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ESSAYS ON THE HISTORY OF THE MATERIALISM



by
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Forgotten Books

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of Materialism**
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Note

Plekhanov envisaged his *Essays* as a series of articles for *Neue Zeit*, theoretical organ of the German Social-Democrats, already in 1892. The writing took him eighteen months, the work being completed towards the end of 1893.

In May 1893 Karl Kautsky, the editor of *Neue Zeit*, thanked Plekhanov for his article on Holbach; but two months later, on July 19, 1893, on receiving the article on Helvetius and expecting an article on Marx, Kautsky wrote a letter to Plekhanov in which he expressed his doubt as to the possibility of publishing these essays in *Neue Zeit* because they were too long; he suggested that they should be published as a separate book. Kautsky's letter of January 27, 1894 testifies to his having received Plekhanov's last essay on Marx. The *Essays* were published then neither in *Neue Zeit* nor separately. Only in 1896 did they appear in book form in Stuttgart, under the title *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Materialismus. I. Holbach. II. Helvetius. III. Marx.* The *Preface*, written by Plekhanov especially for their publication, was signed: "New Year's Day, 1896." In 1903, a second German edition was put out by the same publishers. The book did not appear in Russian in Plekhanov's lifetime.

Preface

In the three essays I am submitting for appraisal by the German reader, I have attempted to interpret and expound Karl Marx's materialist understanding of history, which is one of the greatest achievements of nineteenth-century theoretical thought.

I am well aware that this is a very modest contribution: to provide convincing proof of all the value and all the significance of that understanding of history a full history of materialism would have to be written. Since I am not in a position to write that work, I have had to limit myself to a comparison, in several monographs, of eighteenth-century French materialism with today's.

Of all the representatives of French materialism, I have chosen Holbach and Helvetius, who, in my opinion, are in many respects outstanding thinkers who have not been duly appreciated to this day.

Helvetius has been impugned many a time; he has often been slandered, but few have gone to the trouble of trying to understand him. When I set about describing his writings and giving a critique of them, I had to turn virgin soil, if I may be permitted to use the expression. The only guidelines I could use were several cursory remarks I had come upon in the works of Hegel and Marx. It is not for me to judge in what measure I have made proper use of what I have

borrowed from these great teachers in the realm of philosophy.

Even in his lifetime, Holbach, who was less bold as a logician and less of a revolutionary thinker than Helvetius, shocked others far less than the author of *De l'Esprit* ever did. He was not feared as much as the latter was; he was held in less disfavour, and got more fair play. Yet he, too, was only half-understood.

Like any other modern philosophical system, materialist philosophy has had to provide an explanation of two kinds of phenomena: on the one hand, Nature's; on the other, those of mankind's historical development. The materialist philosophers of the eighteenth century – at least, those who stood close to Locke – had their own philosophy of history, in the same measure as they had a philosophy of Nature. To see that, one has only to read their writings with a modicum of attention. Therefore, the historians of philosophy should certainly set forth the French materialists' ideas on history, and subject them to criticism just as they have done with their understanding of Nature. That task has not been accomplished however. Thus, for instance, when the historians of philosophy speak of Holbach, they usually give consideration only to his *Système de la Nature*, in which work they investigate only whatever has a bearing on the philosophy of Nature, and *morals*. They ignore Holbach's historical views, which are scattered so plentifully throughout *Système de la Nature* and his other works. There is nothing surprising, therefore, in the public at large having not the least idea of those views, and having an entirely incomplete and false impression of Holbach. If one also takes into account that the French materialists' ethics has

almost invariably been misinterpreted, it has to be acknowledged that very much in the history of eighteenth-century French materialism stands in need of amendment.

It should also be remembered that the approach we have mentioned is to be met, not only in general courses in the history of philosophy but also in specialist writings on the history of materialism (which, incidentally, are still few in number), examples being the classical work of Friedrich Albert Lange, in German, and a book by the Frenchman Jules-Auguste Soury. [1*]

As for Marx, it will suffice to say that neither the historians of philosophy in general nor the historians of materialism in particular have gone to the trouble or even making mention of his materialist understanding of history.

If a board is warped, the distortion can be rectified by bending it in the opposite direction. That is how I have been constrained to act in these *Essays*: I have had, first and foremost, to describe the historical views of the thinkers I am dealing with.

From the viewpoint of the school of thought I have the honour of belonging to, "*the ideal in nothing else than the material world, reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought*". [2*] Whoever wishes to regard the history of ideas from this point of view should try to explain how and in what manner the ideas of any period have been engendered by its social conditions, that is to say, ultimately by its economic relations. To provide such an explanation is a vast and noble task, whose accomplishment will utterly transform the history of *ideologies*. In these *Essays*, I have attempted an approach towards the accomplishment of that task. However, I have not been able to devote sufficient attention to it, and that, for a very simple

reason: before answering the question *why* the development of ideas has proceeded in a definite way, one must first learn *how* that development has taken place. In respect of the subject of these *Essays*, that means that an explanation of *why materialist philosophy developed in the way* it did with Holbach and Helvetius in the eighteenth century, and with Marx in the nineteenth, is possible only after it is clearly shown *what that philosophy was in reality* which has been so often misunderstood and even quite distorted. *The ground must be cleared before building can begin.*

Another few words. The reader may find that I have dealt at insufficient length with these thinkers' theory of cognition. To that I can object that I have done all I can to set forth their views in this respect with accuracy. However, since I do not number myself among the adherents of the theoretico-cognitive scholasticism that is in such vogue today, I have had no intention of dwelling on this absolutely secondary question.

Geneva, New Year's Day, 1896

Notes

1*. Friedrich Lange's book *Geschichte des Materialismus und Kritik seiner Bedeutung in der Gegenwart* (*History of Materialism and Criticism of Its Significance at the Present Time*), which appeared in 1866, was an attempt at criticising materialism from neo-Kantian standpoint.

Jules Soury's *Breviaire de l'histoire du materialisme* (*Handbook on the History of Materialism*), published in Paris in 1883, was a similar attempt.

2*. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Moscow 1974, Vol.I, p.29.

I

Holbach

We are going to speak of a certain materialist.

But first: what is meant by materialism?

Let us address ourselves to the greatest of modern materialists.

“The great basic question of all philosophy, especially of more recent philosophy, is that concerning the relation of thinking and being,” says Frederick Engels in his excellent book *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, (Stuttgart, 1888). “But this question could for the first time be put forward in its whole acuteness, could achieve its full significance, only after humanity in Europe had awakened from the long hibernation of the Christian Middle Ages. The question of the position of thinking in relation to being, a question which, by the way, had played a great part also in the scholasticism of the Middle Ages, the question: which is primary, spirit or nature – that question, in relation to the church, was sharpened into this: Did God create the world or has the world been in existence eternally?”

“The answers which the philosophers gave to this question split them into two great camps. Those who asserted the primacy of spirit to nature and, therefore, in the last instance, assumed world creation in some form or other... comprised the camp of idealism. The others, who regarded nature as primary, belong to various schools of materialism.” [1*]

Holbach would have accepted this definition of materialism with the utmost readiness. He himself said nothing else. To him, what we call the mental life of animals was nothing

more than a natural phenomenon, and, in his opinion, there was no need to emerge from within the borders of Nature in search of a solution to the problems she has confronted us with. [1] This is very simple, and a far cry from the dogmatic assertions so often and so groundlessly ascribed to the materialists. True, Holbach saw in Nature nothing but matter or *kinds of matter*, and motion or *motions*. [2] And it is on this that the critics, Ph. Damiron for example, are out to entrap our materialist. They foist upon him their concept of matter arid, proceeding from that concept, attempt triumphantly to prove that matter, alone, is insufficient for an explanation of all natural phenomena. [3]

This is a facile but threadbare device. Critics of this calibre do not understand, or pretend not to understand, that one may have a concept of matter different from theirs. “If, by Nature,” Holbach says, “we shall mean an accumulation of dead substances, without any properties and purely passive, then, of course, we shall be obliged to seek outside of that Nature the principle of her motions; but if, by Nature, we mean what she actually is – a whole, in which the various parts have various properties, act according to those various properties, are constantly acting and reacting upon one another, possess weight, gravitate towards a common centre, while others depart towards the circumference; attract and repel one another, unite and separate, and, in constant collisions and comings together, produce and decompose all the bodies we see – then nothing can make us appeal to supernatural forces for an explanation of how the things and phenomena that we see are formed. [4]

Locke already thought it possible that matter could possess the faculty of thinking. To Holbach, this was a most probable

assumption “even in the hypothesis of theology, that is to say, in supposing that there exists an omnipotent mover of matter”. [5] The conclusion drawn by Ifolbach is very simple and really very convincing: “Since Man, who is matter and has ideas only about matter, possesses the faculty of thinking, matter can think, or is capable of that specific modification which we call thought.” [6]

What does that modification depend on? Here Holbach advances two hypotheses, which he finds equally probable. It may be presumed that the sensitivity of matter is “the result of an organization, a link inherent in an animal, so that dead and inert matter ceases to be dead and becomes capable of sensation when it is ‘*animalized*’, i.e. when it unites and is identified with an animal”. Do we not see every day that milk, bread and wine turn into the substance of man, who is a creature endowed with sensitivity? These dead substances consequently become endowed with sensitivity when they combine with a creature that is endowed with sensitivity. The other hypothesis is that dealt with by Diderot in his excellent *Conversation with D’Alembert*. “Some philosophers think that sensitivity is a universal quality of matter. In this case, it would be useless to seek whence that quality comes to it, which we know by its effects. If one admits that hypothesis, then it will be in the same way as one distinguishes two kinds of motion in Nature – one that is known under the name of *living* force and another under the name of *dead* force – then one will distinguish two kinds of sensitivity: one that is active or living, and another that is inert or dead, and then animalizing a substance will mean nothing but destroying the obstacles that prevent it from being active and sensitive.” However that may be, and whichever of these hypotheses of sensitivity we accept, “the

nonextensive being the human soul is supposed to be cannot be a subject". [7]

The reader will perhaps claim that neither hypothesis is marked by sufficient, clarity. We are well aware of that, and Holbach realised it no less than we do. That property of matter which we call sensitivity is an enigma that is very difficult of solution. But, says Holbach, "the simplest movements of our bodies are, to any man who gives thought to them, enigmas just as difficult to solve as thought is." [8]

During a conversation with Lessing, Jacobi once said, "Spinoza is good enough in my opinion, yet his name is a poor kind of salvation for us!" To which Lessing replied, "Yes! If you wish it so!... Yet ... do you know of anything better?" [9]

To all reproaches from their opponents, the materialists can reply in just the same way: "Do you know of anything better?" Where is that something better to be sought? In Berkeley's subjective idealism? In Hegel's absolute idealism? In the agnosticism or the neo-Kantianism of our times?

