Les Philosophes

Edited by
Norman L. Torrey

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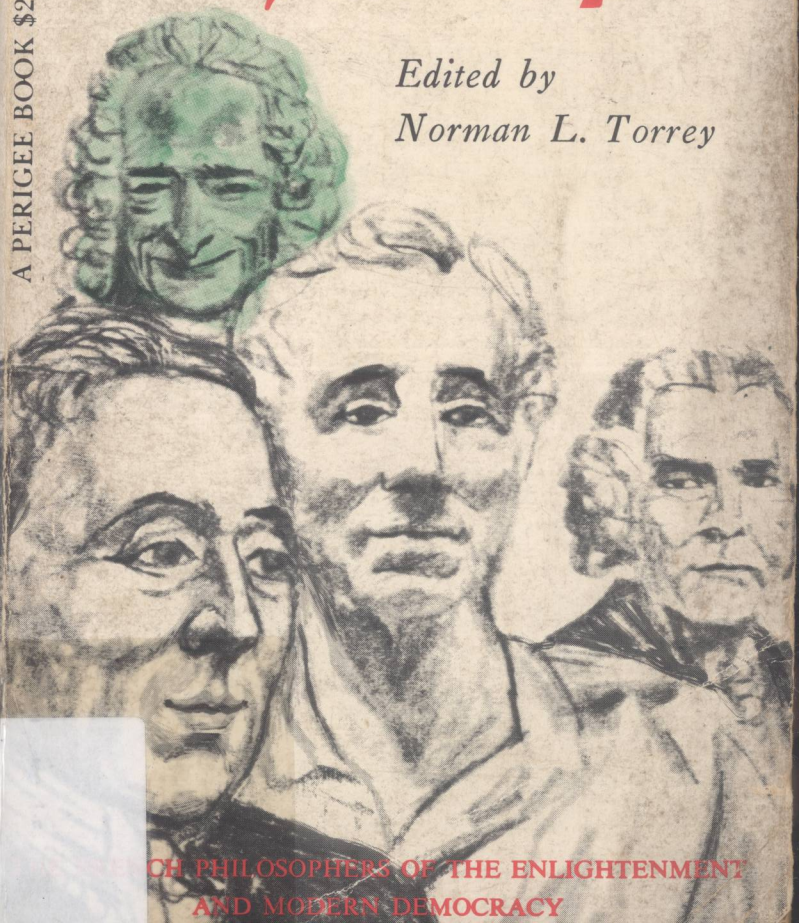

CH PHILOSOPHERS OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT
AND MODERN DEMOCRACY

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THE PHILOSOPHERS OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND MODERN DEMOCRACY

EDITED, WITH AN INTRODUCTION, BY

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A PERIGEE BOOK

Perigee Books
are published by
G.P. Putnam's Sons
200 Madison Avenue
New York, New York, 10016

First Perigee Printing, 1980

Twelfth Impression

Library of Congress Catalog
Card Number: 60-11991

SBN: 399-50131-2

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

CONTENTS

Suggested Reading

George R. Havens: *The Age of Ideas*, Henry Holt & Co., 1955

Kingsley Martin: *French Liberal Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, Little, Brown, 1929

R. R. Palmer: *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*, Princeton Univ. Press, 1959

Alfred N. Whitehead: *Science and the Modern World* (various editions)

Ernst Cassirer: *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, Princeton Univ. Press, 1951

Irwin Edman: *Fountainheads of Freedom*, Reynal & Hitchcock, 1941

Howard Robinson: *Bayle the Sceptic*, Columbia Univ. Press, 1931

S. G. Tallentyre: *The Life of Voltaire*, G. P. Putnam's Sons

H. N. Brailsford: *Voltaire*, Henry Holt & Co., 1935

Norman L. Torrey: *The Spirit of Voltaire*, Columbia Univ. Press, 1938

Lester G. Crocker: *Diderot, the Embattled Philosopher*, Michigan State Univ. Press, 1954

Montesquieu: *The Spirit of Laws* (various editions)

Jean Stewart and Jonathan Kemp (eds.), *Diderot, Interpreter of Nature*, London: Lawrence and Wishart 1937. (Excellent translations)

J.-J. Rousseau: *The Confessions* (various editions)

Diderot: *Jacques the Fatalist* (tr. J. Robert Loy), New York Univ. Press, 1959

Voltaire: *Candide, Zadig, and Selected Stories* (tr. Donald M. Frame), Indiana University Press, 1961 (and other various editions)

Voltaire: *Candide and Other Writings* (ed. Haskell M. Block), The Modern Library

The Portable Voltaire (Ben Ray Redman, ed.), The Viking Press

Author's Foreword

TRANSLATIONS

With the following exceptions, the translations here presented are my own:

For Voltaire's *Letters Concerning the English Nation* (except the letter on Locke) the text is taken from the first English edition of 1733.

