THE CONTROVERSY over the relation between ethics and Christianity is of peculiar interest to us at this point of our study. It embodies both a particularized phase of our earlier discussion of man's relation to God, and the results of the reassessment of human nature which we have investigated in the preceding chapters. Its emphasis was less on the theoretical aspects, as in the former controversy, than on the practical. The practical aspect concerned the means of controlling human behavior and of ensuring a moral society. Atheists, and many deists, now claimed that institutional religions were unnecessary, and even harmful to the moral life. These deists, although they dreaded the chaos of any further step (fearing there could be no ethical certitude without a universe that was not itself a moral structure resting on a divine absolute), wished to liberate man from a false "Revelation." But other, more conservative deists, and all who were opposed to the new philosophies, saw in the attack on Christianity a crisis that threatened the moral basis of society. Even if the reality of vice and virtue could be theoretically upheld, would men, without religion, have motive enough to follow the thorny path of virtue?

As the eighteenth century dawned, men began increasingly to resist submission to authority, to insist on the evidence of
facts and the approval of critical reason. The pertinent fact which many observed (and which Bayle brought out to those who had not) was that men were no better after seventeen centuries of Christianity than they were elsewhere, or in earlier times. Savages and Siamese, they learned from their travel books, had discovered sane moral truth by their unaided natural reason. It was the rise of critical rationalism that made the great factual discrepancy—that people do not live according to their Christian principles—meaningful. The fact itself had always been known; indeed, had it not been, the sermons of the preachers could scarcely have failed to make it known. Critical rationalism thus became the directing force of an evolution of feeling that depended, in the last analysis, on the multiple sociological factors that were transforming the French *mores*, and turning men away from transcendent goals to immanent aims. To advanced thinkers it began to appear that it was going to be necessary to have to undo the course of European intellectual history, and to divorce religion and morality.

The purport of eighteenth century humanistic thinking was consistently to demand the satisfaction of natural desires (confined by rational and social limits, to be sure), within the duration of this natural life. As d'Holbach phrased it, “Several sages of antiquity have pretended that philosophy was only a *meditation on death*; but ideas more in conformity with our interests and less lugubrious will make us define philosophy as a *meditation on life*. . . . A morality that conforms to nature can never displease the Being who is revered as the author of that nature.”¹ But the preference for an ideal of pleasurable living was not itself (as Lanson maintains) the characteristic of this crisis of the European conscience. The novelty lay rather in the open and declared defense of this preference, which contravened the basis of Christian ethics.

The question of the relation between ethics and Christianity resolved itself into the attitude that ought to be taken to the “fact” which Bayle had brought out, that behavior is motivated by pleasure, passion, or self-interest, and not by rational principles. What is the relation between this fact and the Christian ethics? According to Bayle, it proves that Christian ethics is inefficacious, because it is against nature; where religion does influence conduct,

¹ *La morale universelle*, I, xviii–xix.
it does so in an undesirable direction, inspiring "anger against those who are of a different opinion . . . and especially a certain zeal for the practice of external ceremonies, in the thought that these external acts, and the public profession of the true faith, will serve as a rampart for all the disorders to which [man] abandons himself, and will some day procure him forgiveness for them." Christianity is, then, harmful to the moral life. Since all men, idolaters and Christians, act upon the same principles, a republic of atheists is quite conceivable, for civil punishment, concern for reputation, and the natural inclination not to go against the group are the effective protectors of society. Certainly, atheists would need strong laws, but so do we. "Would we dare to leave our homes, if theft, murder and other violent crimes were permitted by civil law?" 2

Anonymous manuscript writers were quick to take up Bayle's corrosive arguments. Later they were restated and embroidered on by almost all the *philosophes*; for the controversy—contrary to the impression that is given (perhaps unwittingly) by most histories—was destined to wax unabated until the very end of the century, as religious scepticism grew more widespread, and resistance to it grew fiercer.

Nowhere is it clearer than in Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721) how Bayle's powerful reasoning was to become the theoretical basis of "secular morality." For Montesquieu finds all our duties inscribed in our natural condition as men, citizens and parents. 3 Obviously, these do not stand in opposition to reasonable satisfaction of natural desires. In the later and more conservative *Esprit des Lois* (1748), however, Montesquieu openly attacks Bayle's paradox. In his important statement on this subject, he perceives at once the central issue. "From the idea that [God] does not exist ensues the idea of our independence; or, if we cannot have this idea, that of our revolt. To say that religion is not a repressive motive, because it does not always repress, is to say that civil laws are not a repressive motive either." 4 It is evident throughout the twenty-fourth book of the *Esprit des lois*, as elsewhere, that

4 Livre xxiv. ch. 2.
Montesquieu's consideration of religions is carried out from the empirical viewpoint of their effect on society and conduct; and except for the conventional bow, he treats the Christian religion like any other. Religion can be of service; it can also be harmful and itself need correction by civil law. He points out the danger of "a religion" that judges morally indifferent acts as wrongdoing, or that turns its adherents away from love and pity for men. Continence is a noble virtue, but socially harmful. In his discussion of homosexuality, he counts not on religion, but on social factors and on natural pleasures to discourage it. He proclaims the perfection of the ethics of Stoicism. "Never has there been any whose principles were more worthy of man, and more suited to forming virtuous men." Finally, he declares resolutely that "we must not decide according to the precepts of religion, when it is a question of those of Natural Law." Perhaps the mot de l'énigme is given us in his private Pensées, where he writes that "a small present pleasure affects us more than great, distant punishment," so that punishment in another life is a weaker restraint than fear of punishment in this life. He agrees, however, that it is ineffective to appeal to men through their reason, instead of through the senses and imagination. It is clear that Montesquieu, though not a partisan of Christian ethics, would not, after his youthful writings, care to dispense with the social safeguards of religious sanctions.

Montesquieu's hesitancy is symptomatic. The separation of religion and morality, and the ethical sufficiency of Natural Law are themes that run throughout the anti-Christian writings of the eighteenth century. They were based on two fundamental suppositions. The first is optimism about man himself and about his

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6 Nothing is more revealing than the opening statement in chap. 19. "The truest and most holy dogma may have very bad consequences, when they are not linked with the principles of [a] society; and on the other hand, the falsest dogma may have admirable results, when they are in relation to the same principles." See also chap. 20.

7 Livre xxix, ch. 22.

8 Livre xiii, ch. 21.

9 Livre xii, ch. 6.

10 Livre xxiv, ch. 10.

11 Livre xxvi, ch. 7. In making points like this one, Montesquieu of course uses the example of pagan religions; but the transposition, in the eighteenth century intellectual climate, was easy. That this was done is evident in the attacks on the Esprit des lois, and in Montesquieu's reply (ed. cit., iv, 250–3).