"Materialism," Lange assures us, "stubbornly takes the world of sensory appearance for the world of real things." [10]

He wrote this remark apropos of Holbach's argument against Berkeley. It creates the impression that Holbach was ignorant of many very simple things. Our philosopher could have replied for himself, "We do not know the essence of any being, if by the word 'essence' one understands that which constitutes the nature that is peculiar to it; we know matter only through the perceptions, the sensations, and the ideas it

gives us; it is only later that we judge whether it is good or bad, in accordance with the structure of our organs.” [11]

“We know neither the essence nor the true nature of matter, although we are able to define some of its properties and qualities according to how it affects us.” [12]

“We do not know the elements of the body, but we do know some of their properties or qualities and we distinguish between their different substances according to the effects or changes they produce on our senses, that is to say, by the various changes that their presence brings forth in us.” [13]

Strange, is it not? Here we see our kindly old Holbach as an epistemologist of today. How was it that Lange failed to recognise in him a comrade-in-philosophy?

Lange saw all philosophical systems in Kant, in just the same way as Malebranche saw all things in God. He found it unimaginable that, even before the publication of *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* [2*], there could have been people, and even among the materialists, who had a knowledge of certain truths, which were, properly speaking, meagre and barren, but, seemed to him the greatest discoveries in contemporary philosophy. He had read Holbach with a prejudiced eye.

But that is not all. There is a vast difference between Holbach and Lange. To Lange, as to any Kantian, a “*thing-in-itself*” was absolutely incognisable. To Holbach, as to any materialist, our reason, i.e., science, was fully capable of discovering *at least certain properties* of a “*thing-in-itself*”. On this point, too, the author of *Système de la Nature* was not mistaken.

Let us apply the following line of reasoning. We are building a railway. Expressed in Kantian terms, that means we are engendering certain *phenomena*. But what is a phenomenon? It is the result of a “thing-in-itself” acting upon us. So when we are building our railway, we are making a “thing-in-itself” act *on* us in a certain way that is desirable *to* us. But what is it that gives us the means of acting upon a “thing-in-itself” in such a manner? It is a knowledge of its properties, and nothing but that knowledge.

Our being able to get a sufficiently close knowledge of a “thing-in-itself” happens to be very useful to us. Otherwise, we could not exist here on Earth, and would most probably have been denied the pleasure of indulging in metaphysics.

The Kantians aver that a “thing-in-itself” is incognisable. That incognisability, in their opinion, gives Lampe, and all the worthies of philistinism, the inalienable right to their own more or less “poetical” or “ideal” God. [3*] Holbach reasoned differently.

“It is being incessantly repeated to us,” he says, “that our senses show us only the *outside* of things, and that our limited minds cannot conceive a God. Let us admit that is so; but those senses do not show us even the *outside* of the Divinity ... As we are constituted, that means that we have no ideas about what does not exist for us.” [14]

The almost complete absence of any kind of idea of evolution was undoubtedly a weak point in eighteenth-century French materialism, as it was, in general, in any kind of materialism prior to Marx. True, such people as Diderot sometimes arrived at masterly conjectures which would have done credit to the most outstanding of our present-day evolutionists; such instances of insight, however, were not

connected with the essence of their doctrine, but were merely exceptions, which, as such, merely confirmed the rule. Whether they were dealing with Nature, morals or history, the “philosophers” tackled the problem with the same absence of the dialectical method, and from the same metaphysical viewpoint. It is of interest to see how indefatigably Holbach tried to find some probable hypothesis of the origin of our planet and the human race. Problems now conclusively resolved by evolutionary natural science were seen as impossible of solution by the eighteenth-century philosophers. [15]

The Earth was not always the same as it now is. Does that mean that it was formed gradually, during a lengthy process of evolution? No. It *might* have been as follows: “Perhaps this Earth is a mass detached at a certain moment from some other celestial body; perhaps it is the result” (!) “of the spots or crusts that astronomers observe on the Sun’s disc, whence they could spread in our planetary system; perhaps this globe is an extinct and displaced comet which once occupied a different place in the regions of space.” [16]

Primitive man perhaps differed from his counterpart of today more than a quadruped does from an insect. Like everything else that exists on our globe and on all other heavenly bodies, Man can be imagined as being in a process of constant change. “Thus there is no contradiction in thinking that the species vary incessantly.” [17] This sounds perfectly in the spirit of evolutionism. It should not be forgotten, however, that Holbach saw this hypothesis as probable given “*changes in the position of our globe*”. Whoever does not accept this condition can consider Man “*a sudden result of Nature*.” Holbach does not adhere quite

firmly to the hypothesis of the evolution of the species. “If one should reject the preceding conjectures, and if one affirms that Nature acts by a certain sum of immutable and general laws; if one should believe that Man, the quadruped, the fish, the insect, the plant, etc., are of all eternity and will forever remain what they are; if one should grant that the stars have shone in the firmament since all eternity” (thus, “a certain sum of immutable and general laws” would consequently preclude any development! – *G.P.*); “if one should say that it should not be asked why Man is what he is, any more than why Nature is as we see it, or why the world exists – we would not object to all that. Whatever system one adopts, it will, perhaps, reply equally well to the difficulties that embarrass one – It is not given to Man to know everything; it is not given to him to know his origin; it is not given to him to penetrate into the essence of things or to reach the prime principles.” [18]

All this seems almost unbelievable to us today, but one should not forget the history of natural science. It should be recalled that, long after the publication of **Systeme de la Nature**, the great scientist Cuvier was up in arms against any idea of evolution in the natural sciences.

Let us now consider Holbach’s moral philosophy.

In one of his comedies, Charles Palissot, an author who has been completely forgotten, but attracted considerable attention in the last century, has one of his characters (Valere) say the following:

*Du globe ou nous vivons despote universel,
Il n’est qu’un seul ressort, l’intérêt personnel* [19]

To which another character (Carondas) replies:

*J'avais quelque regret à tromper Cydalise
Mais je vois clairement que la chose est permise. [20]*

Thus *Palissot* tried to hold up the philosophers' ideas to scorn. "It is a question of achieving happiness, no matter how" – this aphorism of Valère expresses *Palissot's* view of the "philosophers'" ethics. *Palissot* was merely a "miserable ink-slinger", yet were there many writers on the history of philosophy who advanced any other judgement on the materialist ethics of the eighteenth century? Throughout the present century, this ethics has almost universally been considered something *scandalous*, a doctrine unbecoming a worthy scholar or self-respecting philosopher; people such as La Mettrie, Holbach and Helvetius were considered dangerous sophists who preached nothing but sensual enjoyment and selfishness. [21] Yet none of these writers ever preached anything of the kind. Any reading of their books with a modicum of attention will bear this out. "To do good, promote the happiness of others, and to come to their aid – that is virtuous. Only that can be virtuous which is conducive to the weal, happiness and security of society."

"Humaneness is the prime social virtue. It epitomises all the other virtues. Taken in its broadest aspect, it is the sense that gives all beings of our species the rights to our heart. Grounded in a cultivated sensibility, it enables us to do all the good on" faculties render us capable of. It results in love, beneficence, generosity, forbearance and compassion to our fellow-creatures." [22]

Where does this so groundless accusation spring from? How could it have been believed almost universally?

In the first place, *ignorance* is to blame. The French materialists are much spoken of, but not read. It is therefore hardly surprising that, having struck deep root, the prejudice lives on.

The prejudice itself has two sources, both equally abundant.

Eighteenth-century materialist philosophy was a revolutionary philosophy. It was merely the ideological expression of the revolutionary bourgeoisie's struggle against the clergy, the nobility, and the absolute monarchy. It goes without saying that, in its struggle against an obsolete system, the bourgeoisie could have no respect for a world-outlook that was inherited from the past and hallowed that despised system. "Different times, different circumstances, a different philosophy," as Diderot so excellently put it in his article on Hobbes in the *Encyclopédie*. The philosophers of the good old days, who tried to live in peace with the Church, had no objections to a morality which claimed revealed religion as its source. The philosophers of the new times wanted morals to be free of any alliance with "*superstition*". "Nothing can be more disadvantageous to human morals than having them blended with divine morals. In linking sensible morals, based on experience and reason, with a mystical religion that is opposed to reason and based on imagination and authority, one could only muddle, weaken and even destroy the former." [23]

This divorcement of morals from religion could not have been to everybody's liking, and it already provided grounds to revile the materialists' ethics. But that was not all. "Religious morals" preached humility, mortification of the

flesh, and quelling of the passions. To those who suffer here on Earth they promised recompense in the world to come. The new morality reinstated the flesh, reinstated the rights of the passions [24], and made society responsible for the misfortunes of its members. [25] Like Heine, it wanted “*to set up the Kingdom of Heaven here on Earth*”. [5*] Therein lay its revolutionary side, but therein, too, was its wrongness in the eyes of those who stood for the then existent social structure.

In his *Correspondance littéraire* [6*], Grimm wrote that, following the publication of Helvetius’s *De l’Esprit*, a certain comic verse circulated throughout Paris, expressing the apprehension of “respectable folk”:

*“Admirez tous cet auteur-la
Qui de l’Esprit’ intitula
Un livre qui n’est que matière.”* [[26]

Indeed, all materialist morals were merely “*matter*” to those who did not understand them, and also to those who, though understanding them excellently, preferred “*tippling wine in secret, while preaching water-drinking in public*”. [7*]

This will be sufficient to explain how and why materialist morals, to this day, make the hair of all philistines of all “civilised” nations stand on end.

Yet there were, among the opponents of materialist morals, such men as Voltaire and Rousseau. Were they philistines too?

As for Rousseau, he was no philistine in this instance, but it must be admitted that the Patriarch of Ferney [8*] brought a substantial portion of philistinism into the discussion.

