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THE DILEMMA OF DIDEROT.

M. RENE DOUMIC,¹ in a critical essay entitled "Who is the Author of the Works of Diderot?", has thrown out, as a kind of provocative aside, a question of curious interest in itself, and of which the answer takes one rather farther than might at first be supposed. "Another question," he says, "has to do with a kind of mystery which surrounds the last years of Diderot. Whereas, for a dozen years he had published book after book: the Pensées philosophiques, the Bijoux, the Lettre sur les aveugles, essays on dramatic art; suddenly he ceased to publish, and, for more than twenty years, the only work which he gave to the public was the dull and tedious Essai sur les règnes de Claude et Néron. What could have been the cause of this sort of retirement?" Of no other great writer of the century is this true. And the question becomes almost an enigma if we remember that "the moment when he ceased to publish was precisely that which saw the completion of the Encyclopédie": it was the moment too when Diderot, thanks to Catherine II, became financially independent; the moment, therefore, to which he had looked forward all his life for seriously attempting the creative work which vexatious responsibilities and grinding toil had hitherto made impossible.

The plausible, surface answers to this question are all alluded to by M. Doumic, and easily disposed of as inadequate; and it seems to him that a satisfactory answer, at the present moment, is not to be had. Yet he proposes an "hypothesis, for what it is worth." The hypothesis is that Diderot, who possessed the qualities and the defects of the bourgeois, "had also the supreme ambition of the clerk who for forty years has worked faithfully at his desk, or of the man of affairs who has, during his whole life, been up at six o'clock in the morning: the desire, namely, to be one's own master, to be dependent on no one, to follow one's fancy, to enjoy life from day to day, and take the hours as

¹ La littérature française, V, p. 87.
they come." And in support of this hypothesis we are presented with the letter, often quoted, which Diderot wrote to Mlle. Volland, September 10, 1768. "I do nothing, absolutely nothing, not even this salon. It is true that at night when I go to bed my head is full of the finest projects for the morrow. But in the morning, upon rising, there is a disgust, a torpor, an aversion from pen, ink, and paper, which is an indication either of laziness or declining powers. It is much pleasanter, with legs crossed and hands folded, to remain two or three hours with Madame and Mademoiselle, bantering them about everything they say and everything they do. When at last they grow weary of me, I find it is too late to begin any work, so I dress and go out. Where? In faith, I know not: sometimes to the house of Naigeon, or Damilaville."

For this hypothesis there is doubtless something to be said. The correspondence of Diderot in 1765, about the time of finishing the Encyclopédie, reveals the pleasure with which he looked forward to his vacation, to a life of solitude, to days free of care spent with his books and his friends. But the letter which M. Doumic quotes proves rather too much, if it proves anything; the inference from it being that Diderot ceased to publish because he ceased to write. Now, it cannot be maintained that Diderot had ceased to write. The letter just quoted must not be taken for more than it is worth,—the expression of a passing fit of depression and disillusionment. In the letters of this period Diderot does not often profess to be idle; more often his tale is of some work going on; and over against the letter in which he says that he does absolutely nothing, one might set many others in which he complains of working day and night. "I think I have never worked harder in my life," he writes to Mlle. Volland, July 4, 1769. "I retire at an early hour; arise at break of day; and as long as the day lasts I stick to my study. . . . My publishers wish to print two volumes at a time."2

It is quite true that much of what he wrote during these years was written for others,—for Grimm, or Galiani; that much of it took the form of rough notes scribbled on the fly leaves of the