12 Oeuvres, ii, 168, 2.
future, an optimism which stands at times in apparent contradic-
tion to the estimate of human nature proposed by some of the
same writers, when they were not attacking Christianity. This im-
plication was apparent very early. We see it in the polemical
manuscript (published in 1731) of Boulainvilliers, Réfutation des
erreurs de Benoît de Spinoza. Moral truths, we are assured, are
engraved in all hearts, are evident to the reason of all men; those
who follow them are happy; culprits are rejected by other men and
their own conscience. Rewards and punishments are effectuated
right here, on this earth. To say we need a religious motivation is
to say virtue “is not appealing enough to win the heart by itself,”
and vice so delightful, only fear keeps us from it. Diderot, in his
moralizing moments, was to make essentially the same points.

The second attitude is a boundless confidence in the secular con-
ditioning of human behavior by education and by a rational,
realistic system of laws. This attitude, though contradictory to the
first, really supplements it. With this confidence, Helvétius and
d’Holbach thunder against the vested powers that keep men in
ignorance. For these two materialists, all that is needed is the
pressure of an educational and a legal system that are realistic,
that is, built on the one actual motive of conduct, which is self-
interest. If we recognize this fact, they maintain, and utilize it to
direct men, we shall find that aside from this natural, non-moral
and malleable motive, they are not evil. This approach also
involves a certain confidence in man’s basic rationality, at least
as regards his self-interest.

We have proven [claims d’Holbach] that it suffices to meditate on
the essence of a sensitive, intelligent, reasonable being in order
to find motives to restrain one’s passions, to resist one’s vicious
pennants, to flee criminal habits, to make oneself useful and
dear to beings of whom one has a continual need. These motives
are certainly truer, more real and powerful than those some
think we should borrow from an imaginary being, who shows
himself in different form to all who meditate on him.

13 De l’Esprit, Discours 11, ch. 24; Système de la nature, ch. 9.
14 De l’Esprit, loc. cit.; De l’Homme, Sect. IX, X, passim. Système de la nature, 11,
254–255, 1. 374 ff. It will of course be remembered that many writers (including
Helvétius) believed that man derives greatest pleasure from the disadvantage, or
the hurt of others.
Atheists can of course be moral. (Is he not one?)

The opponents of Bayle's views may be divided into two groups, the Christian apologists, and the moderate deists.

The apologists challenged Bayle's logic. They appealed to practical considerations. It is fallacious, declares Hayer, to conclude that because some religious people are wicked, the motives of hope and fear have no influence on conduct. Bergier calls attention to the fact that the Natural Law (even if understood by the masses) provides in itself no motive for its observance. Reason has never been enough to govern men. "The people need a religion; if they do not have a true one, they will make for themselves a false one." To this Boudier de Villemaire added another realistic consideration, which the atheists, in their estimate of human nature, had themselves proclaimed. Without religious sanctions, men are disposed to urge observation of moral laws by others; "but each individual will be tempted to weaken them in his own favor." Le Franc de Pompignan levelled his attack against still another bastion of the non-believers. He repudiates d'Holbach's contention that desire for esteem and approval is a sufficient stimulus to virtue, and fear of hatred and scorn a deterrent to vice. This is wrong, as it overlooks ignorance, error, injustice and partiality. Remorse fails with hardened criminals, and earthly immortality is a will-o'-the-wisp. Religion, on the other hand, provides definite judgments, backs them up with rewards and punishments. Le Franc goes still further, attacks the heart of the materialists' moral system. It is ridiculous to say that laws can modify passions, direct them in such fashion that public and personal interest are combined. "Personal interest is not a spring that public power can manipulate as it wills . . . How will you persuade men, whom you have let believe that this life is the end of their existence, that they should be satisfied with the portion of satisfactions that the republic allots them, that their merit does not entitle them to more . . . ?" Such a philosophy,

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15 In his *Système social* (1773), d'Holbach assures us that no divine punishments are needed, since the motives associated with the "prestige drive" are more powerful. (I, 4, 72, 159–160).


17 *Apologie . . .* (1769), 19–20, 204–213. In his *Examen de la religion chrétienne* (1771), Bergier devotes some seventy pages to proving that atheism is incompatible with morality (II, 991–159).

he thinks, can only exacerbate the eternal war between personal and public interest.\textsuperscript{19}

The Protestant, Samuel Formey, was one of the most clever and prolific of the apologists. He insisted that without belief in the after-life, with its rewards and punishments, laws lose their authority, and violence becomes legitimate. “Since universal annihilation will soon confuse the impious and the devout in the horror of the tomb, virtue and vice, the good man and the wicked become equivalent.” \textsuperscript{20} (With this the marquis de Sade will agree! \textsuperscript{21})

The second group of writers who stood up against Bayle consisted of moderate deists and liberal abbés who were sympathetic to certain of the new ideas. In this matter, however, they stood very close to the most conservative theologians. Their concept of human nature was alike. D'Argens, who fought relentlessly against Christian “superstition,” sees Bayle's thesis as possessing only a very limited value. “Unfortunately these precepts may well be of some use to philosophers, already good and virtuous by temperament; but they are of no use to the common people, and I should gladly say to three-fourths of men.” \textsuperscript{21a} As the abbé Yvon put it in the \textit{Encyclopédie} (“Athées”), our disposition is such that moral instinct and knowledge will not, by themselves, without the

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{La religion vengée} (1772), p. 251-286.
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{L'Anti-Sans-Soucy} (1761), p. 5, 174.
\textsuperscript{21} Emphasis on the insufficiency of reason and the corruption of human nature can also be found in the abbé Pluche (\textit{op. cit.}, vi, 15-16), in \textit{La Luzerne} (Instruction pastorale, 1786, p. 100-130), Holland (\textit{op. cit.}, ii, 176, 206-217), Sigorgne (\textit{op. cit.}, p. 116-119), the monk Thomas Jacob (\textit{Essai sur la jurisprudence universelle}, 1779, p. xiv, 4, 174-207). Gérard (\textit{Le comte de Valmont}, 1774, i, 494-513). Holland, accepting d'Holbach's thesis that nature tells man to be happy, adds that it tells the good man to be happy by being good, and the evil man to be inhuman; nature is not an ethical guide. (It is obvious in what sense Holland takes “nature” here). In a society in which crime is rewarded and fortune worshiped, how can reason alone be sufficient, when reason and religion together are not? Sigorgne also holds that civil restraint only “sharpens the cleverness of scoundrels.” Gérard emphasizes that virtue often requires heavy sacrifices, with no apparent reward, and virtue's charms are not powerful enough to effectuate such sacrifices. \textit{La Luzerne} argues that the instinct of self-preservation stops short of moral feeling: “it allows what is only harmful to others.”