Montesquieu's *Spirit of Laws:* Thomas Nugent.

Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* and *Social Contract*: G. D. H. Cole.

Helvetius, *On the Mind:* a contemporary translation, revised.

D'Holbach, *On Supernaturalism*: H. D. Robinson.

The selections from Fontenelle are from an English translation of the period.

A number of the Voltaire translations appeared previously in *Voltaire and the Age of Enlightenment*, F. S. Crofts & Co., Inc.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is a great pleasure to express here my debt to Otis E. Fellows of Columbia University, who collaborated with me in editing *The Age of Enlightenment* (copyright, 1942, F. S. Crofts & Co., Inc.) which has been a model for the present undertaking; also to Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., for permission to reuse almost verbatim an introductory paragraph on Voltaire's religion and other incidental introductory phrases.

General Introduction

IN AN AGE of wilful irrationalism and dehumanization of the arts, when interests are captivated by myths, symbols and abstractions, it is refreshing to renew our acquaintance with the writers of an age of common sense, reason and humanity. Fashions, customs, habits of thought, are ceaselessly changing, philosophical systems succeed one another in an endless chain, but human nature remains essentially the same, and reason and common sense still wage an uneven battle against the powers of darkness. The writings of the French *philosophes* of the eighteenth century continue to remind us of fundamental human truths.

They have, in addition, the advantage of being of great historical significance. As James Harvey Robinson once wrote, we cannot fully comprehend what we are until we know how we got that way. The ideas of liberalism and democracy that flourished in France at this time have shaped the social and philosophical thinking and the political institutions of the western world and constitute a chapter of American history that is too often neglected. The American and French revolutions, with their constitutions and declarations of civil liberties, are only the most important of many similar developments.

A number of terms have been used to characterize the spirit of the times. Among the most common has been the Age of Reason. Its only disadvantage is its connotation of pure rationalism, or deductive reasoning, more descriptive of the century following Descartes. By 1750, the rapid development of the biological sciences, the publication of the first volumes of Buffon's monumental *Natural History*, and the adoption of the scientific method gave priority

again to natural phenomena and the observed facts of the material universe. The Age of Ideas and the Age of Humanism are descriptive, but not distinctive, while the Age of the Democratic Revolution is not broad enough to be entirely satisfying. D'Alembert, spokesman for his fellow *philosophes*, considered his era the Age of Enlightenment, "l'age des lumières," the splendid illumination that was kindled by the rebirth of the thought of the ancients during the Renaissance, smouldered during the Age of Classicism, and burst into flame in the eighteenth century. It was this concept that gave the name of "Aufklärung" to the derivative German liberal movement.

The Age of Enlightenment, then, is a term applied to a definite Revolution in the history of thought which took place in France in the eighteenth century. The leaders of the movement were called *philosophes*, although they established no definite systems of philosophy. Among the *philosophes*, Voltaire was by far the most powerful figure. The main tenets of the group were a firm belief in the idea of progress, the application of the experimental method in science, the free and unfettered use of the God-given faculty of reason in all affairs, human and divine, and the ardent faith that reason, with all its limitations, was the final judge and the best guide available for the conduct of life.

Historical Setting

In seeking the place of the Enlightenment in the history of thought it is useful to note that many of the anomalies of modern civilization arise from the incomplete amalgamation of our two great cultural heritages, the Judeo-Christian and the Greco-Roman. During the Middle Ages the former played the dominant role, epitomized by its greatest literary production, Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The fourteenth century witnessed the beginnings of the revival of learning as long lost manuscripts of the ancients were being recovered: the texts of Homer and Cicero and

Lucretius and many other Greek and Latin authors, and the works of Aristotle, which had been known only through his commentators. As the Renaissance, or rebirth of pagan culture, spread into France, the excitement of these discoveries inspired a bevy of scholars to produce grammars, lexicons, glossaries, translations and commentaries. As D'Alembert observed, the patient labors of these often pedantic and arrogant scholars were necessary for the full understanding of the riches of the wisdom of the ancients. The rapid development of printing facilitated communication between scholars and contributed greatly to the revival by making possible the wide dissemination of discovered treasures.