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1 Oeuvres complètes, XIX, p. 272.
2 Ibid., p. 309.
books he read,—notes not written for publication so much as to satisfy an insistent demand for self expression. But it has generally been supposed that much of Diderot’s most original and characteristic work was produced after 1765; and the elaborate edition of his works, prepared by Assézat and published in 1876, confirms this supposition. Yet it is precisely in connection with this supposition that the essay of M. Doumic raises an interesting question. It is well known that M. Dupuy, in a critical study of one of the minor works of Diderot, the *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, has shown that the ‘revision’ of this work, which Assézat, along with every one else, attributed to Diderot himself, was in fact an astonishingly free recasting of Diderot’s original sketch by Naigeon. And on the basis of this revelation, M. Doumic raises the larger question of whether the other posthumous works of Diderot were left by him in their present form, or whether they were not also ‘revised’ by Naigeon: who, after all, it is the primary purpose of his essay to ask us, was the author of the works of Diderot? It is from the point of view of this larger query that M. Doumic looks at the fact that Diderot published almost nothing after 1765: was it perhaps because there was nothing to publish,—nothing but work for others, or rough sketches which were later elaborated by Naigeon, or another, after the manner of the *Paradoxe sur le comédien*.

That Naigeon revised rather freely many of the manuscripts which Diderot left with him is quite possible. He was the man to do that sort of thing, and Diderot gave him full authority to do it. Yet it is most likely that his activity in this respect was confined to the less important manuscripts, of which the *Paradoxe* is itself an example. That Diderot did not write the *Paradoxe* in the form in which it was published after his death, one can easily suppose; that he did not write *Rameau*, for example, or the *Physiologie*, or the *Entretien*, or the *Refutation*, one can less easily believe. If Diderot did not write these works, who else, one may well ask, could have written them? Certainly not Naigeon. These works, to mention no others, are in conception so original, or in substance so profound, so oddly fashioned in point of form, so unpremeditated in point of arrangement, that
the completest criticism, it is safe to suppose, will never seriously deny that they are in fact the works of Denis Diderot.

And so the question remains, why did Diderot, who published many books when he was too busy, as he tells us, to do good work, publish none when he acquired the leisure to write, and did in fact write, some of the most profound and original works of the eighteenth century? It is quite right, in answering this question, to take M. Doumic's hypothesis for what it is worth. And it is worth a good deal. Diderot is surely the great writer of the century of whom it would be least safe to assume that publication would follow production. Expression, for Diderot, was a primary need, like breathing; a flow of talk satisfied this need best; lacking that, he wrote. Besides, some of his later works, such as the Entretien, were of such a nature that publication was not to be thought of. But these considerations scarcely explain why, having published almost everything that he wrote up to a certain date, he published, after that date, almost nothing, although he wrote more then than ever before; and this in spite of the fact that his publishers, as he tells us, "wish to print two books at a time." The explanation I think is partly to be found in what may be called the dilemma of Diderot; and the explanation is perhaps worth noting because the dilemma of Diderot brings into relief those social and intellectual conditions which gave to French thought in the latter part of the century a peculiar direction and a distinctive character.

II.

Modern critics and biographers of Diderot have remarked the extraordinary versatility of the man. There was scarcely any field of knowledge wholly unfamiliar to him, scarcely any question interesting to the men of his day to which he had not given much thought, or about which he was unable to say something really worth while. This was also the opinion of his contemporaries. Voltaire thought him "perhaps the one man capable of writing the history of philosophy."¹ "In every branch of human knowledge," said Marmontel, "he is so much at home . . . that

¹ Oeuvres complètes, XLIV, p. 190.
he seems always ready for what is said to him, and observations made on the spur of the moment strike one as the result of recent study and long meditation." His published works tell the same story,—mathematics, natural science, philosophy, romance, poetry, the drama, literary and art criticism, political economy and political science, the psychological novel; and although he produced, with one possible exception, no masterpiece, nor scarcely anything systematically thought out in any of these fields, he threw the search light of his imaginative intelligence upon all of them. And Diderot's versatility was something more than familiarity with all fields of knowledge. It was the versatility which comes of the capacity to take in respect to every subject, for experimental purposes as it were, the most opposed points of view, to understand instinctively intellectual conceptions the most divergent, to experience with genuine sympathy the most antipathetic emotional states. Diderot was, as some one has said, the century itself: in him all the currents of that age, deep or shallow, crossed and went their separate ways.