\textsuperscript{21a} \textit{Lettres chinoises}, quoted by Bush, \textit{The marquis d'Argens and his philosophical correspondence}, p. 139. Cf. Lanson (\textit{Histoire}, p. 332): “I don't know whether it has been noticed often enough, the most fragile or false ethics have always been proposed by very moral people who have taken the fundamental rule of life from instinct and pleasure, because their instinct and pleasure did not lead them noticeably away from those actions without which there can no longer be any morality, therefore any society: such was Helvétius, such was Montaigne.”
stimuli of fear and hope, lead us to morality. Virtue must not merely be loved; we must consider it a personal good, “part of our own happiness.” Precisely because Bayle was correct in pointing to passion rather than reason as our motivating force, a counterweight is necessary. Precisely because we are ruled by self-interest, by fear and hope, the same motives must be used as a remedy. Religion provides them, more effectively than any other agency. The abbé Raynal, friend and collaborator of the _philosophes_, was to go even further. He considers the social function of religion as more important even than its salvation of souls. There is no hope here that men will ever make the moral law the “maxim” of their actions.

Duclos even warns against enlightening men. Prejudices that produce social good are _ipso facto_ truths. And why try to make men do by reason “what they have followed out of feeling and honest prejudice?” Prejudice, “the law of the common man,” is a surer guide. In a similar but much broader vein, Turgot declared that men are so meanly self-interested, so divided and opposed in the natural pursuit of happiness, that Christianity is needed to conciliate and to direct them. All these writers are typical of the “moderate” group. Like Montesquieu, they fear human nature even more than they dislike Christianity.

Dom Deschamps offers us—as usual—a strange assortment of ideas. In his attack on d'Holbach, he warns (like Formey) that the destruction of religion would leave only force as the basis for law. Force without religion will produce its own destruction, and revolution will result. Such a revolution will be useless; for no _société policiée_ can exist without religion. It is rather, he urges the whole moral and social structure that must be destroyed; and then, in a state of complete community and equality, religion will wither away.

Like Montesquieu, Voltaire may be said to have belonged, with some reservations and regrets, to the moderate camp. In the early

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22 Wolpe, p. 139.
23 _Considérations sur les moeurs de ce siècle_ (1751), p. 37–40. See my article, previously referred to, on the debate over truth and falsehood. See also, P.-Ch. Lévesque, _L’homme moral_ (1775), p. 74–84.
25 _La voix de la raison_ (1770), p. 18 ff. These ideas are developed more fully in the work which he left unpublished, _Le vrai système_, p. 53–4, 86, 102–103, 106 nb., 137–138, 199, 202, 203.
Traité de métaphysique (1734), he was inclined to rely on Natural Law, love of virtue and the natural spring of pride and desire for approbation. "This is perhaps the greatest brake that nature has made for human injustice. . . . Those who would need the help of religion to be good men would indeed be to be pitied." 26 Voltaire’s optimism and faith in man waned after the mid-century. In the Traité sur la tolérance (1763), we find him declaring that any superstition is better than no religion. "Man always needs a brake. . . . An atheist who would be violent, powerful and a reasoner, would be as disastrous a scourge as a sanguinary fanatic. . . . Wherever there is an established society, laws watch over known crimes, and religion over secret crimes." 27 These opinions Voltaire was to repeat often in his later writings. 28 But his hatred of Christianity was so great that it took all his distrust and fear of the canaille to impel him to such a position. Religious dogma, he declared time and again, are poisons that divide men. Christianity and reason are not reconcilable; "we must teach men, not deceive them." 29 In his private notebooks, he commented, "Religion is not a brake, it is on the contrary an encouragement to crime. All religion is founded on expiation." But a few pages later, he notes that it is socially useful to have a church cult and a fear of the after-life. And a bit later he again changes his mind: "Natural religion can suffice against solitary and secret crimes; but positive religion has no brake for crimes committed together with others. . . . Religion even encourages them; it blesses a hundred thousand men who are going to slaughter each other." 30

26 P. 62-63.
27 Oeuvres, xxv, 100.
28 The "Homélie sur l’athéisme" (1765, xxvi, 322-329) largely rephrases the same ideas. In the article "Athéisme" of the Dictionnaire philosophique, he takes open issue with Bayle (xvii, 474); see also "Enfer" (xviii, 544); "Dieu, Dieux" (xviii, 376-377). Cf. the famous lines from the "Epître à l’auteur des Trois Imposteurs" (x, 402-405):

Ce système sublime à l’homme est nécessaire.
C’est le sacré lieu de la société,
Le premier fondement de la sainte équité,
Le frein du scélérat, l’espérance du juste.
Si les cieux, dépouillés de son empreinte auguste,
Pouvaient cesser jamais de le manifester,
Si Dieu n’existait pas, il faudrait l’inventer . . .
Ah! laissons aux humains la crainte et l’espérance . . .

29 Cf. xx, 506; xxvi, 444, 550-552.
30 Notebooks, ii, 313, 321, 375, 390.
To Voltaire it was obvious that there is no necessary relation between virtue and speculative opinions, including religion. But he came to the conclusion that men must be forced or tricked into being virtuous by motives that are completely non-moral, and related only to the non-moral aspects of their self. And—bitterly for him—the most powerful force in repressing evil is an institution which is itself the principal generator of evil, the established church. If there is indeed a real basis for ethical values (and Voltaire never will give up this conviction), men, unfortunately, are not moral beings, and will not do the right for the sake of right. They will do it only for their own sake—and society can exist only if we make them believe, or make them act as if they believed, that it is for their own sake they must be virtuous.

Rousseau also found himself in an intermediary position, but for somewhat different reasons than Voltaire. One cannot doubt that he was fundamentally a humanist—unless indeed we were to define that word in such narrowly rationalistic terms that the place of sentiment and intuition be denied. For Rousseau man is the only end, and he must always be treated as an end. "Man . . . is too noble a being to have to serve merely as an instrument for others. . . . It is never permissible to deteriorate a human soul for the advantage of others. . . ."

His writings are concerned, above all else, with the problems of self-fulfillment during this life. This goal, plus his own experience with Catholicism and Calvinism, left him with a strong dislike for dogma and ritual, and with a firm aversion to restrictions or duties which seemed unrelated to a rational morality based on human desires and needs. He warns, in *Emile*, against exaggerated puritanism and urges free expression for youth in legitimate forms of "fun." "By exaggerating all duties, Christianity makes them vain and unobservable," and sours the human disposition.

On the other hand, we know that Rousseau looked upon human nature, at least in its historical realization in society, with the pessimism of Calvin, intensified by his own unhappy experiences.

