is the one who caters to this fashionable taste and is able to render the figures of truth, virtue, and justice “suitable for a financier’s bedroom” (XVI:62, *Salon II* 9). Diderot maintains that these aesthetic choices reveal a deeper incapacity to embrace ideas of aesthetic, moral, or civic excellence. The concentration of economic and social power in the hands of a few individuals creates a ruling elite devoid of civic, moral, and aesthetic sensibilities, and generally unable or unwilling to recognize any values or to value any talents unconnected to economic success. He suggests that these failings do not only reflect a broader social trend, but also contribute to it: “From the moment that anything can be had with gold, gold is what is wanted; and merit that leads to nothing, becomes nothing” (XVI:553, *Salon II* 79). The great danger, as

Diderot sees it, is that once money becomes established as the “measure of all things,” all pursuits other than those dedicated to its acquisition are devalued and considered worthless. As a result, economic considerations do not simply displace moral ones, they replace them: “There is but one vice and that is poverty. There is but one virtue and that is wealth. One is either rich or contemptible” (*Oeuvres Politiques*, 285). The moralization of economic categories is perhaps the most insidious effect of the tyranny of luxury, for it allows a recognizable value system to survive that is devoid of any moral commitments. In their stead emerge relations of abuse and parasitism:

The bad poets, bad painters, bad sculptors, antique dealers, jewellers and prostitutes . . . avenge us. They are the vermin that gnaw our vampires and destroy them, pouring back, drop by drop, the blood that they drained from us. (XVI:168, *Salon II* 77)

This revenge of the weak, Diderot implies, does not compensate for their loss of dignity, the fact they have secured their economic survival through “grovelling, self-degradation and prostitution” (XVI:553, *Salon II* 80).

Diderot’s social diagnosis, his analysis of how good and bad came to mean rich and poor, motivates his engagement with the philosophical question of whether there can be an objective “measure,” or “rule” for our evaluative judgments.²⁸ It is in this context that he introduces the idea of the general will (*volonté générale*). The immediate occasion for reflecting on the general will is provided by his discussion on natural right in the *Encyclopédie*. Diderot endorses the idea of natural rights but argues that what is to *count* as a natural right cannot be left to the individual to decide, setting himself up “as both judge and advocate” (*Enc* VII:27). “But,” Diderot continues, “if we deny the individual the right to determine the nature of justice and injustice, before which tribunal shall we plead this important question? Where? Before humanity. Humanity must adjudge the matter because it desires solely the common good” (27). Here then we have an attempt to fill in the normative void left by the hollowing out of notions of good and bad with a notion of the common good, as this is upheld by the tribunal of humanity. This in turn ushers the concept of the general will: “private wills,” Diderot argues, “are suspect; they may be either good or bad, but the general will is always good” (*Enc* VII:27). The idea of a general will, however, remains vague. It appears to be no more than a placeholder for Diderot’s universalist intentions with respect to the tribunal of humanity. To the question, where can I consult this will? he replies by citing both convention—that is “the principles of prescribed law of

all civilized nations”—and nature, which manifests itself through the “emotions of indignation and resentment” (*Enc* VII:28).²⁹ Cultural diversity and the unreliability of natural feeling, however, represent serious problems to this account. That he is tempted to look for the general will in both convention and nature is surprising, given Diderot’s views on the weakness of such arguments. His frequently repeated observation that good, beautiful, and just are differently interpreted in different societies renders his optimistic appeal to the social constant of “civilized nations” unconvincing. Equally unconvincing is his appeal to feeling as a putative natural constant that provides the basis of the general will. Diderot himself argues so when discussing the views of the Scottish sentimentalists in the *Salon of 1767*. The basic argument is that natural feeling cannot be a reliable guide to the general will because it is ultimately the result of unfathomable natural forces that act without regard for ideas of justice or morality: human beings inhabit, and are part of, a dynamic natural universe that is in a state of “permanent flux” and from which “order” (*organization*) emerges out of the fortuitous and spontaneous interaction of natural “particles” (*molecules*) thrown together by chance, like “dice” (XVI:179, *Salon II* 90). Diderot’s substitution of the principle of sufficient reason with chance leaves little scope for the desired harmonization of natural feeling and the good. Indeed, the fatal blow to the universalist conception of the “tribunal of humanity” is struck by Diderot’s own claim that “everything in us is empirical” (XVI:87-8, *Salon II* 23–24). Who we *are*, as well as our moral and aesthetic sensibilities, is a function of diverse environmental influences; “humanity” cannot therefore be used criterially, as what Diderot calls a “measure,” because it is not in itself a unified and stable concept.³⁰