And yet the multiplicity of Diderot's interests is largely on the surface; the variety of subjects with which he was occupied has somewhat obscured the essential unity of purpose which guided his all-embracing intellectual curiosity. Although he professed a profound contempt for metaphysics and religion, it is not too much to say that the only things which interested him vitally,—and it is perhaps in this that he is most truly representative of the century,—were precisely metaphysics and religion. It was not after all metaphysics that he despised, but a particular type of metaphysics,—the metaphysics that had been so largely shaped by mediaeval Christian thought; nor religion that he hated, but the Christian religion as embodied in the Catholic Church; and his aversion from the prevailing type of metaphysics and religion was tinged with contempt and hatred just because he desired above all things to put in their place a new metaphysics and a new religion, a metaphysics rationally defensible and a religion morally sound.

1 Mémoires, I, p. 487.
Of these two interests, the more fundamental was that which centered in the theoretical and practical aspects of conduct. The extraordinary enthusiasm of that age for 'virtue'—"ce fonds de rectitude et de bonté morale, qui est la base de vertu," as Marmontel defined it—is revealed by the most cursory glance at its literature. A generous action fired even those men like Voltaire about whom there was something hard and metallic. The statement of Fontenelle, that he had "relegated sentiment to the eclogue," aroused in the cold and upright Grimm a feeling very near aversion. The little Abbé Galiani greatly displeased Diderot one day by "confessing that he had never shed a tear in his life." Tears were thought to be the outward sign of an inward grace, and Diderot, whose tears were never far from the surface, struck his contemporaries precisely by those qualities which, by inclining them to weep, were the sure evidence of his being a man of virtue: much more than his penetrating intelligence, it was his good heart that won their devotion. His friends, says Madame d'Épinay, regard Diderot as more profound than Voltaire, "but above all it is his character about which they grow enthusiastic. Grimm says that he is the most perfect moral man he knows." And nothing could have pleased Diderot more than to feel that he deserved such a tribute. His devotion to virtue and morality was something more vital than the intellectual interest of a student of ethics; he wished not only to analyze virtue, but to practice it, and to induce others to practice it. He was always "preaching morality," as Sainte-Beuve says: always possessed of a profound faith in it as a reality, and as the most vital reality; always searching for an immovable basis for it in reason and nature; and although never able to find for it a quite satisfactory basis of that sort, still he preached it to the end of his life. "There is nothing in the world," he wrote about 1757, "to which virtue is not preferable." Twenty years later he was of the same opinion. "I am convinced that even in a society as ill ordered as ours, where the vice which succeeds is

1 Mémories, II, p. 195.
2 Correspondance littéraire, III, p. 345.
3 Mémories, I, p. 405.
4 Œuvres complètes, XIX, p. 449.
often applauded, and the virtue which fails is almost always ridiculed, I am convinced, I say, that on the whole one can do nothing better for one's own happiness than to be a good man."

It was this profound faith in the reality and value of true morality that inspired the hatred which Diderot professed for false religions, of which Christianity, as embodied in the Catholic Church, was the chief; false, not primarily because they were based upon false premises, although that was true enough, but because they made bad men. "Wherever people believe in God, there is a cult; wherever there is a cult, the natural order of moral duties is reversed, and morality becomes corrupted." It should be possible to have a religion based "upon the primitive and evident notions which are found written upon the hearts of all men." Such a religion, he thought, would have no unbelievers. Such a religion it was the business of philosophy to establish; or rather, 'philosophy,' as Diderot understood it, was such a religion; a religion which would approve itself, not primarily because it would have no unbelievers, but because it would make good men. The extraordinary lack of reserve exhibited by the writers of the century, and especially by the greatest of them, the amazing frankness with which they laid their souls bare to the public gaze has sometimes been noted as a curious phenomenon. In fact nothing could have been more in keeping: 'philosophy' was something infinitely more to them than a body of correct inferences; it was a faith, to be justified, if at all, only by the conduct and the motives, and particularly perhaps by the motives, of its devotees. Unbelief and immorality were synonyms in the language of the Church, and it was therefore essential that the man who published his unbelief as the foundation of a new morality should wear his heart on his sleeve for the world's inspection. "Yes, I am an atheist; but look into my heart and examine my conduct and you must admit that an atheist may be a good man." Diderot has always the air of crying this aloud. Rousseau's Confessions is only the most striking example of the disposition, shared by most of the reformers of the age, to disrobe in the market place in order to