When a man comes into the world, he brings with him only the faculty of *sensation*, what is known as the *intellectual* faculties all develop from this faculty. Some of the impressions or sensations a man gets from the objects he meets please him, while others cause him suffering. He approves of some of them, which he wants to last or become renewed in him; he regards others with disapproval, and avoids them as much as he can. In other words, a man likes some sensations and the objects that produce them, and dislikes other impressions and that which evokes them. Since man lives in society, he is surrounded by creatures like himself, who feel exactly what he does. All these creatures seek enjoyment, and fear suffering. They call *good* whatever gives them enjoyment, and *evil* whatever causes them suffering. Whatever is of constant use to them they call *virtue*, while whatever is injurious to them in the make-up of those that surround them is called *vice*. One who does good to his fellow-men is *good*; he who causes them harm is *evil*. Hence it follows, in the first place, that man does not stand in need of divine aid to distinguish *virtue* from *vice*; in the second place, for men to be virtuous, the performance of virtue should *give* them *pleasure*, be *pleasing* to them. Man should love vice if it makes him happy. A man is evil only because it is to his advantage to be so. Evil and wicked men are so often to be met in this world of ours only because no government exists that could enable them to find advantage in justice, honesty and charity; conversely, the vested interests everywhere drive them to injustice, evil and crime.

“Thus, it is not Nature that creates evil people, but our institutions that make them such.” [27]

Such is the formal aspect of materialist morals, which we have conveyed almost in Holbach’s own words. His thoughts often lack clarity. Thus, it is tautological to say that *if vice makes man happy, he should love vice*; if vice does indeed make man happy, then he *already loves vice*. This absence of precision in Holbach often leads to unfortunate consequences. Thus, in one place he says that “*interest is the only motivation of human acts*”. Elsewhere he gives the following definition: “We call *interest* that object with which any man, in conformity with the temperament and ideas peculiar to him, links his well-being; in other words, *interest* is simply what each of us regards as necessary to his happiness”. [28] This is so broad a definition that one can no longer tell the difference between materialist and religious morals [29]; any adherent of the latter could say that his opponents had merely invented a new terminology, and preferred to call self-interested such actions that had previously been called *disinterested*. However that may be, one can readily understand what Holbach meant by saying that if vice makes man happy he should love vice. He makes society responsible for the vices of its members. [30]

Voltaire fulminates against Holbach for the latter’s alleged *advice* to people to take to vice if that proves to their advantage. This reminds one of l’abbé *de l’Lignac*, who made a convert to the new morality reply to the question of whether he should love the interests of his nation, as follows: in the measure in which it is to my advantage. Yet Voltaire knew more of the matter than de Lignac ever did: he knew

his Locke very well, and must have seen that materialist morals were merely continuing the English philosopher's cause. In his *Traité de métaphysique*, Voltaire himself said far bolder things about morals than Holbach ever did. However, the patriarch felt afraid: he was apprehensive lest the people, after turning into atheists and utilitarian moralists, should become too audacious. "All things considered," he wrote to Madame Necker (September 20, 1770), "the age of Phaedra and le Misanthrope was a better one." [9*] Of course it was! The people were held in curb far better then!

What is most comical is that Voltaire contraposes the following argument to Holbach's morals: "Our society cannot exist without the ideas of the justice and injustice, he (God) has shown us the road to reach them – *Thus, for all people, from Peking to Ireland, the weal of society is firmly established as an immutable rule of virtue.*" What a discovery for an atheist philosopher to make!

Rousseau's conclusions were different: he thought that utilitarian morals could not explain the most virtuous of human actions. "What is meant by offering up one's life in one's own interests?" he asked, adding that he found repellent that philosophy which was a source of embarrassment to virtuous actions, escaped from any difficulty only by ascribing base intentions and evil motives to virtuous actions, and "is obliged to humiliate Socrates and slander Regulus". [10*] For an appreciation of what this reproach signifies, we have to advance the following considerations.

In their struggle against “religious morality”, the materialists were out, first and foremost, to prove that people were capable of knowing what “virtue” is, without any aid from Heaven. “Did men need supernatural revelation,” Holbach exclaimed, “to learn that justice is necessary for the preservation of society, or that injustice merely brings together enemies prepared to do injury to one another? Was it necessary that God should speak for them to realise that creatures who have gathered together need to love each other and render each other aid? Was aid necessary for them to discover from on high that vengeance is an evil, an outrage against one’s country’s laws, which, if they are just, see to it that citizens are avenged? ... Is not anyone who values his life aware that vice, intemperance and sensual pleasure shorten his days? Finally, has not experience proved to any thinking being that crime is an object of hatred to his” (i.e., the criminal’s. – *G.P.*) “fellow men; that vice is injurious to those who are infected with it; that virtue wins respect and love for those who cultivate it? If men reflect but a little on what they do, on their true interests, and on the purpose of society, they will realise their duty to one another ... *The voice of Reason is sufficient for us to learn what our duty is towards our fellow creatures.*” [31]

Since Reason is sufficient to teach us our duties, the mediation of Philosophy is indicated to show us that virtue lies in our own and correctly understood interest. It must, also show us that the most illustrious heroes of mankind would not have acted otherwise if they had had only their own happiness in mind. Thus psychological analysis arises, which does, indeed, often and obviously *humiliate Socrates and slander Regulus*. Consequently, Rousseau’s reproach was not made without certain grounds; only the “citizen of

Geneva” forgot that the “slandered Socrates” often fell into the same error that the materialists are reproached with. [32]

Whether in Greece or in France, in Germany or in Russia (Chernyshevsky and his followers) – the Enlighteners everywhere made one and the same mistake. They were out to *prove* what cannot be proved but must be taught by the life of society itself. [33] Mankind’s moral development follows closely in the footsteps of economic necessity, precisely adapting itself to society’s actual needs. In this sense, it can and should be said that interest is the foundation of morality. However, the historical process of that adaptation takes place behind people’s backs, irrespective of the will and intellect of individuals. A line of behaviour that is dictated by interest seems to be an injunction of the “gods”, “inborn conscience”, “Reason”, or “Nature”. But what kind of interest is it that dictates one line of behaviour or another to individuals? Is it self-interest? In innumerable cases, it is. However, inasmuch as individuals listen to their voice of their personal interests, it is no longer a question of “virtuous” actions that we are called upon to explain. Such actions reflect the interest of the *entity, social interest*, and it is the latter that prescribe them. The dialectic of historical development leads, not only to “*sense becoming nonsense, and beneficence turning into evil*” [12*] but also to the *selfish* interests of society or a class often turning, in the hearts of individuals, into impulses full of *unselfishness* and heroism. The secret of that conversion lies in the influence of the social environment. The French materialists were good at appraising that influence; they kept on reiterating that upbringing determines everything, that people become what they are, and are not born that

way. Nevertheless, they regarded and depicted this process of *moral moulding* as a series of reflexions that are repeated at every instant in every individual's mind and are directly modified according to the circumstances affecting the private interest of anybody who is motivated to action. From this viewpoint, as we have seen, the moralist's task takes shape of itself. The thinking of individuals should be protected against errors, and the moral "truth" be pointed out to them. In that case, then, what is meant by pointing out the moral truth? It means pointing out where personal interest, as best understood, lies; it means lauding that particular disposition of heart which leads up to some praiseworthy action. It was thus that the psychological analysis which Rousseau rose up against came into being; it was thus that there appeared the interminable hymns of praise in honour of virtue that Grimm called *capucinades*. [13*] The latter were highly characteristic of some of the eighteenth-century French materialists, while a false analysis of behaviour motivations was a feature of the others. However, the absence of the dialectical method is conspicuous in *everything they all* wrote, and wreaks vengeance on *all of them* in equal degree.

In his polemic against materialist morals, Rousseau often appealed to the *conscience*, that "divine instinct", "innate feeling", and the like. It would have been easy for the materialists to explain that feeling as being the fruit of upbringing and habit. For their part, however, they preferred to present it as a series of reflections grounded in a thorough awareness of personal interest. According to Holbach, conscience can be defined as "knowledge of the effects that one's actions produce on others, and, conversely,

on ourselves”. “A guilty conscience is the certitude or the fear of having merited their hatred or their contempt by our conduct towards them.” [34]It is clear that Rousseau could not have been satisfied with such a “definition”; it is just as clear that the materialists could not tolerate his point of view. The least admission of “innate feeling” would have defeated all their philosophy. Today dialectical materialism can easily single out that part of the truth which is contained both in Rousseau’s statements and in those of the French materialists.

And so all moral laws originate from “Reason”. But what is Reason guided by in its search after these laws? By *Nature*, Holbach replies without the least hesitation. “Man is a feeling, intelligent and rational being.” Reason does not have to know anything more than that to endow us with “*universal morality*”.

The psychology of this appeal to “Nature” can easily be spelt out. Incidentally, it is explained by Holbach himself: “To impose duties on us, and to prescribe to us laws that obligate us, an authority is doubtlessly needed that has the right to command us.” But the materialists were at war with all the traditional authorities, so they appealed to Nature to find a way out of the difficulty. “Can anyone deny this right to necessity? Can one question the claims of that Nature which exercises sovereign rights over all that exists?” All this was very “natural” at the time, but it must be emphasised that, like most of his contemporaries, Holbach was referring only to the nature of “*Man*”, which is something quite different from the Nature we have to struggle against for our existence.

Montesquieu was convinced that differences in climate produced “variety in laws”. He adduced most inconclusive proof to bear out this relationship, while the materialist philosophers demonstrated it with no great difficulty. “Will one say,” Holbach asked, “that the Sun which shone down on the Greeks and the Romans, who were so jealous of their liberties, does not send the same rays upon their effete descendants?” [35] Basically speaking, however, Montesquieu’s line of thought was not quite erroneous. Today we know the significance the geographical environment has had for the history of mankind, and if Montesquieu was mistaken, that does not at all mean that those who attacked him on this score had a better understanding of what Hegel was later to call the “geographical foundation of world history”. They had *not the least* knowledge of the matter, neither right nor wrong knowledge. Human nature was the key they expected to use to open all doors in the edifice of morals, politics and history. It is often difficult for us today to have a clear realisation of a point of view so commonly held by eighteenth-century writers.