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31 *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, iv, 22.
32 P. 468.
33 Ed. Halbwachs, p. 423.
He also was impregnated with an emotional religiosity, accompanied by a deep need to believe in a God concerned with his personal destiny and in an anthropomorphically just universe. For all these reasons, his political and moral philosophy, which are in many ways inseparable, postulated, as we saw in an earlier chapter, man's subservience to a Creator who rewarded and punished. In *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Julie, after many torments, reaches a note of mysticism which contravenes natural desires and which is in perfect accord with the most severe Christian morality. It is true that natural desires obtain their revenge, in a sense, at the end of the tale. But where self-discipline fails, the discipline of the State takes up.

The same basic considerations apply, then, to the *Contrat social*. We must not forget that Rousseau's purpose is the re-conditioning of man, so as to change the "natural man," who cannot function properly in the artificiality of social structures, into a "social man"—to force man to be free, to force him to be what he really wants to be. One proper mechanism for obtaining this result is censorship. A second mechanism is what Rousseau calls "civil religion." "It is essential to the States that each citizen have a religion which will make him love his duties." Rousseau's position is, then, that religion is essential to ethics in society. Compliance cannot be expected from the individual's moral will, but must be compelled. The Christian religion, however, is the least suited and the most contrary to this purpose. Instead, he proposes a State religion which is in perfect accord with the deism of the majority of the philosophes, and includes belief in a just, provident and personal God, in rewards and punishments in the future life, and in the sanctity of the laws. However he gives this State religion a total and compelling force of which the philosophes would not have dreamed, but which must be understood as essential to his proposed "re-conditioning" of man. Whoever refuses to accept the dogma is to be banished. "Whoever, having accepted them, acts in such fashion as if he did not believe in them, let him be

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34 III, 65-68.
35 See also the "Lettre sur la Providence," where Rousseau admits that without an after-life in which justice is done, there is no motive, or reason, to be virtuous.
36 *Ibid.*, p. 426-429 and p. 427 nb., 387. *Cf. Profession de foi*, "As for the external cult, if it must be uniform for good order, that is purely une affaire de police; no Revelation is needed for that."
punished by death.” In a word, Rousseau, on the issue of religion and morality, is in agreement with the Christians and the more conservative *philosophes*; but he rejects the religion of the former and demands a social control unimagined by the latter, with consequences that point to a new radicalism and repression. Law, writes Paul Vernière, becomes the measure of morality; “there is no longer but one sin, social sin.” 37 The sources of Rousseau’s idea are in Spinoza; its first fruits, in Robespierre.

The torments of Voltaire and the solutions of Rousseau plunge us once again into the central dilemmas of the age, as revealed by its more radical thought. The materialists were not, for the most part, immoralists, but seekers for a truer and more effective moral system. Yet their philosophies—as Voltaire and many others feared—opened the door to moral relativism and anarchism. On the other hand, many who defended religion on the social grounds we have seen, were also, without realizing it, skirting the same abyss. A good instance of this difficulty came to light at the very beginning of the century, in Bayle’s reply to a sermon preached at St. Paul’s Cathedral by William Harris, on January 3, 1698.38 For the atheist, the preacher had said, the only motive for doing good is not hatred of evil acts, but *amour-propre*: fear of the law and concern for his reputation. The conclusion imposes itself: if atheists are not stupid, they should use any means to get pleasure that they can with impunity.

These words seem almost like an invitation for the atheist to reject the existence of any moral order. They allow no natural or objective criterion of good, once God’s existence is denied, other than the value of individual pleasure or happiness. On the other hand, the moral order Harris proposes rests on the very same happiness principle, with its locus shifted to a future world. It assumes that God has set up a moral order; but that, without rewards and punishments (i.e., the *happiness* motive), it would be no order to man, since it would not satisfy his only criterion of value. Consequently, happiness *is* the only value, and there is no natural moral order, only an arbitrary order set up by the authority and power of God (or the State). This, of course, Harris does not say; he affirms only that the atheist, guided solely by

37 *Spinoza et la pensée française* . . . II, 481.
38 *Continuation des Pensées diverses, Oeuvres diverses*, III, 410–415. Also ch. 172.
happiness, finds no action *naturally* better than any other—that is to say, as long as happiness results, all acts are equal (and the only “better” act is one that is conducive to greater happiness). However, following Harris’ reasoning, there is no way in which the Christian, either, could judge an act to be “*naturally*, or inherently better,” except also that inasmuch as God has commanded it, reward or punishment ensues. We have, then, a purely authoritarian morality, or restraint; and, if one should ever overthrow the authority, the morality and the restraint must go, too.

In his own refutation of Harris, Bayle concedes that fear and hope are stronger motives than right reason. But atheists who act morally, purely out of right reason, perform a more truly moral act, “inasmuch as it will not appear to them attached to divine rewards.” Many women would not be unfaithful, even if they could be, unknown to man or God; nor would sons poison their fathers and mothers. Thus Bayle, the unbeliever, is more rigorously moral than the Christian.

The marquis de Sade, however, was to confirm Harris’ view. Sade’s literary sons do poison their fathers, mothers, and children. We have noted that the apologists foresaw such a consequence, and warned against it. “And in good faith,” asks the cardinal de Polignac, “if there were no God, is there a motive strong enough to determine [a man] to make himself wretched, by fighting his inclination . . . without hope of reward . . . ?” None at all, if he can get away without reproach from others, since from conscience there will be none: “when one enjoys without scruple, one must be insensitive to remorse.” Only religion, then, represses vice.\(^9\) While to most *philosophes* this would signify false fears and hope producing false virtues, Sade, once more, agrees with the Christian: the words “vice and virtue” have no status in reality; there is only passion and pleasure. Both Harris and Polignac are right, in Sade's view of things:

As soon as one no longer believes in religion, and consequently, in the imbecillic confidences made by God to men, all that comes

\(^9\) *L’Anti-Lucrece* (1769, 1, 29–30). Thomas Jacob similarly asks, “But what can virtue do for him who believes that God does not exist, or that he disdains to lower his looks to the earth, that death is for man the end of his existence . . . ? Virtue is in his eyes only an illusion, a vain idea. It promises him nothing after this life; it leaves him unhappy in this one . . . He will cry, like Brutus on the plains of Philippae . . . ‘Why did I not rather flee your sterile and unhappy ways, to devote myself to injustice . . . ?’” (Op. cit., p. 325.)
from these same men must be . . . treated with the vilest scorn. . . . No being has the despotic right to submit me to what he has said or thought. And no matter to what point I trample on these human reveries, there is no individual on earth who can acquire the right to blame me or to punish me. . . . And by what incredible injustice will you name moral what comes from you, immoral what comes from me? To whom shall we have recourse to know on which side is right? 40