The significance of Diderot’s reflections on value does not rest with his positive claims, which are meagre and ill-supported, but with his criticism, which is, by contrast, powerful, meticulous, and lucid. Important in this respect are the two fictional works, *Supplement to Bougainville’s Voyage* and *Rameau’s Nephew*.³¹ The *Supplement to Bougainville’s Voyage*, written in response to Louis-Antoine de Bougainville’s account of his travels to Tahiti, has often been seen as making use of the Rousseauian trope of setting wholesome nature against culture and thus as offering a qualified defense of a natural utopia.³² This is precisely, however, the kind of contrast Diderot sets out to undermine in this work, which is best seen as a critical exploration of the limitations of the use of nature normatively either by appeals to nature’s command or by the reduction of normative to natural facts. Diderot uses the theme of cultural diversity, which was a

common *topos* for his contemporaries, to explore the question of how cross-cultural evaluative judgments are possible. The dialogue is inconclusive on this broader question. By the end, however, it becomes fairly clear that one tempting option, namely invoking nature in support of cross-cultural evaluative judgments, is both misguided and fruitless. Indeed the subtitle hints as much: “On the inappropriateness of attaching moral ideas onto certain physical acts that do not admit of them” (*Bougainville*, XII:577). In his earlier work, *On the Interpretation of Nature*, Diderot had already argued that we should not mistake “nature with God” (*Interpretation*, IX:26), meaning both that nature should not be seen as the product of a divine power, and that it should not be used, instead of God, as a guarantor or foundation for a system of values. In the *Supplement*, he shows how easy it is to mistake for natural what is, in fact, the product of a complex social organization and thus how treacherous it is to seek to use nature evaluatively. The work is in the form of a dialogue between two unidentified interlocutors, designated merely as A and B, who discuss the relative merits of European Christian morality and the “natural” morality of the “uncivilized” Tahitians by relating the experiences of a chaplain in Tahiti. A and B start from a perspective of doubt about European superiority: “A: I thought the European powers sent only honest souls to command their overseas possessions, charitable men, full of humanity and capable of compassion....B: Right! That is precisely what concerns them!” (*Bougainville*, XII:583). Equally, however, troubled by accounts of female infibulation and other “customs of unusual and necessary cruelty,” A and B have difficulty assenting to the view of the “savage” as “innocent and gentle” (*Bougainville*, XII:585). It is in this context that we are given the account of the encounter between the chaplain and his host, Orou. Orou disputes the chaplain’s Christian morality, claiming that in order to find out what is good “at all times and in all places” one must follow nature: “its eternal will is that good be preferred to evil and the general good to the particular goods” (*Bougainville*, XII:643). However, it transpires that this natural Tahitian morality that prescribes what, from a European perspective, looks like an extreme form of sexual freedom is, in fact, part of a culture which, in its own way, is shown to be as sophisticated, artificial, and restrictive as that of the civilized Europeans. The Tahitian freedom of sexual relations is shown to be regulated by a strict social code based on eugenic and economic considerations: because children are viewed as a source of wealth, the aim is to maximize opportunities for childbearing. Therefore the Tahitians, just like the Europeans with their notions of shame and guilt, attach values to the natural facts of sex and procreation. The encounter between

Tahitians and Europeans is thus not one between nature and culture, but rather between two different cultures. The question it raises and leaves unresolved is which are the *right* values. This question is left unresolved because, Diderot suggests, it simply cannot be decided by reference to those “natural facts,” which, after all, Tahitians and Europeans have in common.

If we approach now *Rameau's Nephew* from the perspectives opened by the *Salon of 1767* and the *Supplement*, we can see it as playing a vital role in Diderot's normative reflections. The work, presented as a dialogue between a philosopher, who is referred to in the first person as “I,” and a character based on the nephew of the famous composer, Jean-Philippe Rameau, designated simply as “He,” deals with a wide range of issues, including individuality, genius, and character. What has attracted, however, many interpreters is the way in which the candid confessions of the character of the nephew seem to upset the worldview of the philosopher. Foucault interprets this as the reassertion of the repressed voice of madness, arguing that it shows the “necessary instability . . . of all judgement in which unreason is denounced as something external and inessential.”³³ Others describe the work as a study in the search for authenticity.³⁴ Here, I take neither approach. Foucault's identification of the voice of the nephew with the voice of madness is unconvincing because the nephew is able to produce perfectly rational arguments for his behavior. Furthermore, the nephew's morality, which consists chiefly in following the bidding of his stomach, is shown to be fully congruous with Diderot's materialism. As we shall see, instability is not an outcome, following from the effort to suppress unreason, but rather the *premise* of the dialogue. This is also the reason for rejecting the second interpretation. The different layers of physical, social, and moral instability exposed in this dialogue render problematic the very ideal of authenticity. The nephew's seemingly authentic behavior, his undisguised concern with the satisfaction of his natural desires, is an authentic product of a corrupt society, rather than of untrammelled nature; his voice is shown to be as authentic as is the culture of the Tahitians natural.