“The development of the arts,” it was said by *Suard*, for example, “is subject to the same gradations that one observes in the development of mankind.” We seize eagerly upon this idea, thinking that the author is about to reveal the hidden causes of human development, which, while independent of the human will, give direction to their spirit and enlightenment (“*lumières*”). There are some who think that, thanks to *Suard*, they are escaping from the *circulus vitiosus* the philosophy of history was revolving in so hopelessly in the eighteenth century. They are, however, too precipitant, and deeply mistaken. The causes that the

development of the “arts” is subordinate to and dependent only on the nature of – “man” ... “In childhood man has nothing but his senses, his imagination and his memory; he needs nothing but songs and tales. Then follows the age of passions, and the soul wants to be stirred and agitated; next the mind expands and reason becomes fortified; these two faculties, in their turn, have to be exercised, their activities extending to everything affecting man’s curiosity, tastes, feelings and needs.” [36]

It is now recognised by all natural scientists that the sequence of forms the individual organism passes through, from the embryo to its full development is a repetition of the form-changes gone through by the ancestors of the genus the organism belongs to. *Embryogenetic* development epitomises the *genealogical*. In the same way, one can regard the sequence of forms that each man’s mind goes through from infancy to full development as a kind of synopsis of the lengthy and slow changes each man’s ancestors underwent in the course of history. Highly interesting research can, in our opinion, be carried out in this field. [37] But what would be said of the natural scientist who would see, in the embryogenetic history of an individual organism, sufficient grounds for changes in a genus? But that is exactly the mode of thinking of Suard and, together with him, of all eighteenth-century “philosophers”, who had a vague idea of the pattern of mankind’s development.

In this, Grimm is in full accord with Suard. “What people has not started by being a poet, and ended by being a philosopher?” he asks. [38] Helvetius alone understood that this fact could spring from other and deeper causes than Suard thought. But we have not yet come to Helvetius.

Man is a sentient, thinking and rational creature. He is created thus, has always been and will always remain that way, despite all his errors. In this sense, man's nature is immutable. What, then, is there surprising in the moral and political laws dictated by that nature being, in their turn, of universal significance, unchanging, and constant? These laws have not yet been proclaimed, and it must be admitted that "nothing is more common than to see civil laws in contradiction with those of Nature". These corrupt civil laws are due to the "perversity of morals, the errors of societies, or tyranny which forces nature to bow to its authority". [39] Let Nature have its say, you will learn the truth once and for all. Errors are without number, but there is only one truth. "Morals do not exist for the monster or the madman; universal morals can be established only for rational and normally organised creatures; in them Nature does not change; observation alone is needed to infer the immutable rules that they must follow." [40]

But how is one to explain that the same Holbach could have written the following lines: "Like all natural bodies, societies undergo transformations, changes, and revolutions; they are formed, grow and disintegrate just like all beings. One and the same laws cannot suit them in different circumstances of development: useful in one period, they become useless and harmful in another."

It is all very simple. Holbach draws a single conclusion from the above argumentation, namely that obsolete and outmoded laws (the reference is to the laws of France at the time) should be abolished. The entrenchedness of a law speaks rather *against* it than *for* it. The example of our forebears is no evidence in its favour. Holbach could have

proved this in theory, but only by appealing to “reason”, but, in view of his readers’ prejudices, he pretended to adhere to the historical point of view. The same is true of the history of religions. The “philosophers” have devoted a great deal of attention to this subject, their purpose being to prove that the Christian religion, which claims to be based on revelation, fully resembles all profane religions. This was a blow aimed against the odious Christian faith; when it had been dealt, none of the “philosophers” felt concerned with a study of the comparative history of religions. The times were revolutionary, and all “truths” proclaimed by the philosophers (which very often contradicted one other) had immediately practical aims in view.

We shall remark at this point that “human nature” often led the materialist philosophers much farther than they had expected. “The distinction that was often drawn between *physical* and *moral* man was excessively abused.” Man is a purely physical being. Moral man is the selfsame physical creature, only considered from a definite angle, i.e., in respect of some of his faculties as conditioned by his organisation. Hence, “*All of men’s errors are physical errors*”. [41] Thus, what devolves on medicine, or rather on physiology, is the task of providing us with a key to the human heart. The same science should also explain to us the historical changes that have taken place in mankind. “In Nature, in which everything is interlinked, everything acts and interacts, everything moves and changes, composes and decomposes, forms and is destroyed, there is not a single atom that does not play an important and necessary role; there is not a single imperceptible molecule which, if placed in suitable circumstances, does not lead to tremendous effects ... An excess of acidity in a fanatic’s bile, excessively

inflamed blood in a conqueror's heart, troublesome digestion in a monarch's stomach, a whim that passes through some woman's mind" (also a molecule? – *G.P.*) "are sufficient causes to start wars, send millions of men into the slaughter, destroy fortresses, reduce cities to rubble... and spread desolation and calamity for a long succession of centuries ..." [42]

There is a well-known aphorism about the speck of sand that found its way into Cromwell's bladder, thus leading to the entire picture of the world being reshaped. There is neither more nor less content in this aphorism than in Holbach's ideas about "atoms" and "molecules" as the causes of historical events, the only difference being that we owe the aphorism to a pious man. In the latter's opinion, it was God who introduced the fatal speck of sand into the Protector's body. Holbach already would have nothing of God, but in everything else he could produce no objection to this aphorism.

Aphorisms of this kind contain a "grain" of the truth, but that truth also relates to the entire truth in just the same way as a "grain" or a molecule does towards all matter in the Universe. Since it is infinitesimal, that truth does not take us a single step forward in our study of social phenomena. And if we did nothing else in historical science but await the advent of the genius that Laplace dreamt of – a genius who, with the aid of molecular mechanics, will reveal to us all the secrets of mankind's past, present and future – we could indulge in long and calm slumber, for that marvellous genius's coming will not take place so soon.

“If, aided by experience, we knew the elements underlying the temperament of a man or of most of the individuals a people is made up of, we would know what is to their liking, what laws they need, and what institutions are useful to them.” [43] In that case, however, what would become of “*universal morals*” and “*policies that are in accord with Nature*”? Holbach has nothing to say on that score but comments with ever greater zeal on all the moral, political and social laws which, of necessity, derive from man’s nature as considered in the capacity of a sentient, etc., creature.

It was highly “*natural*” that, in Holbach’s times, Mother Nature was politically and morally on the side of the very laws that the French bourgeoisie needed at the moment when it was prepared to become “everything”. [15*]

A tacit agreement, a social pact, exists between society and its members. That contract is renewed at every moment, and is designed to ensure the mutual guarantees of citizens’ rights, of which *liberty, property and security* are the most sacred. Moreover: “Liberty, property and security are the only bonds that attach people to the land they live in. No homeland exists if these advantages have disappeared.” [44] Property is the soul of this holy trinity. Security and liberty are necessary in society. “But it is impossible for man to keep or make his existence happy if he cannot enjoy the advantages his exertions and his personality (!) have provided him with. Therefore the laws of Nature have granted every man a right which is called *property*”. Society cannot deprive a man of his property “*because it is created to assure that property*”. Thus, property is the aim, and liberty and security are the

means. Let us examine this sacred right in this light and in greater detail.

Where does it spring from? It is based on the necessary relation that arises between man and the product of his labour. Thus, a field becomes, in a certain way, a part of him who cultivates it, because it is his will, his arms, his strength, his industry, in a word, "*his inherent individual qualities, those belonging to his person*", that have made that field what it is. "That field, irrigated with his sweat, becomes, so to speak, identified with him; its yield belongs to him in just the same way as his limbs and his faculties do, for, without his labour, that produce would never have existed or, at least, would not have existed in the way it does." [45]

Thus Holbach saw bourgeois property in the form of the product of the proprietor's own labour. This, however, did not preclude his high regard for merchants and manufacturers, those "benefactors, who, in enriching themselves, give occupations and life to all society". [46] He seems to have had a correct, though not quite clear, understanding of the origins of the manufacturers' wealth. "... *While the labourer*" he says, "*gains his livelihood by his labour, he is constantly increasing the wealth of those who give him employment.*" Now, is that wealth produced only by "*inherent individual qualities, those belonging to his person*" ("*What a multitude of artisans of all kinds turn the wheels of manufactures!*")? [47] Of course, not! But what of that? Manufacturers and merchants are very useful people, so should not a grateful society award wealth and honours to those that serve it, so well? The trouble lies, not in the indisputable fact that the "artisan" promotes the manufacturer's wealth but in "Gothic and barbarous

prejudices” leading to the manufacturer and merchant being held in lower esteem than they deserve. “The peaceable tradesman seems a contemptible object to the stupid soldier, who does not see that this man, whom he looks down on, *clothes* him, *feeds* him, and keeps his army supplied.” (*Sic!*) [48]

Holbach has a different kind of language for feudal property. He regards such proprietors – “the Rich and the Grand” – as “useless and harmful members of Society” and attacks them indefatigably, for it is they who threaten “*the fruits of the labours of others*”, destroy the liberty of their fellow citizens, and insult their persons. “*That is how property is incessantly violated.*” [49]

We know that society has been created to preserve property, but the tacit social pact does and should refer to bourgeois property alone. In respect of feudal property, society has but a single duty – its complete and absolute abolition. Holbach stands for abolition of the nobility’s privileges, obligations to them, taxes, the *corvée*, feudal rights, and the like. [50] “If the Nobles, whose harmful rights the Sovereign would take away, should make reference to the sacred rights of property, the reply might be given that property is nothing but the right to possession with justice; whatever runs counter to the national weal can never be marked by justice; whatever is injurious to the property of the husbandman can never be regarded as a right, for it is nothing but usurpation, a violation of his rights, whose maintenance is of far greater benefit to the nation than the pretensions of a small number of Seigneurs, who, not content with doing nothing, are opposed to works that are of the utmost importance both to themselves and to Society.” [51]

The nobles “*prefer to do nothing*”; they perform no useful function in society, this condemning them in the eyes of our philosopher. There was a time when the nobles had to go to the wars at their own expense, and then enjoyed certain privileges on a fair basis of law. But on what legal foundation should they enjoy the same privileges in a society in which the army is maintained by the sovereign, and the nobles are no longer under any obligation to serve? [52]

A time has now arrived when the proletariat is using the same yardstick for the capitalists’ rights as was used over a hundred years ago by representatives of the bourgeoisie in respect of the privileges of the nobility.

It should not be thought that the antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the nobility was reflected in Holbach’s mind as one between landowners and urban proprietors of various kinds. Nothing of the kind! Holbach was in no way biased in favour of movable property. On the contrary, it was landed property that he considered as the real thing, property *par excellence*. “*Ownership of land forms the genuine citizen*,” he said. The condition of agriculture is the indicator of a country’s economic situation in general. The “poor” are, first and foremost, “husbandmen”; defending them is tantamount to defending the country folk who are oppressed by the “Grand of this world”, i.e., the nobility. Holbach went so far as to say, together with the Physiocrats [16*], that, directly or indirectly, all taxes fall on the land, just like everything else, whether good or bad, that happens to the nation. “It is to defend the possession of land that warfare is designed; it is to keep the fruits of the land in circulation that trade is necessary; it is by assuring lands to their owners that jurisprudence is useful.” [53] The land is the source of a

nation's entire wealth, and it is for that reason that it should be released as soon as possible from the feudal yoke, which is pressing down so heavily on it. Another argument in favour of the bourgeoisie's revolutionary trends!