The acceptance of moral nihilism is implicit in the writings of two arch-conservatives who had absorbed the lessons of the whole century, Sabatier de Castres and Antoine de Rivarol. Both had flirted early in life with the liberal trends, both were to become bitter anti-philosophes, but on premises that were inherent in some of the positions of the philosophes themselves. 41 Thus Sabatier (who is the less interesting on this point) defends the necessity of religion and public cult purely as an instrument of social utility, and with no interest in their truth. 42 The French Revolution had taught him this. Rivarol, writing to Necker the year before the Revolution, admits that if there is no God who punishes, then there is no reason not to do anything which we can do with impunity. But here is precisely where Rivarol differs from the apologists. In their somewhat naive reasoning, the formula, “no morality without God and religion,” was an argument for the truth of God and religion, as well as for their necessity. In Rivarol’s mind, however, the formula only tends to prove that there is no morality, or, as he puts it, “accredits the dangerous sophism.” Clearly, the same march of ideas leads both to Sade and to Rivarol and Sabatier; only the former embraces the anarchism, while the latter turn to a proto-totalitarianism to stifle it. Rivarol is aware of the danger: “as you will resist in vain the ‘march of enlightenment,’ and the number of unbelievers will increase, they will remain unbridled.” What, then, is Rivarol’s proposal? We must rehabilitate morality, he urges Necker, “by basing it no longer on heaven, but on earth,” that is, on enlightened self interest. But religious morality will still be needed for the ignorant and stupid masses:

40 Histoire de Juliette, vi, 168–169. An outline of a theory of moral nihilism follows; we shall return to it in a later chapter.

41 Perhaps there is some analogy here with a twentieth century intellectual politician, Benito Mussolini.

42 “Lettre aux Français républicains,” in Lettres critiques (1802).
... a lie that makes them happier and better is no longer one... The people would mock a man who offers as the moral rule only the general utility of societies, and as motive, the interest and pleasure of doing good. This system is so bare, it speaks so little to the imagination, it supposes so much reflection and knowledge, so much nobility and rectitude of soul, that it will never suit the multitude.\textsuperscript{43}

In writing to Necker, Rivarol is somewhat circumspect. He is more brutally frank in a post-Revolutionary work, \textit{De la philosophie moderne}.\textsuperscript{44} Here he writes that God is always present in the physical order, always absent in the moral order. "Therefore it has been necessary to make up for him, to make him intervene in this order where he is not." It has been necessary to invent religions, to have God send a representative down here "to prop up the insufficiencies of morality, to settle the perplexities of conscience. . . . If all that had really existed, if morality, like the physical world, had been founded on visible and invariably effective laws, the intervention of God, and consequently of religion, would have been unnecessary." If we take poison, we die, but if we lie, our tongues are not frozen in our mouths. Nature punishes our errors, the civil police can punish open crimes, but religion must take care of passions and hidden crimes. Furthermore, religion is free to promise rewards, while justice can only punish. Nonetheless, crime will always prosper, provided the criminal is an "artist." Nature's only contract is the eternal laws of motion, which form a definite order. It is for us "to form a conspiracy in the moral world, in favor of virtue and against vice, in favor of order and against anarchy." Only religion can do this. Only religion can preach to man equality and fraternity—without danger.\textsuperscript{45}

Not very distant from these two writers is a third, the abbé de Mably, who combined a theoretical economic radicalism with an authoritarian political philosophy that became exacerbated in his

\textsuperscript{44} N.d., n.p., p. 23–34.
\textsuperscript{45} Rivarol boasts of having been the first to attack the French Revolution, a year before Burke. On July 30, 1789, he had written, "Woe to whoever stirs up the dregs of a nation! There is no century of enlightenment for the populace... The populace is and will be the same in all countries, always cannibalistic, always man-eating" (p. 47–48 n).
later writings. Mably, too, lays weight on the secret crimes argument, and on the impossibility of bringing sufficient motivation to bear to induce men to follow reason, instead of passion, when they are safe from the sanctions of political laws. Religion, no matter how false or absurd, stands guard in this breach. Are not false rules of justice and duty better than none at all? A republic of atheists, to be honest and consistent, would have to teach the young that there is no real virtue or vice. By implication, Mably seems willing to admit that Christianity may be false and that there is no “real virtue or vice.” Six years later, in 1783, Mably wrote his *Observations sur le gouvernement et les lois des États-Unis d’Amérique* and addressed it to John Adams. He warns Adams that indifference in matters religious, harmless in enlightened and rational individuals, is fatal to the *mores* of the herd. A government must control and direct the thought of these “children,” as fathers do before their young have reached the age of reason. When they lose fear, they lose shame, remorse and honor.

One would almost say, a Parable of the Grand Inquisitor *avant la lettre*!

The *philosophes*, shunning both extremes of anarchism and total repression, were bound to reply to the counter-assault of the *dévots*. In doing so, they adopted several tactics. Reputed facts, such as the historical existence of virtuous atheists and the virtue of the Chinese people, were frequently brought into evidence. The universality of morality, consequently its independence from religion, was of course constantly maintained from the early years of the century when, for instance, the author of the widely circulated manuscript, *Le Traité des trois imposteurs*, pointed out that in the Christian ethics there was nothing new, nothing divine, nothing unknown to the pagans.

Nature, and nature only, cry a multitude of writers, is the valid basis of moral values. The unknown author of the important article in the *Encyclopédie*, “Philosophe,” maintains these must be founded on love for man “not *qua* creatura, not *qua* imago

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46 “Choose,” he cries in *De la Législation*, “between revolution and slavery, there is no half-way house.” (Quoted by K. Martin, *French Liberal Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 249.)
47 *De la législation* (1776), in *Oeuvres complètes* (1789), ix, 232 ff.
48 Ibid., viii, 346–347, 357–358.
49 Folio 136.
Dei, but simply as a human being.” This meant freeing “the concep­tion of man and his duties from all that is out of proportion to human nature itself.” Religion was accused of giving short shrift to the mainsprings of human nature. As Montesquieu noted in his Pensées, “It is in vain that an austere morality wishes to efface the traits which the greatest of all workmen has imprinted in our souls. It is for morality, which seeks to work on the human heart, to regulate its sentiments, not to destroy them.” Religious morality was also held to be harmful to society; not only in specific, anti-social valuations, but in its general spirit, which shrugged off the miseries and injustices of this world, and led to an underestimation of one’s duties as a citizen. This argument also traverses the century, in manuscripts, in Fréret, Meslier and d’Holbach, as well as in Rousseau. The Hollander, Hemsterhuys, put it in these words: “A great part of the imperfections of the present form of society derives from the difference between the purpose of religion and that of civil virtue: the one aims at the eternal happiness of each individual, the other at the temporal happiness of society. Some have tried to reconcile religious and civil virtue: that is impossible.”