2 Oeuvres choisies, V, p. 16.
reveal the shining beauties of the natural man. "It is not enough," said Diderot, referring to the theologians, "to know more than they do: it is necessary to show them that we are better, and that philosophy makes more good men than sufficient or efficacious grace."\(^1\)

"It is not enough to know more than they do;" yet that was necessary too: to know more than they do in order to undermine the intellectual foundation of their false system of morality; to know more theology than the theologians in order to refute their theology; to know more science in order to discredit their appeal to miracle; to know more history in order to disprove their claim to authority; to know more psychology in order to expose the viciousness of their moral regimen. This is the secret of Diderot's interest in science and philosophy. To discredit the old theology it was necessary to attack metaphysics; and although Diderot professed to be occupied only with scientific experiment, it is clear that in his philosophical and scientific works, from the *Pensées philosophiques* to the *Physiologie*, his primary interest is in questions of a metaphysical nature; scientific experiment was necessary only as a new means of approach. What interested him in the *Physiologie* was the ontological question: Is all mind, or is all matter? What interested him in the *Lettre sur les aveugles* was the bearing of a physiological experiment upon the question of the existence of a God. And Diderot inquired so intently into all the specific scientific activity of the day just because the new metaphysics, the new conception of the origin and nature of the universe, was necessarily to be based, as the old metaphysics had not been, upon positive knowledge derived from observation and experiment.

The solution of the metaphysical problem which commended itself most strongly to Diderot, which he set forth towards the close of his life in the *Entretien* and the *Physiologie*, was what may be termed vitalistic materialism. All is matter, said Diderot, because without matter nothing can be known or explained: "The soul is nothing without the body; I defy you to

\(^1\) *Oeuvres complètes*, XIX, p. 464.
explain anything without the body." To explain the soul in
terms of matter he was quite willing to think of matter, even
inorganic matter, as sentient; and many suggestive things are
said for the purpose of showing, after the manner of Hamlet,
how marble dust might be transformed into thought. What
matter might be in itself seemed to him a fruitless question.
The world is as it behaves; so regarded, matter is the mani-
festation, infinitely varied, and continuously changing, of the
energy that moves the universe: a vortex of moving forces,—
to this the substance of the world reduced itself in the final
analysis.

As to the origin of a world thus constituted, one may find
different answers in the works of Diderot. The deistic explana-
tion, which he first accepted, after the manner of the English
deists, was soon renounced; it raised more difficulties than it
disposed of; and he was left in the end with no more satisfactory
solution than chance. But if the world originated in a mere
fortuitous combination of forces, what of its purpose and end?
It would be difficult to inject purpose into an accident. And
yet the accident seemed rational in its form and operation:
nature was intelligible, and Diderot seems often, in his reverent
apostrophes, to conceive of it as therefore intelligent; in moments
of enthusiasm he all but deifies nature, attributing to it some-
thing very near beneficent purpose. But most often, when the
question is presented directly, he can find no sufficient evidence
for believing that the continuous change of form, constant and
uniform though it might be, was a change from 'lower' to 'higher,'
from worse to better; so far as reason went, it seemed quite as
likely that the universe was returning to the dust heap from
whence it came.