“Equality” could contain nothing tempting to a man like Holbach. On the contrary, he thought it an extremely obnoxious chimera. Not all people have the same kind of organisation. They have always been unequal in their physical, moral and intellectual forces. “A man who is feeble in body or mind has always been forced to recognise the superiority of those who are stronger, more industrious, and more intelligent. One who is more industrious cultivates a larger lot and makes it more fertile than can be done by another who has received a weaker body from Nature. Thus, inequality in property and in possessions has existed from the outset.” [54]

To such arguments the l'abbé Mably could well object that they patently contradicted the point of departure of recent political philosophy, to wit, absolutely equal rights for all people, both strong and weak. [55] The time was not yet ripe for “equality”, and Mably himself had to admit that “no human force could today attempt to re-establish equality without causing greater disorder than one would wish to avoid.” [56] The objective logic of social evolution proved to be on the side of the bourgeois theorists.

Foototes

1. Cf. *Le bon sens puisé dans la nature, suivi du testament du curé Meslier*, à Paris, l'an Ier de la République, I, p.175.

2. "Nature, understood in the broadest sense of the word, is a vast whole resultant from a compound of different substances, their different combinations and different motions, as observed by us in the Universe." (*Système de la Nature ou, des Loix du Monde Physique et du Monde Moral*, Londres 1781, I, p.3). Holbach also recognised four elements, which the ancient philosophy recognised before him: air, fire, earth and water.

3. Thus, according to Damiron, matter cannot possess the faculty of thinking. Why? Because "matter does not think, does not cognise, does not act" (*Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de la philosophie au XVIIIe siècle*, Paris 1858, p.409).

What, amazing logic! Incidentally, in their struggle against the materialists, Voltaire and Rousseau were also in error in this question. Thus, for instance, Voltaire assured the reader that "any active matter reveals its non-material essence, which acts upon it". To Rousseau matter was "dead"; he could never "imagine a live molecule".

4. *Système de la Nature*, I, p.21. The quotation is from the 1781 edition.

5. *Le bon sens*, I, p.170.

6. *Système de la Nature*, I, p.81. Note 26.

7. *Système de la Nature*, I, pp.90-91. La Mettrie also considers the two hypotheses almost equally probable. Lange has been totally wrong in ascribing a different opinion to him. This will be seen from a perusal of Chapter VI of *Traité de l'âme*. La Mettrie even supposes that "the philosophers of all ages" (with the exception of the Cartesians, of course) "recognised that matter had the faculty of sensation" (Cf. *Œuvres*, Amsterdam 1764, I, pp.97-100).

8. *Le bon sens*, I, p.177.

9. *Jacobi's Werke*, IV, S.54.

10. *Geschichte des Materialismus*, 2. Aufl., Iserlohn 1873, I, S.378.

11. *Système de la Nature*, II, pp.91-92.

12. *ibid.*, p.116.

13. *ibid.*, I, p.28.

14. *Système de la Nature*, II, pp.109-13. Feuerbach said the same thing. In general, his critique of religion contains much that resembles Holbach's. As for the conversion of a "thing-in-itself" into God, it is noteworthy that the Fathers of the Church denounced their God in exactly the same way as the Kantians define their "thing-in-itself". Thus, according to St. Augustine, God does not fit into any category: "ut sic intelligamus Deum, si possumus, quantum possumus, sine qualitate bonum, sine quantitate magnum, sine indigentia creatorem, sine situ praesidentem, sine loco ubique totum, sine tempore sempiternum". "So this may be our notion of God, if and so far as it be within our powers, a creator wanting in nothing, good without quality, great without quantity, present without abode, whole everywhere without location, everlasting without time." (Cf. Ueberweg's *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie*, Berlin 1881, II.) We shall refer to Hegel those readers who would like to get an idea of all the contradictions of a "thing-in-itself". [4*]

15. It is really surprising that Diderot admires the moral doctrine of Heraclitus, but says nothing of his dialectics, or, if you wish, merely a few insignificant words, in considering his physics. *Œuvres de Diderot*, Paris 1818, II, pp.625-26 (*Encyclopédie*).

16. *Système de la Nature*, I, p.70.

17. *ibid.*, p.73.

18. *Système de la Nature*, I, p.75. Among the problems whose solution is not given to Man, Holbach also includes the question, "What came first: the animal before the egg, or the egg before the animal?" This is a caution to scholars who like to expatiate on the uncrossable borderlines of science!

19. [Universal despot of the world we live in and sole motive of everything – personal Interest.]

20. [I have some regret at deceiving Cydalise, But I see clearly that the thing is permitted.]

21. "De La Mettrie and Helvetius are sophists of materialistic ethics" (Hettner, *Literaturgeschichte des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Braunschweig 1881, II, S.388). "What is fatal to materialism is that it indulges, nourishes and encourages man's lowest instincts, the baseness out of which he was created" (Fritz Schultze, *Die Grundgedanken des Materialismus und die Kritik derselben*, Leipzig 1887, S.50).

22. La Politique naturelle ou discours sur les vrais principes du gouvernement, par un ancien magistra (Holbach), 1773, pp.45-46.

23. Système social ou Principes naturels de la morale et de la politique. Avec un examen de l'influence du gouvernement sur les mœurs. Par l'auteur du Système de la Nature, Londres, 1773, I, p.36. Cf. with the Preface to *Morale universelle* by the same author: "We shall not deal here with religious morals, which do not recognise the rights of reason, since they pursue the aim of leading people along supernatural roads."

24. "Passions are true counterweights to passions; let us not seek to destroy them but try to give them direction; let us balance those that are detrimental with those that are useful to society. Reason, the fruit of experience, is merely the art of choosing, for our own happiness, the passions we should listen to" (*Système de la Nature*, I, p.304).

25. "Let them not tell us that no government can make all its subjects happy; no doubt, it cannot please the whims of a few idle citizens who do not know what to think up to dispel their ennui; it can and must, however, engage in satisfying the real needs of the multitude. A society enjoys all the happiness it is capable of when the greatest number of its members are fed, clothed and housed – in a word, can, without excessive labour, satisfy the needs that Nature has made necessary to them.... As a consequence of human follies, entire nations are obliged to toil, sweat, and water the soil with their tears so as to provide for the luxury, whims and corruption of a small number of madmen, a handful of useless people, for whom happiness has become impossible because their unbridled imagination knows no bounds" (*ibid.*, p.298).

26. [Admire this author, all of you, who has entitled his book *On the Spirit*, though it contains nothing but matter.]

27. *Système de la Nature*, I, p.306.

28. *ibid.*, p.268.

29. It is not only too broad but also tautological since it says nothing except that man wants only what he wants. This was noted by Turgot in his analysis of Helvetius's theory of morality.

30. "In depraved societies one should oneself be depraved to be happy" (*Système de la Nature*, II, p.237).

31. *Le Christianisme dévoilé ou examen des principes et des effets de la religion chrétienne*, à Londres 1757, pp.120-28. This book was

called “the most horrible that could have appeared on Earth”. It was actually brought out in Nancy, not in London.

32. “And yet, – what Possession (sic!) shall; be placed in Competition with a Friend? What Slave so affectionate to our Persons, or studious of our Interest? What Horse able to render us such Service? From whence, or from whom, can we at all Times and on every Occasion receive so many and such essential Benefits?” (Xenophon’s *Memoirs of Socrates*, II, Ch.IV). Nothing more “cynical” was ever said by the French materialists. Does that mean that Socrates “slandered” himself?

33. Incidentally, in the eighteenth century this was fully in keeping with the spirit of the times, and the adherents of “religious morality” in no way lagged behind the materialists in this respect, sometimes producing quite amusing “proofs”. Here is a splendid example. According to Helvetius, the Jesuits initialed the performance of a ballet in Rouen, in the year 1750, “the object of which was to show that ‘pleasure prepares the youth for the true virtues, that is to say, the first act is on the civic virtues, the second – on the military virtues, while the third is on the virtues proper to religion’. In the ballet they tried to prove that truth through the dances. Personified Religion performed a pas de deux with Pleasure and, to give the latter more piquancy, as the Jansenists [11*] said at the time, the Jesuits clad him in trousers. But if, in their opinion, pleasure can do anything with man, what is it that interest cannot do with him? Is not all interest reduced in us to a search after pleasure?” (*De l’Homme*, I, section II, chap.16.)

34. *Système social*, I, p.56; cf. also *La Morale universelle*, I, pp.4-5.

35. *Politique naturelle*, II, p.10; *Système social*, III, pp.6-8. For his part, Voltaire never tired of warring against this opinion of Montesquieu, who, incidentally, had said nothing new on this question, but had merely repeated the views of certain Greek and Roman writers. To be fair, we shall add that Holbach often spoke of the influence of climate far more superficially than Montesquieu did. “In its essence, a definite climate organises and modifies people in such a way that they become either very useful or harmful to their race” (!), says Holbach in *Système de la Nature*.

36. *Du progrès des lettres et de la philosophie dans le dix-huitième siècle*. In *Mélange de littérature*, Paris, l’an XII, t.III, p.383.

37. It goes without saying that the closest attention should be paid to the tremendous influence that adaptation to the social environment exerts on the individual’s spiritual and moral development.

38. *Correspondance littéraire*, août 1774.

39. *Politique naturelle*, I, p.52.

40. Condorcet, who rebelled against Voltaire's views on this particular matter, which were diametrically opposite to his own, asserted (*Le Philosophe ignorant* [14*]; the Patriarch often changed his views) that the ideas of justice and right developed "without fail in one and the same way with all beings endowed with the ability to feel" and acquire ideas. "Therefore they will be the same." Of course, it is true that people "often change them . but any creature that reasons correctly will arrive at the same ideas in morals as in geometry. Such ideas are the necessary conclusion from the indisputable truth that "people are feeling and thinking creatures". (In a Note to *Philosophe ignorant* of the Kehl edition of Voltaire's works.)

41. *Système de la Nature*, I, p.5.

42. *ibid.*, I, p.214.

43. *Système de la Nature*, I, p.106.