These comments lead us into what was to be the principal course of argumentation developed by the philosophes, after Bayle, in their continuing attack upon the Christian outlook. Not only is ethics independent from religious dogma and cult; there is, they argued, an essential opposition between them. If ethics is to grow out of human nature and tend toward individual and social good, then it may be asserted that religion, and Christianity more than all other religions, has actually perverted ethics. On the one hand, then, the devout cried out against the danger latent in the position of the philosophes, the danger that it made all acts equivalent, without real moral value. On the opposite side, the philosophes exclaimed that as soon as the other-worldly becomes the directive and the end, all else must be subordinate to it. This assertion was correct, at least to the extent that such a current of thought and feeling has always existed in Christianity. What Pascal reproached the casuists for was essentially their substitution of a

51 Oeuvres, II, 2.
52 Oeuvres philosophiques (1792), I, 222–223.
human, reasonable ethics for a divine ethics whose principles exist not in our corrupted human nature, but only in our original nature. The Church itself, however, for this very reason, had never expected perfect purity and saintliness of most men; but the philosophes preferred, in the heat of combat, to ignore this, to exaggerate the Christian attitude, making it equivalent to the line of Don Alvaro, in Montherlant's drama, Le Maitre de Santiago: "Every human being is an obstacle to one who reaches for God." Don Alvaro's antagonist, precisely like the eighteenth century philosophes, accuses him of being dangerous to society.

The philosophes were basically right, too, inasmuch as, in important forms of Christianity, morality is essentially a matter of pleasing God. For the philosophe, morality was something quite different: the best way to the fulfillment of human nature, which, in society, involves its "proper" regulation. They were unable to approve, or even to conceive of the Christian ideal, which aspires towards a surpassing of nature. The latter phrase, to be semantically precise, meant the depreciation or even the suppression of "nature" in the sense of certain biological and egoistic survival instincts, and the exaltation of those aspects of human nature that were, in the same sense, un-natural—the altruistic and the spiritual. The Christian would hold that the first group of instincts are really the anti-social ones. The philosophes claimed that they were necessary to society, and in fact its very basis; and that the second group, when exaggerated out of their proper place in the total human harmony, distorted the personality, with consequences that are injurious to ethics and to society.

The question of chastity turned out to be one focus of this issue. Monasticism, for both males and females, became a concrete bone of contention. As the century advanced, attacks against the conventual system, in particular, grew ever more thunderous. It was condemned on a diversity of grounds; among them were the suppression of natural desires, perversion of character, and injury to society through parasitism and impoverishment of the population. In a broader way, the ideal of chastity itself was attacked on the same counts, and as typical of a false ethical system. As d'Argens wrote, "To be a perfect Christian, one must be ignorant . . . renounce all pleasures, honors, wealth, abandon his family and friends, keep his virginity, in a word, do all that is contrary to
nature.” All that is contrary to society, later writers would have added. In chastity, the *philosophes* saw the inversion of moral values, as well as the perversion of character. As the author of an early manuscript wrote, keeping one’s virginity becomes more important than being a good father or mother; the virtues of religion are imaginary virtues, even vices.

From the standpoint of the *philosophes*, then, Christianity was proposing absolutes, with no regard to their effect on the welfare of individuals and society—an accusation that has been renewed in the twentieth century, in the campaign for birth control. In the eyes of the Catholic, the *philosophes* were incapable of understanding the religious spirit. As a later apologist put it, the eighteenth century, imbued with the criterion of utility, “was poorly disposed to appreciate the beauty and moral usefulness of absolute renunciation, of mastery exercised over oneself, of the flesh conquered and sacrificed to the ideal.” Because of the Fall, virtue lay in struggling against our corrupt nature, and in triumphing over it. No view could have been more opposed, or more repulsive to the new spirit of the times.

The accusation of perverting ethical values, which was levelled against Christianity, assumed from the outset a much broader scope than the particular subject of chastity. Thus the writer of one early manuscript claimed that whereas atheism leaves man free to follow his “philosophical feelings” as a guide to moral virtue, religious people are guided by superstition, which leads to discord and violence, and to such cruelties and immoral acts as Christianity is shown by its history to abound in. There is no atheistic writer in the eighteenth century who does not repeat this charge, and many deists, especially Voltaire, joined in the chorus.

The basic requisitories were drawn up early in the century, and no writer was more important in their composition than Fréret. How can we establish ethics, asks Fréret, on an enthusiastic, mys-

54 *Difficultés sur la religion*, Pt. IV, fol. 16 ff. Humility and forgiveness of all offences are cited as two additional examples. The writer compares the doctrine with the edifices and sumptuous living of those who preach it (Pt. III, fol. 63–85). Also the ms., *Dialogues sur l’âme* (later printed in *Pièces philosophiques*, n.d., n.p., p. 105–111).
56 *De la conduite . . .*, fol. 137 ff.
terious, contradictory religion, on the concept of an unjust and malignant Being who tempts man (for whom he created the world), in order to have the right to punish him? How can we know the will of a God who says “Thou shalt not kill,” and exterminates whole nations? If we are to love God above all else, we must love him more than our fellow-men, and so exterminate the latter if they offend him. Humility destroys energy, harms not only ourselves but also society, inasmuch as pride, reputation and desire for others' esteem are necessary motives for public good.

The penetration and diffusion of ideas such as Fréret's are evidenced not only by their frequent expression in France, but also in England. Thus a paragraph of Hume's conclusion to his *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* could be fitted word for word into one of Fréret's pages, or into one of Helvétius or d'Holbach.

Diderot was deeply concerned with this question. In his earlier writings (*Essai sur le mérite et la vertu, Promenade du sceptique*) he follows the deistic current, considering morals to be independent of religion and related only to man's passions, interest and happiness in society. Like many deists, however, he holds religion to be a very useful mechanism of moral discipline, and in the *Promenade du sceptique* (1747), he tells a story of an atheist who is robbed by a servant to whom he had imparted his doctrine. What seems to have changed Diderot's thinking, some time after this, was his conversion—very likely effectuated by the influence of d'Holbach—to the view that religion actually perverts moral values and is inimical to the humanistic ethics towards which he was working. In 1759 we find him writing to Sophie Volland, in regard to his brother, who was a narrow-minded zealot, “He would have been a good friend, a good brother, if Christ had not commanded him to trample on such trivialities. He is a good Christian who proves to me at every moment that it would be...

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57 *Lettres à Eugénie, Oeuvres complètes*, iii, 75-84. For Fréret's charges made on the basis of human nature and needs, see *ibid.*, p. 1-26. This section also contains a sweeping attack on the assumed relation between "obscure dogma" and "evident moral ideas" and on the motivation of immortality. Cf. the later broadside of Naigeon: “They tell us we must love our neighbor like ourselves; and on the other hand, they ceaselessly repeat as the most beautiful and essential thing, that we must hate ourselves. Must we then hate our neighbor?” (*Le Militaire philosophe*, 1768, p. 35.) See also Mirabeau, *Des Lettres de cachet*, in *Oeuvres*, vii, 41-63.