The key theme of the dialogue is change. This is announced already in the epigraph “born under the malign influence of every single Vertumnus” (XII:69, RN 33).³⁵ This line, which in its original context in Horace is used to introduce a fickle character, here introduces Rameau's nephew, suggesting that he too was “born under the malign influence” of the god. While the philosopher is portrayed as a creature of habit—“Come rain or shine, my custom is to go for a stroll in the Palais-Royal every afternoon at about five” (XII:69, RN 33)—

the nephew is introduced with the paradoxical claim “Nothing is less like him than himself” (XII:71, RN 34). Though the claim is amply justified by the subsequent description of the nephew’s changing looks and mercurial character, it discloses the metaphysical pitch of the dialogue, the ceaseless flux, which manifests itself in the nephew’s problematic self-identity, and which constitutes a direct challenge to the stable identity of “I.” Over this theme of natural or fundamental fluidity, however, Diderot constructs a theme of social instability, represented by the nephew’s lack of secure social position and regular income. His changing appearance reflects his changing fortunes and precarious position on the margins of polite society. He lives by his wits, flattering wealthy patrons and running their errands: “I am a person who isn’t of any consequence. People do what they like with me, in my company, in front of me, without my standing on ceremony” (XII:68, RN 46). A further layer of instability is revealed when the nephew offers his frank and cynical opinions on morality, arguing that society, in which “all classes prey on each other” (XII:113, RN 63), is ruled by greed and that the moral code is no more than a “trade idiom,” a “kind of credit system—no intrinsic value, but value conferred by public opinion” (XII:113, RN 62). Although we are warned that “the notions of good and evil must be strangely muddled in his head” (XII:70, RN 33), the nephew’s moral disorder is seen as symptomatic of the disappearance of a shared conception of the good, which results from social alienation, or “estrangement” (XVI:555, *Salon II* 81); that is, the dissolution of affective and familial bonds, of the ties to one’s country, friends, and fellow citizens that have traditionally sustained the idea of a common good. The nephew’s teaching is that “in a matter as variable as behaviour there is no such thing as the absolutely, essentially, universally true or false, unless it is that one must be what self-interest dictates—good or bad, wise or foolish, serious or ridiculous, virtuous or vicious” (XII:139, RN 83). *Rameau’s Nephew* serves thus to contextualize and also to sharpen Diderot’s normative question, is a general notion of the good conceivable in a social context of competing individual wills pursuing particular interests?

This question too is left unanswered. The disappearance of a shared view of the good, Diderot suggests, has a counterpart in the selfish pursuit of pleasure. But here social and philosophical diagnosis meet: the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain are the “principles” invoked in Helvetius’s materialist explanation of human behavior, which, as we saw earlier, Diderot rejects. However, he lacks the philosophical resources to offer an alternative, nonreductive account of good and bad. When the philosopher in *Rameau’s Nephew* is confronted

with the nephew's opportunistic and self-interested morality, he cannot say why the nephew *should* care for anything beyond the satisfaction of his immediate desires.³⁶ Similarly, when in the *Salon of 1767*, Diderot in propria persona criticizes the artist Jean-Jacques Bachelier for preferring money to honor, he admits defeat when confronted with Bachelier's defiant "I want to drink, sleep, have excellent wines, luxurious clothing, pretty women" (XVI:171, *Salon II* 84). Diderot's silence is essentially an acknowledgment of philosophical impotence that only the consoling thought of a benevolent "posterity" or of a noble but remote classical past assuages.³⁷ But there is more to this failure: Diderot's normative question becomes intractable because his search for an objectively valid content for "good" and "right" collides with his account of the subjective formation of our ideas of good and right, which stresses variety and mutability. That different people find different things good or right is as good a clue as any that everything is "empirical" in us, that we come to be who we are through a process of association of beliefs that is not obeying any predetermined path. This conviction is reinforced by Diderot's conception of nature itself as mutable and contingently organized. Yet despite his conviction that there is no stable natural substrate or ground, Diderot persists in framing his search for an objective "measure" precisely as a search after a fact or a hitherto undiscovered piece of knowledge. What motivates this search is the requirement that the "ought" be compatible with "facts as we know them," without it being historically or culturally determined. That this search leads to a dead end is clearly illustrated in the article "Cit ," where Diderot seeks to distinguish between the historical origin of cities and what he terms their "philosophical" origin, that is, the origin of the city understood in the singular as a "public moral entity" (*Enc*, VI:461). While eloquently filling in the genealogical-historical account, he says nothing about the latter. The "philosophical" account remains an unredeemed promise and the "public moral entity" a cipher. Yet Diderot's impasse can also be viewed as offering the opportunity to strike out in a new direction. This is the direction taken by Rousseau. Rousseau's basic insight is that the authority Diderot is searching for cannot be found because the public moral entity is an essentially *artificial* entity, the modeling and preservation of which are the essential tasks of the *polis*.