M. Jules Soury naively remarks about those words: "This idea of Baron d'Holbach's has in part become a fact." (!) "Nevertheless, it is moral statistics rather than physiology that seems bound to render the greatest services to the physics of [morals" (*Bréviaire de l'histoire du materialisme*, Paris 1881, p.653).

44. *Politique naturelle*, I, pp.13-14, 38, 125.

"The great and chief end, therefore, of men uniting into commonwealths, and putting themselves under government, is the preservation of their property, to which in the state of Nature there are many things wanting ..." (John Locke, *Two Treatises on Civil Government*, [London 1884, Book II], Ch.IX, *Of the Ends of Political Society and Government*, p.256).

45. *Politique naturelle*, I, p.39.

46. *Morale universelle*, II, p.249.

47. *ibid.*

48. *ibid.*, II, p.240.

49. *Politique naturelle*, I, p.42.

50. Of course, he makes no exceptions either for guild and other such "privileges", or for the "wealth of the clergy".

51. *L'Ethocratie ou le Gouvernement fondé sur la morale*, Amsterdam 1776, pp.50-51.

52. *ibid.*, p.52.

53. *Politique naturelle*, I, p.179.

54. *ibid.*, p.20.

55. “If my physical or moral qualities give me no right over a man less endowed than I am with the gifts of Nature; if I cannot demand of him that he should not demand of me – then tell me, I ask you, on what grounds I can claim that our conditions are unequal ... It should be demonstrated to me by virtue of what title I can establish my superiority” (Doutes proposés aux philosophes économistes sur l’ordre naturel et essentiel des sociétés politiques, à la Haye 1708, p.21).

56. Politique naturelle, I, p.15.

Notes

1*. K. Marx and F. Engels, Selected Works in three volumes, Vol. 3, Moscow, 1973, pp.345, 346. Plekhanov cites this passage in his own translation.

2*. Kant’s *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Critique of Pure Reason) appeared in 1781.

3*. Lampe – Kant’s servant; here an embodiment of German petty-bourgeois Philistinism. Plekhanov had in mind the ironical criticism to which Heine subjected the contradictions in Kant’s theory explaining them by the spirit of philistinism which permeated Kant’s philosophy too. After refuting the possibility to prove God’s existence (in his Critique of Pure Reason), Kant, Heine believed, felt sorry for his poor Lampe and, to make the latter happy, returned to proving the existence of God (in his Critique of Practical Reason).

4*. For Hegel’s criticism of Kant’s teaching on the “thing-in-itself” see his work *Science of Logic*. The criticism is incomplete, as it is given from an idealist point of view.

5*. Heinrich Heine, *Deutschland. Ein Winter Märchen*.

6*. *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique* (Literary, Philosophical and Critical Correspondence) – a magazine circulated in Paris in manuscript form (15 or 16 copies) from 1753 to 1792. It was issued by Friedrich Grimm, a prominent Encyclopedist, man of letters and diplomat. The magazine was sent to outstanding personalities and the authorities of the time. Scientific, literary and other problems were discussed in its pages. Correspondance appeared in book form in 1812.

7*. From Heinrich Heine’s poem, *Deutschland. Ein Winter Märchen*.

8*. Patriarch of Ferney – Voltaire. The epithet was derived from the name of his estate near Geneva, where Voltaire spent more than twenty years of his life.

9*. The age of Phaedra and Misanthrope – the seventeenth century, the age of great French dramatists Jean Racine, the author of the tragedy Phaedra (1677) and Jean-Baptiste Molière, the author of Le Misanthrope (1666).

10*. Socrates, who was imprisoned and sentenced to death for his struggle against the Athenian democracy, made no attempt to escape from prison, despite his friends' entreaties, and took poison.

The Roman general Marcus Atilius Regulus (3rd cent. BC), captured by the Carthaginians in the 1st Punic War, was said to have been sent to Rome to negotiate peace and an exchange of prisoners of war. But on arriving in Rome, he ardently advised the Senate against accepting the Carthaginian terms. Then, as he did not want to break his word, he returned to Carthage, where he was tortured to death.

11*. The Jansenists, named after the Dutch Roman Catholic theologian Jansenius – represented the oppositional trend among the French Catholics in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, expressing discontent in part of the French bourgeoisie with the feudal ideology of official Catholicism.

12*. Words by Mephistopheles from Goethe's Faust.

13*. Capucinades – commonplace and banal moral admonitions, derived from the name of the order of Capuchines.

14*. Le philosophe ignorant – a philosophical treatise by Voltaire (1766) devoted to the problem of knowledge. It was Condorcet who wrote notes to the Kehl edition of Voltaire's Works.

15*. The reference is to the following passage in Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès's *Quest-ce que le tiers état?* published on the eve of the French Revolution in 1789: "What is the Third Estate? Everything. – What was it until now in the political respect? Nothing. – What is it striving for? To be something."

16*. Physiocrats – a trend in bourgeois classical political economy which arose in the 1750s in France. The Physiocrats were staunch advocates of large-scale capitalist agriculture, and the abolition of class privileges and protectionism. They realised the necessity of doing away with the feudal system but wanted to bring this about through peaceful reforms, without any detriment to the ruling classes and absolutism. In their philosophical views they were close to the French eighteenth-century bourgeois Enlighteners.

II

Helvetius

“Helvetius, that elegant farmer-general and man of probity, disinterestedness and charity, whom Voltaire, in his flattering historical reminiscences, nicknamed Atticus, took it into his head to write a book; to bring that about, he collected, at gatherings of philosophers, invited by him to his table, their theories, views, and paradoxes; skilled in provoking interesting discussions, he brought into play now the sparkling wit of Diderot, now the sagacity of Suard or the witty and pungent mind of the Abbe Galiani; then he set forth, in a corpus of learning, all the various opinions he had so faithfully recorded. The outcome of these conversations, as heard, analysed and summed up, was the book *De l’Esprit*, that is to say, materialism in metaphysics, personal interest in morals.” [1]

The reader now knows how Helvetius’s main work came into being. In this particular instance, we can give the greater credence to Demogeot for this tattler merely having repeated a piece of fiction which has, for over a century, been passed on from one old literary gossip to another. Demogeot was a well-disposed gossip: he did not *say* anything bad of Helvetius; he left the surmising to the reader. There have been other and less well disposed and more outspoken gossips. From them the reader learns that, in his investigations, our philosopher was motivated by an *excessive vanity*. It is to that vanity that we owe Helvetius’s “sophisms”; it prevented him from creating something firm and fundamental. The gossips are always marked by an extraordinary perspicacity. It befits them greatly and

invariably to engage in writing the history of literature and politics; in their exposition everything is plain and clear: you read them with great enjoyment, with little effort, and with tremendous benefit. You prefer them to that brand of writers who, like the good old *Hegel*, would delve deeper into history than these gossips do. Such writers are fairly dull folk, but ... *audiatur et altera pars*.

When he spoke of the part played by great men in history, Hegel fulminated against “*the petty study of man which, instead of taking as the object of research the general and essential features of human nature, occupies itself mainly with the particular and the fortuitous, with individual motivations, passions, and so on.*” In his opinion, “*great men wanted that which they did, and did that which they wanted*”. The same, of course, “only in other words”, can be said of all those who have worked with greater or lesser success for the benefit of mankind, this in accordance with their understanding of some particular field. It might also be said that “*the viewpoint of envy*” that Hegel held in such contempt in no way helps us understand and appraise the various periods of history. It might be said ... but then, so much might be said, but will that be listened to? The gossips get a far better hearing. For instance, when they assert that Helvetius was a dangerous sophist, and a vain and shallow man, they remain highly pleased with themselves, their wit and their integrity, and pronounce judgement.

Helvetius comes in for especially scurvy treatment at the hands of the German historians. In France, his character still gets its due at times [2], but inappropriate lenity towards this “dangerous” man is eschewed in Germany. In that country, Helvetius has been reviled oven more than *La*

Mettrie has. Though the latter was quite “dangerous”, His Majesty Frederick the Great of blessed memory was pleased to pronounce some gracious words about him after his death. *Voluntas regis suprema lex*, German scholars are aware of that more than anybody else, and that because they are scholars.

What a surprising fact! Though Helvetius’s theories alarmed even the “philosophers”, his opponents including men of Diderot’s calibre, he was attacked in France much more *after* the Revolution than *before* it. Laharpe acknowledged that his refutation of this man’s “sophisms” in 1788 *produced a far weaker impression* than it did nine years later, in 1797. Only then was it realised, Laharpe said, that materialist philosophy was an “*armed doctrine*”, a revolutionary doctrine. In 1797, the bourgeoisie no longer stood in need of such theories, which would be a constant threat to its gains; materialism had to be done with, and done with it was, the question never arising whether the proofs provided by sycophants like Laharpe were really as valid as they had been depicted. New times produce new aspirations, the latter producing new philosophies. [3]

As for the gossips, they had good reason to complain of Helvetius. Only on rare occasions could they understand him, and not merely because his thoughts were beyond the range of their comprehension. Helvetius had an original manner of expressing his theories, one capable of putting the gossips out of countenance. He respected less than any other writer of his time that which Nordau called a *conventional lie*. A man of the world and a keen observer, he had an excellent knowledge of eighteenth century French “Society”; a pungent and satirical writer, he never missed an

opportunity of telling that society several home truths that were hard to swallow and had nothing in common with the innocent truths that always “fall so trippingly from the tongue”. Hence the countless misunderstandings that ensued. What he had to say about his contemporaries was taken for his *ideal*. Madame de Boufflers said of him that he had laid bare every man’s secret.[1*] She thought that therein lay all the value and significance of his *De l’Esprit*. This quid pro quo also resulted in the following: when the subject of respect for “virtue” arose, Helvetius said that, in “*despotic empires*”, it was held in contempt, its name alone being paid tribute to. “If it is invoked every day, and if it is demanded of citizens, it is a matter, in this case, of a truth that is asked for on condition that one will be sufficiently prudent to say nothing of it.” This proposition won approval from Madame de Boufflers, who called it correct, witty and delicious, and asserted that it revealed every man’s secret. Helvetius went on to explain why things could not be different from what he said they were. He showed how, in despotic states, people’s *interests* made them hate “virtue”. Again Madame de Boufflers agreed. Then there would come along some *Lampe*, usually a German but sometimes a Frenchman, who, in his turn, raised his voice, saying that Helvetius lauded a contempt for virtue. When it came to love, Helvetius said that wherever “the wealthy and the grand” took no part in government, they had to engage in amorous adventures as the best antidote to *ennui*. At this, Madame de Boufflers smiled archly: this gracious blue stocking was better aware of that than the philosopher was. The latter, however, did not stop at that; he asked himself how love could become an occupation. He found that “love should be surrounded with perils; that a vigilant jealousy should incessantly stand in the way of the lover’s desires,

and that the lover should incessantly be finding ways of catching his lady love off her guard". He arrived at the conclusion that, in such conditions, "*a coquette ... is a delightful mistress*". Again Madame de Boufflers agreed. But then there appeared on the scene a Frau *Buchholtz* [2*], who, pale with indignation, accused our philosopher of glorifying coquetry and attacking womanly virtue, the tested virtue of Frau Buchholtz, and so on and so forth. This kept on being repeated without end, and spreading. Such misunderstanding of Helvetius has lasted down to our days, and is embedded in the minds of those who have never read him. Incidentally, reading Helvetius would hardly change anything, for he would be read only through the eyes of Frau Buchholtz, a very near-sighted lady, though highly virtuous and most reputable.