It would doubtless be a mistake to think of Diderot as having
worked out a coherent philosophy, upon which he was ready to
take his stand against all comers. If he sometimes ran his
thought in the mould of logical categories, he never left it
there to cool and harden. Diderot's mind was far too plastic,
too continuously generative and creative, to formulate a rigidly

consistent, a perfectly integrated explanation of things; far too curious and inquiring, having formulated such an explanation, to surrender to it past escape. In the very act of shaping a system essentially materialistic, we find him coquetting with notions which, if resolutely pursued, might have led him to the camp of Hume. "What do I perceive? Forms. And what besides? Forms. We walk among shadows, shadows to ourselves and others. If I look at a rainbow, I see it; but for one who looks from a different angle of vision, there is nothing." Diderot has often the air of wishing to avoid the conclusions to which reason led him. But he had none of Rousseau's talent for ignoring difficulties; and the conclusions of the *Entretien* and the *Physiologie* are those which, had he thought it necessary to proclaim any, he would most probably have professed.

But then what was the bearing of such a philosophy upon the problem of morality and conduct? No question that it destroyed the intellectual basis of morality as taught by the Church; but it was one of the ironies of fate that the speculative thinking of Diderot, of which the principal purpose was to furnish a firm foundation for natural morality, ended by destroying the foundation of all morality as he understood it. This was the dilemma, that if the conclusions of Diderot the speculative philosopher were valid, the aspirations of Diderot the moral man, all the vital purposes and sustaining hopes of his life, were but as the substance of a dream. For reason told him that man was after all but a speck of sentient dust, a chance deposit on the surface of the world, the necessary product of the same purposeless forces that build up crystal or dissolve granite. Aspiration, love and hope, sympathy, the belief in virtue itself,—what were these but the refined products of mechanical processes, spiritual perfumes, as it were, arising from the alternate waste and repair of brain tissue? Freedom was surely a chimera if the will could be defined as "the last impulse of desire and aversion." And "if there is no such thing as liberty, there is no action which merits either praise or blame: there is neither vice nor virtue, nothing which can properly be rewarded or punished. What is

1 *Oeuvres complètes*, IX, p. 428.
it then that distinguishes men? Good action and bad action. The bad man is one whom it is necessary to destroy rather than to punish: good action is good fortune but no virtue.\(^1\) Surely if philosophy, which was to "make more good men than sufficient or efficacious grace," could teach nothing more reassuring than that vice is something for which the individual is not responsible, something to be avoided only in so far as it might be found out, it could furnish little inspiration for the preaching of morality. In that case, the religion of philosophy, Diderot was vaguely aware, must remain as vain a delusion as the philosophy of religion.

The works of his later years reveal this conflict between the two Diderots,—Diderot the speculative philosopher unable to ignore reason, and Diderot the emotional preacher of morality unable to renounce his conviction that good action is a virtue. Turning, for example, from the Refutation, written in 1773, to the Physiologie, written in 1774, we find there, as M. Caro says, "another Diderot revealed to us."\(^2\) But the most striking, the most artistic presentation of the dilemma of Diderot, and perhaps a conscious and deliberate presentation of it, is to be found in that little masterpiece, the Neveu de Rameau, written about 1762, probably in reply to Palissot's Les philosophes, but revised later and given the form in which we have it about 1772–1774.\(^3\)

The real Jean François Rameau appears to have been an eccentric who amused his contemporaries by maintaining that the end of all effort was to "place something between the teeth," and so accomplish the laws of mastication. With this concise philosophy of life as a nucleus, Diderot has constructed a character compounded of pure intelligence, swelled and festering appetites, and an entire lack of feeling for any moral obligation. "He shows the good qualities that nature has bestowed upon him without ostentation, and the bad ones without the smallest

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\(^2\) La fin du dix-huitième siècle, I, p. 219.