4. Rousseau's Conception of Freedom and Its Problems

Diderot's violent social criticism and his skeptical philosophical conclusions form the context and the starting point for Rousseau's own inves-

tigation of normativity. Diderot's influence is most visible in the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* and the *Discourse on Inequality*, both of which bear the traces of a fruitful engagement with Diderot's thought.³⁸ Although Diderot shared many of the ideas expressed in these works, however, he remained in disagreement with what he took to be Rousseau's central thesis: that we must abandon society and return to nature. For Diderot, this represented a form of capitulation to the corrosive and divisive forces at work in modern society, which he saw as already conspiring to return us to our natural state. Though he did not share Hobbes's apocalyptic vision of the state of nature, he thought that Hobbes was right in identifying the potential for disruption and violence in unsocialized nature and conceived of human society as a constant struggle to establish order and continuity over a fundamentally unstable natural basis.³⁹ Although, as I will show, this criticism was based on a misunderstanding of Rousseau's argument, it caused a rift that precipitated Rousseau's disaffection with the philosophical milieu, which Rousseau described as a "break with philosophy" itself.⁴⁰ Many commentators concur, seeking to emphasize the visionary, antiphilosophical character of his work.⁴¹ I think that such emphasis is misleading, cutting off Rousseau from the vein of philosophical skepticism that feeds even his public disavowal of philosophy. Simply summed up, the thought that spurs Rousseau on is that we cannot rely on reason alone either to determine the nature of the good or our status as moral agents. Indirect but powerful evidence of this can be found in his epistolary novel *Julie or the New Héloïse*, where Rousseau has one of the main characters, St. Preux, expressing his impatience with fashionable materialist refutations of human freedom:

I hear many arguments against human freedom; but I despise all such sophistries because whilst they can prove to me with reasoned argument that I am not free, inner feeling, which is stronger than all arguments, shows to me that they are wrong. (*Julie* II:683)

Unlike his hero though, Rousseau is not a philosophical naïve who speaks from the heart. He offers instead a powerful and original vindication of human freedom within the social context. However, he fails to pursue the radical implications of his conception of freedom for political and social organization and presents instead an oppressive social and political model. The reason for this failure, I will be arguing, is a deep skepticism, which he inherits from Diderot, not only about the powers of human reason reliably to guide our choices, but also about human nature itself.

Rousseau's skepticism about human nature has often eluded his commentators. That man is naturally good is supposed to be the bedrock of Rousseau's moral philosophy. This conviction can be found already in Diderot's article "Hobbisme" in the *Encyclopédie*. Diderot sums up the differences between Rousseau and Hobbes arguing that "the one thinks man naturally good, and the other thinks him wicked" (*Enc* VII:146). This summary of Rousseau's argument, however, is misleading and perpetuates a misunderstanding of his assumptions regarding human nature. When we read claims such as the famous opening lines in *Émile* that "everything is good as fashioned by the author of things" (IV:245, *Émile*), we need to distinguish two senses of "good." One is good as a positive force, that is, as a natural propensity for goodness, and the other is the absence of badness, which enables one to respond to a moral education and to *become* good. It is the latter that interests Rousseau here. As we shall see, his key premise is not that human beings are naturally good, but rather that human nature is malleable. Though he shares this view with Diderot, he puts it to a different use, for his main concern is to show that human beings are neither marred by destructive selfishness nor born carrying the burden of the original sin. The force of his critical argument lies in the contrast he draws between an "original state" that obtains prior to exposure to social forces of corruption and one that obtains after such exposure. This contrast forms the first step in an argument by which Rousseau seeks to establish that the moral and social problems he identifies are of human, rather than natural or divine, origin, and that they are therefore remediable. The failure to display moral and civic excellence is thus a *historical* failure, which can be corrected if adequate measures are taken to resist corrupting influences. To substantiate this thesis, Rousseau embarks on an ambitious diagnostic project in which the task of criticism of social ills becomes inextricably linked with the task of self-knowledge.

The *First Discourse*, which can be seen as the prelude to Rousseau's diagnostic project, draws on a long philosophical tradition, which ultimately issues from Plato, in which the arts are viewed with suspicion on account of their supposedly corrupting influence on morals. In the eighteenth century, this view was more closely associated with the writings of the Abbé Saint-Pierre, who wrote that the arts "demonstrate the existing riches of a nation" but do not show that the nation's happiness "will increase and prove lasting."⁴² Rousseau, however, builds this familiar theme into a broader thesis, which extends beyond the narrow domain of the arts to include the natural sciences, philosophy, and even good manners. He argues that these accomplish-