Was Helvetius, in the strict sense of the word, what might be called a materialist? This is often doubted, because of his reputation.

"The thoughtful and reserved Buffon, the reticent and diplomatic Grimm, and the vain and superficial Helvetius," said the late Lange, "all stood close to materialism, without adhering to any firm viewpoint or any consistent accomplishment of a fundamental idea, which distinguished La Mettrie, despite all his frivolity of expression." [4] Jules-Auguste Soury, a French re-echoer of this German neo-Kantian, repeated the same opinion word for word. [5]

We would like to look into the matter with our own eyes.

The question whether there exists in man a non-material substance to which he owes his mental life did not come within the orbit of Helvetius's studies. He touched upon the

matter only en passant, and dealt with it most cautiously. On the one hand, he did not want to irritate the censors, for which reason he spoke with obvious deference of the Church, which had “*established our faith on this point*”. On the other hand, he disliked flights of “philosophical fancy”. We must follow up an observation, he said, halt at the moment it leaves us. and have the courage not to know what, cannot yet be known. This smacks of “reserve” rather than of “vanity” or the “superficial”. Lange would have sensed and noted this had it concerned some less “dangerous” writer. But since he was dealing with Helvetius, he used a different yardstick: he thought it obvious that the “ram” and “*superficial*” author of *De l’Esprit* could be nothing but “*vain*” and “*superficial*”. [6]

In all the fundamental questions of “*metaphysics*” (for instance: matter, space, the infinite, and the like) Helvetius in fact shared the views of the English materialist *John Toland*. That can be seen from a comparison of the latter’s *Letters to Serena* (London, 1704) with *De l’Esprit*, Discours I, ch.IV. To Lange, Toland was undoubtedly an outstanding materialist, whose ideas he considered *as clear as was only possible*; as for Helvetius, he had merely “drawn close” to materialism, because his “superficiality” prevented him from firmly adhering to any basic idea. “*That is how history is written!*” How pernicious is the influence of “superficial” people: the “*soudest of men*” grow *superficial* when they read from the latter.

Is matter capable of sensation? “This subject was debated very long and very vaguely,” said Helvetius. “It was much later that people presumed to ask themselves what the argument was all about, and to attach a precise idea to the

word “matter”. If its meaning had been determined in the first place, it would have been recognised that men were, if I might say so, the creators of matter, that matter was not some kind of creature; that there were, in Nature, only *individuals* that had been given the name of *bodies*, and that one could understand by the word “matter” only a collection of properties common to all bodies. The meaning of this word having been thus defined, it would remain only to learn ... whether the discovery of such a force as attraction, for instance, could not lead up to the surmise that bodies could also possess several unknown properties, such as the faculty of sensation which, while manifesting itself only in the organised bodies of animals, might nevertheless be common to all individuals. The question having been reduced to this point, one could see that, if it was impossible to demonstrate that all bodies were absolutely insensible, no man unenlightened on this subject by “revelation” (we know the significance of such deference, in the “philosophers”, for “revelation” and Church dogmata in general – *G.P.*) could solve the problem otherwise than by calculating and comparing the probability of this opinion with that of the contrary opinion.

“Consequently, to end this argument, there was no need at all to construct various systems of the world, lose one’s way in a combination of possibilities, and make prodigious mental efforts, which led, and could not but have actually led, to more or less ingenious errors.” [7]

This lengthy quotation shows equally well both the affinity between the materialism of *Helvetius* and that of *Toland* [8], and the nature of what one would like to call *Helvetius’s* scepticism or probabilism. In his opinion, however, it was

not the materialists but the idealists of various schools who engaged in “*flights of philosophical fancy*”; he recommended to them such things as prudence, caution and due account of probabilities. Such prudence and caution would have shown them that their denial of the sensibility of matter was a figment of their imagination, and that it was not the properties of “*bodies*” but only the *definition* of matter, i.e., a single *word* that was preventing them from uniting the notion of body with the faculty of sensation. Here scepticism was merely a weapon directed against the enemies of materialism. It was the same when Helvetius spoke of the “*existence of bodies*”. The faculty of sensation in matter was only a probability! Quite true, but what did that prove against the materialists? After all, the very existence of bodies was, in its turn, merely a probability, yet it would be absurd to deny it. That was how Helvetius’s thinking proceeded, and if it did prove anything at all, it was primarily that his sceptical doubts had left him.

Helvetius knew just as well as his contemporaries did that we get a knowledge of bodies *only through the sensations* they produce in us. This again proves that Lange was in error in asserting that “*materialism stubbornly takes the world of sensory appearance for the world of real things.*” [9] This, however, did not prevent Helvetius from being a convinced materialist. He quoted a “*famous English chemist*” whose opinion concerning the sensibility of matter he obviously shared. Here is what that chemist said:

“We distinguish, in bodies, two kinds of properties; those whose existence is permanent and unalterable, such as impenetrability, weight, mobility, etc. These qualities pertain to general physics. But these same bodies possess other qualities whose fleeting and short-lived existence is successively produced and destroyed by certain

combinations, analyses or movements in the internal particles. These kinds of properties form different branches of natural history: chemistry, etc.; they pertain to the special branches of physics. Iron, for example, is composed of phlogiston (inflammable substance) and a special kind of earth. In this state of composition, it is subject to the attractive power of a loadstone. But when iron is decomposed, this property is destroyed. A loadstone has no action on ferruginous earth that has been deprived of phlogiston ...

“Now why is it that, in the animal kingdom, organisation does not produce in like manner the singular quality called the faculty of sensation? All phenomena in medicine and natural history clearly prove that this power is the result, in animals, only of the structure of their bodies, that this faculty begins with the formation of their organs, is preserved while they live, and is finally lost by the dissolution of these same organs.

“If the metaphysicians ask me what then happens with the animal’s faculty of sensation, I will reply that the same thing takes place as with the power of decomposed iron to be attracted by a loadstone.” [10]

Helvetius was not merely a *materialist*; he was the most “*consistent*” of his contemporaries in his adherence to the fundamental idea in materialism. He was so “*consistent*” that he horrified the other materialists, none of whom had the boldness to follow him in his daring conclusions. In this sense, he did indeed only stand “close” to such men as Holbach, since they could merely *approach* him.

The soul within us is nothing more than the faculty of sensation, the intellect being the outcome of that faculty. Everything in man is sensation. “Physical sensibility is the prime source of his needs, his passions, his sociability, his ideas, judgements, desires and actions – Man is a machine which, put into movement by physical sensibility, must do

everything that it performs.” [11] Thus, Helvetius’s point of departure is absolutely identical with that of Holbach. Such was the foundation that our “dangerous sophist” built on. Let us now take a closer look at what was original in his edifice’s architecture.

What is meant by virtue? There was not a single eighteenth century philosopher who did not discuss this question after his own manner. To Helvetius, the question was a very simple one: virtue consisted in a knowledge of people’s obligations to one another. Consequently it presupposed the formation of a society.

“Had I been born on a desert island and left to my own devices, I would have lived there without vice and without virtue; I would have been able to manifest neither one nor the other. What, then, is to be understood by these words – *virtuous* and *vicious*? Actions that are useful or harmful to society. This simple and clear idea is, in my opinion, preferable to any obscure and highflown bombast about virtue.” [12]

The common weal – such is the measure and the foundation of virtue. Therefore our actions are the more *vicious*, the more *injurious* they are to society; they are the more *virtuous*, the more *useful* they are to it. *Salus populi – suprema lex.* Our philosopher’s “virtue” is, first and foremost, *political* virtue. The *preaching* of morality leads nowhere; preaching will never produce a hero. Society should be given an organisation that will teach its members to hold the common weal in respect. *Corrupt morals* mean only a split between the social interest and the private. The legislator who knows how that dichotomy should be done away with is the best preacher of morality.

It is often claimed that John Stuart Mill's "utilitarianism" as a teaching of morality was far superior to the ethics of the eighteenth-century materialists, since the latter wanted to make personal advantage the foundation of morals, while the English philosopher brought into the foreground the principle of the greatest happiness of the greatest number. The reader can now see that, in this respect, John Stuart Mill's merit is more than doubtful. The happiness of the greatest number is merely a poor copy, without the least revolutionary tinge, of what the French materialists called the "common weal". If that is so, what is the source of the opinion that sees in John Stuart Mill's "utilitarianism" a felicitous modification of the eighteenth-century materialist doctrine?

What is the principle of the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people? It is a kind of *sanction* of human behaviour. In this sense, the materialists could draw upon nothing in Mill's -celebrated book. However, the materialists were not content with the search for a *sanction*; facing them was the task of solving a *scientific problem*: how was man, if he was nothing more than sensation, to learn to appraise the common weal? Through what miracle could he forget his sensory impressions and achieve aims that would seem to have nothing in common with the latter? In the area and within the bounds of *this problem*, the materialists did actually take *personal interest* as the point of departure. But doing so meant, in this context, merely reiterating that man is a sentient being, and nothing more. Thus, to the materialists, personal interest was not a moral precept, but only a scientific fact. [13]

Holbach evaded the difficulty of this problem with the aid of obscure terminology. “Thus, when we say that interest is the sole motive of human actions, we want thereby to indicate that every man works in his own manner for his well-being, which he finds in some object, visible or hidden, real or imaginary, and that the entire system of his conduct is designed to obtain it ...” [14] In other words, this meant that personal interest cannot simply be reduced to the demands of his “sensory impressions”. At the same time, however, to Holbach, just as to all eighteenth-century materialists, man was merely sensation. There is a logical leap here, due to which Holbach’s “ethics” evoked less abhorrence in the historians of philosophy than did Helvetius’s ethics. In Lange’s opinion, “*Holbach’s ethics is rigorous and pure.*” [15] For his part, Hettner saw in it something substantially different from Helvetius’s ethics. [16]

The author of *De l’Esprit* was the only eighteenth-century philosopher with the courage to touch upon the question of the *origin* of moral sentiments. He was alone in daring to infer them from man’s “sensory impressions”.