\(^3\) Œuvres complètes, V., p. 361. There is a later edition by Monval, prepared for the Bibliothèque Elsevirienne. The essential parts of the dialogue have been translated by Lord Morley and printed as an appendix to his Diderot, II, p. 285.
shame,”—so Diderot speaks of him. “I have,” he is made to say of himself, “a mind as round as a ball, and a character as fresh as a water-willow”:—a mind, that is, to which other men’s experience has added nothing, a character shedding, as a water-willow sheds water, the effects of good and evil action. In no sense the product of society, unaffected by tradition or the pressure of conventional habit, Rameau is simply Diderot’s materialism personified, a creature whose will is precisely nothing but “the last impulse of desire and aversion,” a kind of Frankenstein’s monster such as one might construct from the principles of Diderot’s Physiologie, an example of the natural man, stripped of all ‘artificial’ accretions, functioning in society as it existed, in Paris, about the year 1772.

With this creature, whose outward circumstances are those of a finished social parasite, Diderot the moral philosopher enters into conversation; and the inimitable dialogue, touching upon many things, running hither and thither without apparent object other than to while away the hour, is in reality a searching inquiry into the basis of morality. Rameau is no straw man ingeniously constructed to fall over at the right moment. He is Diderot’s other self, possessed of Diderot’s powerful rationalizing imagination, and of his profoundly sensuous nature, looking out upon a corrupt society in the perfectly dry light of reason untouched by sentiment or any altruistic impulse.

Now reason tells Rameau that nature, that chance combination of purposeless forces, made him what he is, “sloth, madman, and good-for-naught”; and, not being responsible for what he is, he feels no obligation, and therefore no desire, to be better than he is, but only more happy. “Everything that lives, without exception, seeks its own well being at the expense of any prey that is proper to its purposes.” Therefore he, Rameau, will seek his well being, his happiness, by the “vices that are natural” to him, and not (how could that be?) by the virtues that are natural to some one else. And this is his happiness, “to drink good wines, to cram one's self with dainty dishes, to rest on beds of down; except that, all is vanity and vexation of spirit.” It is useless to appeal, as Diderot does, to the higher
pleasures of self-sacrifice; these are not higher pleasures because, for Rameau, they are not pleasures at all; quite useless to appeal to the welfare of society, for happiness is individual, society is but an abstraction, and the conventional morality is only "what every one has in his mouth but what no one practices," a convenient mask which enables "men to keep the vices that are useful to them while avoiding their tone and appearance." A strange notion you philosophers have, says Rameau in effect, and all systems of morality are based upon the fallacy, that "the same kind of happiness was made for all the world." What is good for you, Diderot, may be bad for me, Rameau, and while you may suppress me I deny that you can know what makes me happy.

The dialogue ends, characteristically enough, without reaching any solution. "I see," says Diderot, speaking of the happiness to be derived from self-sacrifice and the performance of duty, "that you do not know what it is, and that you were not even made to understand it"; and Rameau replies, "so much the better." The basic thesis, which Hume thought axiomatic, that a thing is good because useful, not useful because good, was accepted without question by both Diderot and Rameau. But what is useful, and who is to judge? The dialogue turns on this. To be sure, the useful is what brings happiness; but the irresponsible creatures of a mechanical universe found that what made one happy made the other miserable; their standards of happiness were simply incommensurable, and the compact moral world dissolved under their feet in a conflict of wills.