The most notable authors in sixteenth-century France were Rabelais and Montaigne. It was no accident that Rabelais earned his medical degree by a translation from the Greek physician Galen, and that linguistic concerns loom so large in his histories of Gargantua and Pantagruel. He showed Protestant leanings before the line was sharply drawn by Calvin, but was wise enough not to follow Calvin in his exodus to Geneva. The Pantagruelian philosophy is a robust and whole-hearted acceptance of the joys of life, both physical and intellectual, a revolt against the asceticism of the Middle Ages; for Rabelais pictured God as the beneficent creator of carp, sausages and wine, rather than the stern author of Lent.

Later in the century Montaigne's *Essays*, which are still considered one of the world's great masterpieces, were nourished by the learning of the ancients. Although Montaigne was no rebel and remained faithful to the Church as a matter of civic duty, in his retirement during the bloody religious wars of the period his essays were an attempt to find the salvation of individual men in the fulfillment of their human possibilities. Because of his Stoicism and genial skepticism, Montaigne's work became the bible of later generations of "libertines," or freethinkers, who kept alive the traditions of pagan culture even during the most repressive years of the reign of Louis XIV. At the end of the seventeenth century, at the very threshold of

the Enlightenment, Pierre Bayle adopted Montaigne's skeptical philosophy in his *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, from which the *philosophes* derived so much of their information and inspiration.

The philosophical thought of seventeenth-century France was dominated, however, by Descartes, whose discourse on methodical reasoning (1636) denied the validity of the axiomatic truths and syllogisms of the Scholastics and established a system of rationalism deduced from clear and innate intuitions. His belief in the fixed and immutable laws of nature, of inertia and the conservation of energy, gave a firm foundation to modern philosophies of science and a guarantee of the validity of scientific research. The material universe, ordered by the laws of motion, which were determined once and for all by the Divine Intelligence and never abrogated, is, in his system, submitted to a rigorous scientific determinism, from which man alone is exempt; for man's nature is dualistic, partaking through the union of soul and body of the realms of mind and matter. In so far as he is body, he is, like the lower animals, an automaton, a beast-machine. In the realm of the mind, his thought, which Descartes equated with soul, and his will, even when it yields to the evidence of intuitive, clear, innate ideas, set him free. A century later, as we shall see, La Mettrie, one of the most radical and original of the *philosophes*, will deny the distinction and attempt to prove that man, too, is a machine.

Descartes' philosophy met considerable opposition, even in his own century. Chief among the opponents was Pierre Gassendi, priest and doctor of theology. He upheld against Descartes' innate ideas and intuitions the scholastic doctrine that there is nothing in the intellect which does not originate in sense perceptions. This theory of sensationalism, stripped of its scholastic overtones, was passed on to the *philosophes* through John Locke and Condillac and became one of the burning issues of the struggle for freedom of thought. Voltaire's defense of John Locke in his *Letters on the English Nation* was the chief cause of the condemnation of that work and subsequent persecution

of its author. Diderot's *Encyclopedia*, too, was condemned and publication suspended because of the adoption of the sensationalist philosophy. His original and scientifically valid *Letter on the Blind*, a study of persons who are deprived of one of the gateways by which sense perceptions enter the mind, was likewise condemned. This generally accepted theory was that sense perceptions recalled by memory gave rise to comparisons, reflection, judgment, and finally to self-awareness. The story of Helen Keller and the slow and patient opening of her mind through the sense of touch confirms the theory, as does also the observation of the gradual development of intelligence and self-awareness in the child.

Gassendi was noted also for his rehabilitation of Epicurus, so mistreated by Christian apologists, and of the atomic theory of his forerunners, Leucippus and Democritus. Epicurean philosophy is known to us chiefly through the treatise of the Latin poet Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, on a translation of which it is reported that Cyrano de Bergerac and Molière worked under Gassendi's tutelage. The influence of Lucretius injected a large element of epicureanism into the philosophy of Voltaire and his co-workers. As friend and correspondent of Galileo, Gassendi gave strength and support to the Copernican theory of the universe, which was the most revolutionary and violently opposed idea of the age, and accepted by the Church only in the nineteenth century. Descartes had prudently withheld his own views from publication and based his own theories on a carefully elaborated system of vortices, in which the earth was still left as the center of the universe; around it revolved the sun and the moon and the starry firmament, according to the Ptolemaic system so beautifully popularized by Dante. Gassendi's disciple, Cyrano de Bergerac, in his posthumously published *Voyage to the Moon* (1655), gave an imaginative account of Copernican astronomy and the theory of gravitation, of which Newton was soon to discover the mathematical laws.