58 *Moral and Political Philosophy*, p. 251.
better to be a good man and that what they call evangelical perfection is only the fatal art of stifling nature. . . .” 59 In the crystallization of this opinion, in the minds of Diderot and of innumerable contemporaries, the martyrdom of Calas, Sirven and La Barre, in the 1760’s, was undoubtedly a decisive factor, leading to conclusions such as the one expressed by Diderot: “Everywhere a God is admitted, there is a cult; wherever there is a cult, the natural order of duties is reversed and morals corrupted. Sooner or later, there comes a moment when the notion that has prevented the stealing of an écu causes the slaughter of a hundred thousand men.” 60

We may perhaps attribute to Diderot the intercalation, in the third edition of Raynal’s *Histoire des Deux Indes* (1780), of the following opinion: “More than two thousand years ago, Socrates, stretching a veil over our heads, had declared that nothing that went on above that veil mattered to us, and that men’s actions were not good because they pleased the gods, but that they pleased the gods because they were good: a principle that isolated morality from religion.” 61 This may be said to represent the conclusion of Voltaire and of all the *philosophes*.

At the head of the polemicists was d’Holbach. His writings were the most numerous, the most widely diffused and the most complete. All the wrongs and harms of the Christian religion, all its incompatibilities with a social and humanistic morality and the demands of human nature were broadcast by him, in volume after volume. I shall beg off from the task of following the course of his ideas here. They are not only repetitious from book to book, but repeat the arguments we have already expounded, though often in more dramatic and effective phraseology. 62 One passage must suffice to illustrate his presentation.

What, indeed, results from the confused alloy that theology has made of its marvelous chimeras and reality? . . . religion wished

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61 1781 ed., x, 280.
62 For his principal statements, see *Le Christianisme dévoilé* (1756), p. 8–26, and especially ch. 11, 12, 13; *Système de la nature*, I, 164–165, 349–386, II, 284–311, 374 ff; *Système social*, I, 24–40.
to command nature, to bend reason under its yoke, to submit man to its own caprices; and often in the name of the Divinity, it forced him to stifle his nature and violate out of piety the most obvious duties of morality. When this same religion wanted to repress mortals, whom it had taken care to make blind and unreasonable, it had nothing to give them but brakes and ideal motives; it could substitute only imaginary causes for real causes, marvelous and supernatural motives for natural and known ones, fiction and fable for reality. By this reversal, morality was deprived of sure principles; nature, reason, virtue, evidence depended on an indefinable God, who never spoke clearly, who stilled reason, who explained himself only through zealots, impostors and fanatics, whose delirium or desire to profit from men's aberrations interested them only in preaching abject submission, factitious virtues, frivolous observances, in a word, an arbitrary morality, in conformity with their own passions, and often very harmful to the rest of the human race.

We may fittingly close our history of this controversy with another quotation, taken from that bizarre figure of the Revolution, Anarcharsis Cloots:

... morality is the result of social interest, which itself is the result of private interests. We weaken human motives by inventing divine motives. Society tells me: thou shalt not steal. I can conceive that, and I obey a law that is formally or tacitly consented to... Nature has put into me the feelings of shame, pity, love.... I cannot gainsay these affections without feeling the remorse of a timorous conscience. ... But by invoking the voice of God, we deprive the law of the motive of consent, without which we cannot be accused; we muffle the sonorous voice of nature and of society. We put all sins and crimes under a single tariff: fornication and gluttony are both damnable sins, just like stealing and murder; the same ablution washes away the stains of the weak and the atrocities of the wicked. ... But all morality is founded on reason, and an arbitrary heavenly order makes us lose sight of the real interests of this world. The habit of virtue, that is, obedience to our laws, is a powerful deterrent to secret crimes. The fruit of a good up-bringing, the vanity we derive from fine deeds, the pride of honor, the instinct of justice, the horror of ignominy resemble that modesty, as praise-

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Système de la nature, ii, 293–294. Mention should be made, in passing, of the deist, Saint-Lambert, who defends the necessity of religion to morals, since men are governed by imagination ("astonish by the marvelous, master by threats or promises, make passionate those you cannot convince"), but who also argues that the development of a clergy produces inevitable perversion, useless or harmful "duties" being placed above real virtues. (Oeuvres philosophiques, i, 4–5).
worthy as it is inexplicable, that would prevent us from walking naked in the Tuileries, even if the police would not oppose it. . . . When man has reconquered his dignity, he will fear that the walls will reproach him for his faults.\(^{64}\)

In looking back over this controversy, certain generalized antitheses suggest themselves. Both Bayle and the Christian apologists agreed on the moral insufficiency of reason in the motivation of human behavior, but drew opposing conclusions from that opinion. The moderate liberals agreed with the apologists, but the extreme thinkers showed either a greater optimism or a greater pessimism than either of these. Both sides thought they could establish the objectivity of moral value, but differed as to whether they could do this without religion. A few extremists on the right or left denied any objective reality to moral distinctions. Both the *philosophes* and the apologists used the ambiguous criterion of nature, but again in opposing ways, either as the standard of virtue and value, or as something to be feared and repressed. The few writers I have labeled proto-totalitarians, holding that we arbitrarily create values, felt it necessary to project them through a God and a religion, and to create fictitious divine imperatives in accord with the established social order.

One conclusion we may draw from this chapter is that the deepest cause of the *philosophes*’ resentment of Christianity was their desire to replace consciousness of sin by consciousness of evil. The implications of such a substitution were revolutionary, in regard to the content of ethics, the sources of moral judgment and the stimuli to adherence. The Church quickly perceived the danger and reacted vigorously. The more timid liberals, while agreeing with the new view in theory, feared it, too, in practice.

In the heat of polemics, the *philosophes* naturally judged the Church by its worst practices only, and by the “purest” (or least humanistic and palatable) aspect of its doctrine. Thus Fréret wrote that “to deserve to be happy in that unknown world, religion teaches us that we can do no better than to make ourselves unhappy in the one we know,” and especially “to forbid ourselves the use of reason.” \(^{65}\) In vain the apologists retorted that Christianity desired men’s happiness on earth as well as in heaven, that


\(^{65}\) *Lettre à Eugénie*, loc. cit.
it was not opposed to legitimate natural pleasures, and was in fact the surest way to earthly happiness.\textsuperscript{66} The philosophs paid no attention and kept on hammering home the same points.