It is worth noting again that Diderot was engaged upon the Rameau between the years 1763 and 1774, for these were probably the years when he first became fully aware of the dilemma of which it is so perfect an expression. These were the years, on the one hand, when his philosophy received its extreme and final formulation in the Entretien and the Physiologie; on the other hand, these were the years also when the question of practical morality was presented to him in the most intimate and disturbing form possible,—in connection with the education of his daughter. One consolation at least for the folly of a precipi-
tate marriage Diderot found in the child who loved him, and the correspondence reveals to us how much he was concerned, as she came to maturity, to give her a good education, an education of which the chief part was to be, as he says in the *Rameau*, "a great deal of morality." It is true, he taught her some curious morality; but his principal aim seems to have been to demonstrate that "there is no virtue without two rewards: the pleasure of doing well, and that of obtaining the good will of others."¹ This was in 1769, and it was also in 1769 that the *Entretien* was written: so that one may picture Diderot the speculative philosopher, encased in his famous dressing gown, retiring, some morning of that year, to his study, and there engaged in explaining the soul in terms of matter and motion; but in the afternoon, transformed into the doting father, coming forth to teach his child a "great deal of morality," as he walks with her in the park. This very morning, perhaps, he committed to cold paper that desolating doctrine about the will,—"last impulse of desire and aversion." And what is the moral instruction which this philosophy inspires him to convey to his daughter in the afternoon? Something original surely, something profound, at the very least something unconventional? Not at all. Excellent bourgeois that he is, he tells her to be a good girl! So strangely remote sometimes, as Diderot found, is philosophy from life.

What use to preach "a great deal of morality" to a creature whose will is nothing but "the last impulse of desire and aversion"? This was the question which came to stare Diderot in the face about the year 1765; and about the year 1765 he ceased to publish. Diderot had no intention, indeed, of publishing works like the *Entretien*, as he told Mlle. Volland when it was written. Some great constructive work on morality, which should prove that "one can do nothing better for one's own happiness than to be a good man," was, as he tells us, "the most important and the most interesting to be written"; and that was the work which he most wished to write,—"which I would recall with the most satisfaction in my last moments." But

¹ *Oeuvres complètes*, XIX, p. 321.
he never wrote such a work. "I have not even dared to take up the pen to write the first line. I say to myself: if I do not come out of the attempt victorious, I become the apologist of wickedness; I will have betrayed the cause of virtue, I will have encouraged men in the ways of vice. No. I do not feel myself equal to this sublime work; I have uselessly consecrated my whole life to it." Diderot never wrote such a work; but perhaps the "dull and tedious Essai sur les règnes de Claude et Néron" may be taken as a frantic, half-despairing effort, at the last moment, to thrust upon the world the fragmentary and ill-digested results of his thinking on the subject.

And why indeed should a man whose ambition was to contribute something towards the regeneration of a corrupt society publish philosophical works which taught nothing more reassuring than that "good action is good fortune but no virtue?" Or works on morality which had nothing more original to say than that virtue is good action? Under the circumstances, it would be as well perhaps to throw the manuscripts into the fire. Diderot did not, indeed, throw his manuscripts into the fire; but he gave them to Naigeon.

III.

The dilemma of Diderot is chiefly interesting as a concrete example of the fundamental intellectual difficulty of the century,—fundamental at least for those who were primarily concerned for the social regeneration of France. The empirical method, announced by Locke, and carried to its logical conclusion in one direction by Hume and in another by the French materialists, was thought to be an excellent instrument, so neatly did it shelve the Absolute, so effectively bring all values to the relative test, for undermining the theoretical foundations of the ancien régime; and, for this purpose, excellent it undoubtedly was: effective for purposes of criticism, but, for purposes of reconstruction, not so effective; and in truth Empiricism, so far from destroying the ancien régime, ended by intrenching it more firmly than ever. For the last word drawn from the premises of

Locke in that century was that man and nature were one. But if man was only a part of nature, if all his action and all his thinking were determined by forces beyond his control, then 'society' must be 'natural' too; superstition was in that case as natural as enlightenment, the ancien régime in France no less a state of nature than primitive Gaul or second-century Rome. The identification of man and nature, and the conception of both as the necessary product of uniform natural law, had done nothing more after all than to put blind force in the place of God, and by eliminating purpose from the world leave men face to face with the reductio ad absurdum that "whatever is is right."