The great popularizer of Copernican theory, however,

was Fontenelle (1657-1757). His widely published and often translated *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds* first brought the new system to the attention of the general educated public. As a primer of astronomy, it was not surpassed for over a century. Because of its clarity and discussions of other possibly inhabited universes, it still holds its fascination for the modern reader. Fontenelle's *Origin of Fables* gave to the *philosophes* their conviction that myths arose in times of ignorance and were maintained through the connivance of priests and princes. His *History of Oracles* is a concrete example of the ease and pleasure with which man can be fooled and become a prey to superstition. Fontenelle prudently excepted Christian priests and miracles from his attack, which was, none the less, a worthy forerunner of *The Golden Bough*. Many *philosophes*, and especially Voltaire, were not so prudent.

Towards the end of the seventeenth century, as a result of the persecutions and forced conversions of French protestants and the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, promulgated in 1598 by Henri IV to give them the rights of public worship, Bayle's attack on the dissolute morals of all-Catholic France and his plea for religious toleration added greatly to the fuel of the Enlightenment. Most of the ideas developed by the *philosophes* were already at hand. What was lacking was a dynamic program of social and political action, based on the faith that man's condition could be meliorated. This program Voltaire and his associates provided. Montaigne had sought his ideal in retirement from the bloody world of civil war and in the dream of individual perfection. Pascal, in general submissive to the authority of pope and king, considered man's condition hopeless and this world a vale of tears, at best a painful preparation of the Elect for the glorious life to come. The eighteenth-century ideal was a society which would limit the authority of State and Church, protect the citizen from arbitrary powers, submit man only to established law, and thereby increase his chances of finding happiness on this earth. In the development of

this program most of the cherished traditions and institutions of the Old Régime were doomed to perish.

General Themes

For readers today, the most significant of the general themes treated by the *philosophes* is the rapid growth and development of the democratic spirit. Since their contributions to the rise of modern democracies are still very much alive and not yet fully realized, illustrations of this theme have received special attention in the following pages. History had contributed comparatively little for them to draw upon since the democracies of the Athenian and other Greek city-states. The new ideas developed only gradually in the struggle to liberate mankind from the authoritarian repressions of the Old Régime.

Rather than a model, the Greek city-state presented a political ideal, most nobly expressed in the Funeral Oration of Pericles: an administration by the many regardless of wealth or station, in the duties and privileges of which all free citizens (the great body of slaves of course was excluded) could share equally according to their virtues. The Greeks also deified Justice, the mark of all superior civilizations, as Montesquieu said all nations must do if justice were not the main attribute of their God. The famous trilogy, the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus, ends with the glorification of the Athenian court of justice, in which all citizens had the right to appeal and be judged by their peers.

Montesquieu admitted, too, that if he had not been born a Christian, he would be a Stoic: for it was chiefly from the Stoics and from their disciple, Cicero, that the modern world inherited the principles of natural law and rational justice. We find in Cicero the idea of the essential equality of men as men and of the natural rights of man based on his submission to reason; also an exaltation of law as an expression of reasonableness. Long after the decline and fall of Rome, Roman law was recognized throughout

great regions of western Europe as superior to local customs and exerted its stabilizing influence. The Stoics emphasized, too, the sense of the dignity and self-sufficiency of the individual, an idea which was strengthened by the Judeo-Christian insistence that all men are brothers in the sight of God, their common father. It appears paradoxical that the chief proponent among the *philosophes* of the brotherhood of man was Voltaire who, because of the persecuting power of the Church, did his utmost to sap the foundations of Christianity. His prayer for universal tolerance, the noblest expression of this ideal, was widely disseminated in Europe and often republished in the newspapers and magazines of eighteenth-century America from colonial times. It was Voltaire, too, who bade all men forget their petty differences and remember their essential dignity as men ("Souviens-toi de ta dignité d'homme").

In modern times John Locke exerted the greatest influence on the political thought of the *philosophes*, and both directly and through them, on Franklin, Jefferson and Madison. Considered superficial by systematic philosophers, Locke's political principles, like his philosophical theory of sensationalism, were developed more fully in France and given more solid foundations. Chief among them were a plea for religious toleration, a somewhat intuitively conceived defense of inalienable rights and free enterprise, and the proposal that the only legitimate form of government was by consent of the people and in the interests of the people, with emphasis on the happiness of the individual.

Locke's *Letters on Toleration* supported, but did not surpass the somewhat earlier *Philosophical Commentary* of Pierre Bayle, whose defense of the rights of the "erring conscience" was more broadly conceived and more solidly grounded. Locke's constitution for the Carolinas, like William Penn's laws for the colony of Pennsylvania, granted freedom of worship, but excluded atheists, whom Bayle defended. Bayle's proposal that a multiplicity of religions would be beneficial to the state was accepted by Montesquieu in his *Persian Letters* and by the *philosophes*