The chief weakness in the reasoning of many of the philosophs was their vague optimism and trust in man's natural moral impulses. This was evident from the first. "Self-love, humaneness, finally nature will restrain us more than religion . . . vanity and passions restrain men." \textsuperscript{67} But it was never clear how these mechanisms would be more effective than the religious motives which Bayle mistakenly dismissed as abstract and unrelated to action, and which later followers of his deemed unnecessary or harmful. The same philosophs placed their trust, too, in man's rationality. "Man has only to contemplate himself to feel that his own happiness depends on that of others, that the most hidden vices can tend to his own ruin, that his crimes will infallibly make him despicable in the eyes of his associates, in a word, that public opinion, better than religion, will show him his duties." \textsuperscript{68} But do men contemplate themselves in this way, and judge each other in this way? It seems that the philosophs were the ones who were guilty of violating Bayle's maxim and his realistic analysis of motivation.

We have, then, a paradoxical situation. Many who expressed a dim view of man's goodness and who reduced his motivation to pleasure, passion and self-interest, optimistically insisted, when it came to the issue of ethics and Christianity, that the Christian appeal to these motives was superfluous, or futile. On the other hand, some who opposed the extreme pessimistic evaluation of human nature insisted, in refutation, that men could not be trusted and had to be repressed by the force of religion.

Only a few eighteenth century writers went beyond a hedonic calculation and held men to be capable of governing themselves

\textsuperscript{66} Abbadie, for instance: "For Jesus Christ did not come to annihilate nature, but to perfect it. He does not make us give up the love of pleasure, but he proposes purer pleasures. . . ." (Op. cit., p. 252 ff.) Schweitzer emphasizes the eighteenth century triumph over the world- and life-negation of Christianity, but points out that the Christian world-view had been changing since the Renaissance. "It gradually begins to be accepted as self-evident that the spirit of Jesus does not renounce the world, but aims at transforming it." In fact, this was a wrong interpretation of the world-view of Jesus, which was pessimistic about the natural world and looked forward only to its end. (Civilization and Ethics, p. 62, 66.)

\textsuperscript{67} Examen de la religion, p. 139.

\textsuperscript{68} Fréret, loc. cit.
by true moral feelings, by a sense of right and wrong, and of obligation. The failure of most of the group to take such a position actually placed them on the same ground as the apologists, that of relying on non-moral motivations. This being so, the Christian position was obviously the stronger, since it added additional motivation, of a type that required neither innate virtue nor rationality. The apologists were accused of opposing and perverting human nature; but in a sense it was the former who misjudged our nature. This was their fatal weakness. Their own frequent restriction of their views to a select élite, their own frequently expressed distrust of the common people, was a confession of this failure. Even Fréret, after all his attacks, admits as much.

The common man is too corrupt and too unreasonable not to have to be led to the practice of virtuous actions, that is, those useful to society, by the hope of reward, and turned away from criminal actions by the fear of punishments; that is what gives rise to laws; but as laws do not punish or reward secret crimes, and as in the best regulated societies powerful and influential criminals find a way of eluding the laws, it has been necessary to imagine a more redoubtable tribunal than that of the magistrate. . . . This belief is without doubt the firmest foundation of societies. . . . As long as it is used only for public welfare, I shall regard it as a useful error that good people should respect. . . .

The devout writers, on the other hand, accepted human weakness and depravity. "It is impossible to offer man sufficient motives," wrote Mably, "to persuade him to follow his reason rather than his passions; and he will be just only insofar as he will be unable to escape the vigilance of laws and magistrates." It is no wonder then, that a Voltaire was torn between allegiance to a philosophy of whose truth he was convinced and fear of mankind, whose nature he despised and distrusted.

It is true that the philosophes, in their theoretical optimism, were thinking not of men as they were then, or as they are now. Their effort was a total one, towards a new view of man in nature,

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69 Op. cit., 145-146. La Mettrie had also admitted that religion, "that marvelous work of politics," is necessary for the vulgus, that "imbecillic, low and crawling species, which society has deemed it can use only by captivating the motive of all minds, self-interest: that of a chimerical happiness." (Système d'Epicure, p. 252.)

70 De la législation, p. 323.
towards a new humanistic society. With prejudice and superstition swept away, with government and society organized on just and rational lines, with an economic and moral system based on an acceptance of so-called “laws of nature,” reason, they thought, would be free, self-interest would be rational, natural desires would receive proper and harmless satisfaction. Some *philosophes*, notably Voltaire, despaired of any radical improvement; but many more believed that man needed only to be conditioned to this new way of living by a suitable education and a proper social and legal climate. Many of those who were pessimistic about human nature—or at least relatively pessimistic, in their attribution to men of the unique motive of self-interest—also recognized the necessary existence, in human beings, of moral experience and moral judgments. Their optimism was not about man left to himself, but about what he might be made into.

A faint shadow of collectivist control thus arises from the humanistic writings of the eighteenth century, and from those of Helvétius, d’Holbach and others. It raises its head even in Montesquieu, when he writes on democracy.\footnote{Precisely because democracy requires a type of conditioning that will control the egoistic motives of behavior; and this is what Rousseau was to develop. See *De l’Esprit des lois*, Livre IV, ch. 5, 6.} We can understand why Rousseau’s *Contrat social* crowns the century’s political thought. In fact, the meaning of that work requires the illumination of this intellectual background for its full understanding.\footnote{Rousseau’s espousal of what we would consider totalitarian conditioning comes out most openly in his *Considerations sur le gouvernement de Pologne*, see especially Vaughan, ii, 427 ff., 437.} While a Sabatier de Castres or a Rivarol tended towards totalitarianism as an oppressive system to assure the *status quo* (man not being capable of better, but only of worse), other *philosophes* were driven towards collectivism as the necessary mechanism of man’s reconditioning. Perhaps only Morelly and Rousseau went so far as to realize clearly that to make men into what we should like them to be, more or less complete control and conditioning are necessary; but even they certainly did not realize the implied destruction of human values that was ultimately involved, a destruction far beyond that which they attributed to Christianity. At the other pole, the liberation from superior directives was to lead a
few men, like Dom Deschamps and the marquis de Sade, to a complete anarchism.

We have here our first wide view of the failure of eighteenth century ethical thought. It is not enough to show man his true position. We must, in Mably’s terms, find another way, offer him sufficient motives. The humanistic *philosophes*, as we shall see more clearly in later parts of this study, sought what they considered to be the way of reason, or the way of nature, or a way that reconciled these. But nature was never only what they took it to be; and the failure of reason has had its continuing and widest reverberations in the crisis of our own age. And yet, the humanist of today, like those of the eighteenth century, cannot turn back. Bronislaw Malinowski has shown that among primitive peoples, religion and ethics are always inseparable. The humanist of today cannot consent to such a regression, but feels that man must march bravely into his future, be it a brighter day or a starless night. He cannot give up his faith in man’s eventual matur- 
one, in his eventual humanization. Only that way can man ever be worthy of himself.