A hopeless conclusion like this might satisfy a poet in search of resignation and an epigram; and in England, where most men, if not resigned, were fairly content with things as they found them, it was generally thought to be profound. In England, indeed, much keener men than Pope, if they were suspicious of the poet's epigram, were well satisfied with the philosopher's restatement of it in terms of relative utility, as Hume restated it: whatever is is relatively good, because relatively useful, useful in relation to the conditions that produced it: a statement which in our day has been illumined, but not essentially changed, by the scientific law of survival and the results of historical research. This solution of the ethical problem was perhaps the only one possible from empirical premises; at least it is the one which would most naturally occur to one steeped in the empirical philosophy of the time. But why, in that case, did it not occur to Diderot? One might almost say that it did. Diderot, curiously enough, was in some respects nearer the modern point of view than Hume. That utility was the test of virtue, he took for granted quite in the manner of Hume; he just failed of formulating the theory of evolution in terms of natural selection;¹ the idea of progress was ready to his hand; it remained only to combine these ideas, to interpret the philosophy of 'perpetual flux' in the light of the resplendent theory of perfectibility, to have anticipated most of the characteristic political and ethical

speculation of the nineteenth century. It may well be asked why after all there was any dilemma for Diderot? Since he was on the very frontier of the promised land, why did he not enter and possess it?

The answer must be sought in those social conditions which determine the drift of fruitful speculative thinking. In France men were not content with things as they found them. If the French 'philosophers' were certain of anything, they were certain that the existing régime, so far from being best, was not even relatively good, but evil, and the parent of all evil. What they needed was a standard for judging society rather than a principle for explaining it. The overturning which men like Diderot dreamed of required some fixed and sure fulcrum not to be found in the shifting sands of relative utility. And so, in France, the Absolute, so contemptuously thrown out of the window early in the century, had to be brought in again, by some back stairs or other, at its close. To weigh the ancien régime in the balance and find it wanting, it was necessary to separate society from nature once more, to make a distinction between the natural and the artificial man, to disengage the abstract man, naturally good, from the tangled skein of temporary circumstance which made him bad.

It is well known that such a separation was effected by Rousseau: "man is born free, but is everywhere in chains," "naturally good, it is society which corrupts him,"—so ran the famous formula of the new dualism. But Rousseau cut the knot instead of untying it; and it is worth noting that many of those who denounced his methods were themselves seeking for some valid principle which would effect just this separation of the natural from the artificial man. It would be interesting to follow Diderot himself in the vain search for such a principle: his recurring interest in contrasting the sentiments of the savage with those of the civilized man; his attempt to find some instinct common to all men, such as pity, from which the social virtues might be derived; above all, perhaps, his desperate resolve, revealed in his correspondence with Falconet, to see in the lessons of history and in the judgments of posterity some stand-
ard, more or less absolute, by which the particular act, the concrete institution, might be judged:—what was all this but the effort to discover, as Kant said, "the constant elements in man's nature in order to understand what sort of perfection it is that befits him"?

Few men, it is true, were philosophers enough to be troubled by the difficulty which Diderot never solved, and which Kant himself solved only with the aid of Rousseau. To the unphilosophical person the difficulty presented itself in a less technical form. Many a 'fervent soul,' like Madame Roland, whose emotional nature had found abundant nourishment in the literature of Catholicism, renounced the harsh creed of the Church only to be chilled by the cold and barren rationalism of the very philosophers whose works had pointed the way to intellectual emancipation. "The atheist," said Madame Roland, "is seeking for a syllogism, while I am offering up my thanksgivings." "Helvetius hurt me," she says in another place. "He destroyed the most ravishing illusions, and showed me everywhere a mean and revolting self-interest. I persuaded myself that he delineated mankind in the state to which it had been reduced by the corruption of society." Here was a mind already attuned to the siren voice of the man whose over-topping egoism enabled him to credit himself with virtues which he regarded as natural, while charging his neighbors with vices which he felt had been thrust upon him by an artificial society. To direct Kant on the way to fruitful speculation in the rare upper regions of pure philosophy, and at the same time to inspire Madame Roland and her kind with an unquenchable faith in the fair destiny of humanity, required other talents than those which Diderot possessed.

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