Man is susceptible to physical pleasure and physical suffering. He avoids the latter, and is drawn to the former. This constant and ineradicable avoidance and attraction bears the name of *self-love*, which is inseparable from man; it is his main sensation.

”Of all the senses, it is the only one of this kind: to it we owe all our desires, all our passions; these are merely the application of the sense of love of self to one object or another” ... “Look into history books and you will see that, in all countries where certain virtues were encouraged by the

hope for pleasures of the senses, such virtues were the most common and conferred the greatest lustre.” [17] Peoples that gave themselves up most to love were the most courageous, “because in their countries women accorded their favours only to the bravest”. With the Samnites, the greatest beauty was the reward for the highest military prowess. In Sparta, the wise Lycurgus, convinced that “*pleasure is the sole and universal motive in men*”, was able to turn love into an inspirer of bravery. During public holidays, young, fair, and semi-nude Lacedaemonian girls sang and danced at assemblies of the people, the words of their songs reviling the cowardly and lauding the brave. Only men of valour could expect favours from the fair sex. The Spartans therefore tried to be valiant: *amorous* passion inflamed in their hearts a *passion for glory*. However, the “wise” institutions set up by Lycurgus did not achieve the limits of the possible. Indeed, let us suppose that “after the example of the virgins consecrated to Isis or Vesta, the fairest Lacedaemonian maidens were dedicated to rewarding merit; that, presented nude at the assemblies, they were carried off by the warriors as the prize for courage, and that the young heroes experienced, at one and the same instant, the double intoxication of love and glory: however strange and far-removed from our morals such legislation may be, it is certain that it made the Spartans more virtuous and valiant, because the strength of virtue is always proportionate to the degree of pleasure assigned as the reward ...”

Here Helvetius speaks of a double intoxication – with love *and glory*. This should not be misunderstood. Everything in a thirst after glory can be reduced to sensory impressions. We love glory, just as we do wealth, *for the sake of the power* they confer. But what is power? It is a way

to make others serve our happiness. But, in essence, happiness is reducible to sensual enjoyment. *Man is nothing but sensation*. All such passions as, for instance, a passion for glory, power, wealth and the like, are merely *artificial passions* which can be derived from physical needs. To better understand this truth, one should always remember that our sensations of enjoyment and suffering are of a double kind – *actual* enjoyment or suffering, and *foreseeable* enjoyment or suffering. I suffer the pangs of hunger, and I experience *actual suffering*; I foresee that I shall starve to death, and I experience *foreseeable suffering*. “... If a man who loves fair slave girls and beautiful pictures finds a treasure, he will be in transports. It will be said, however, that he does not as yet experience any physical pleasure. That is true, but at that moment he has acquired the means of obtaining the objects of his desires. Now this anticipation of pleasure at hand is already pleasure.”

It goes without saying that *foresight* does not at all contradict Helvetius’s point of departure. It is merely the result of *memory*. If I foresee that lack of food will cause me suffering, that is because I have already experienced such suffering. But the memory possesses the property of “exerting on our organs a certain degree, of the same influence” as suffering or enjoyment. “It is therefore evident that all pain and pleasures, which are considered internal, are so many physical sensations, and that by the words *internal* or *external* one should understand only impressions evoked either by the memory or by the actual presence of objects.”

Since I am capable of foreseeing, i.e., of *sensory impressions*, I mourn the death of a friend, whose

conversation helped to dispel my boredom, “that malaise of the spirit which is actually physical pain”; he would have risked his life and fortune to save me from death or suffering; he always tried, with the aid of pleasures of every kind, to increase my enjoyment. The consciousness that my friend’s death has deprived me of my sources of pleasure .brings the tears to my eyes.

“If one delves into the depths of one’s soul and searches therein, one will see in all these sentiments only the development of physical pleasure or pain.”

However, the objection might be raised, in reply to Helvetius, that your friend was prepared to risk life and fortune to rid you of suffering. You yourself have said so. Consequently, you have admitted that there exist people that are able to turn a deaf ear to your “sensory impressions” in order to achieve an ideal aim.

Our philosopher did not give a direct reply to this objection; it will, however, be readily understood that this would not have embarrassed him. What, he might have asked, is the motive of heroic actions? *The expectation of reward*. In such actions great dangers are courted, but the greater the danger, the greater the reward. Interest (the sensory impression) suggests that the game is worth the candle. If that is how matters stand with great and glorious exploits, a friend’s self-denial has nothing extraordinary about it.

There are people who are devoted to science, ruin their health in poring over books and suffer all kinds of deprivation in order to amass knowledge. It might be said that love of science has nothing in common with physical enjoyment. That is not true. Why does the *miser* deny

himself the *necessities of life*? Because he wants to increase his means of enjoyment tomorrow and the day after – in short, in the future. Excellent! Let us accept that the same kind of thing takes place with the *scholar or scientist*, and we shall have the answer to the riddle.

“The miser wants to have a magnificent castle, and the man of talent a fair woman; riches and a grand reputation are needed to achieve these aims. The two men work, each in his own way to build up – one his treasures, and the other his renown. But if, during the time employed to acquire that wealth or that reputation, they have grown old and have formed habits they cannot break without an effort precluded by their age, the miser and the man of talent will die, the former without his castle, and the latter without his mistress.” [18]

All this was sufficient to evoke indignation in all “decent men” throughout the world and to explain how and why Helvetius acquired his ill fame. It was also sufficient to reveal the weakness in his “analysis”. We shall add another quotation to those already given: “Moreover, in admitting that our passions originally take their source in physical sensibility, one might also think that, in the present conditions in the civilised nations, such passions exist independently of the cause that has produced them. I shall therefore try, in tracing the transformation of physical suffering and pleasure into their artificial counterparts, to show that, in such passions as avarice, ambition, pride and friendship, whose object would seem to least pertain to the pleasures of the senses, it is nevertheless always physical pain and pleasure that we shun or seek after.” [19]

And so, *no heredity*. According to Darwin, the “intellectual and moral faculties of man are variable; and we have every reason to believe that the variations tend to be

inherited.” [20] According to Helvetius, man’s faculties are highly variable, but changes are not passed down from one generation to another, while their basis – the faculty of sensory impressions – remains unchanged. Helvetius was keen-sighted enough to discern the phenomena of evolution. He saw that “one and the same race of cattle grows stronger or weaker, advances or declines, according to the nature or abundance of grazing grounds”. He also noted that the same was true of *oaks*. “If one sees little oaks and tall ones, oaks growing straight or crooked, no one absolutely resembling the other, why is it so? It is, perhaps, because none of them gets exactly the same cultivation, or is put in the same kind of place, struck by the same kind of wind or sown in the same kind of soil.” This is a very reasonable explanation. But Helvetius did not stop at that, but asked himself: “*Do the differences between beings lie in their embryos or in their development?*” Such a question could not have arisen in a bigoted mind. Note, however, the content of the dilemma: *either* in the embryo or in development. Our philosopher did not even suspect that the history of a species can leave an imprint on the structure of the embryo. The history of a *species*? It did not exist for him or his contemporaries: he was interested only in individual; he was concerned only with *individual* “nature”, and observed only *individual* “development”. We are far from satisfied with Darwin’s theory of the heredity of inborn moral and intellectual faculties; it was just the first page in evolutionary natural science. But we know very well that, whatever results the latter may lead up to, it will meet with success only if the *dialectical method* is used in the study of phenomena whose nature is essentially dialectical. Helvetius remained a *metaphysician* even when he instinctively felt drawn to another and quite contrary point of view – the *dialectical*.

He confessed to “*knowing nothing*” of whether the difference between beings “lay” exclusively in their (*individual*) development. Such a hypothesis seemed too bold to him. Indeed, it would have led up to what Lucretius, who was well-known to the materialist “philosophers”, considered an egregious absurdity:

... *Ex omnibus rebus*
Omne genus nasci posset ...
.....
Nec fructus idem arboribus constare solerent
Sed mutarentur: ferre omnes omnia possent. [21]

However, when the problem was a limited one and the question was about a single species, i.e., *man*, Helvetius no longer entertained such doubts. He stated positively and with the utmost confidence that all “distinctions” between people lay in their development, not in their embryos or heredity: we all possess the same abilities at birth. It is only our upbringing that makes us different from one another. Below we shall see that this idea, though lacking the necessary substantial evidence, proved most revealing. However, he reached it along the *wrong avenue*, the origin of his thinking being obvious each time he drew upon it, and each time he tries to prove it. This thought shows that Diderot was absolutely right in saying that Helvetius’s *statements* were far more forceful than his *proofs*. The metaphysical method in eighteenth-century materialism was constantly wreaking vengeance on the boldest and most logical of its followers.

We always feel an urge towards physical enjoyment and always try to avoid physical suffering. This is an important

pronouncement. But how is it proved? Helvetius takes as his point of departure the mature grown-up man, with “passions” whose motivations are extremely numerous and complex and indubitably owe their origin to the *social environment, i.e., to the history of the species*, and attempts to deduce these “passions” from sensory impressions. Something that arises independently of the *mind* is presented to us as the immediate instant result of the selfsame mind. *Habit and instinct* assume the form of *reflection* evoked in man by one feeling or another. In our essay on Holbach, we established that this error was peculiar to all “philosophers” who came out in defence of utilitarian morality. In Helvetius, however, this error assumed regrettable proportions: in the picture he depicted, *reflection*, in the proper sense of the word, vanished, yielding place to a number of *mental images*, all of which, without exception, refer to “*sensory impressions*”. Indubitably *an operative but most distant cause of our moral habits*, these become *the ultimate cause of our actions*. Thus, a *fiction* is presented as the *solution* of the problem. It is, however, self-evident that the problem cannot be dissolved in the acid of fiction. Moreover, by his “analysis”, Helvetius would deprive our moral sentiments of their specific features and thus *delete* that *x*, that unknown quantity, whose significance he would determine; he wanted to prove that all our sentiments are derived from sensory impressions: to prove his point, he depicted man as being in constant pursuit of pleasures of the flesh, “beautiful slave girls” and the like. In actual fact, his assertion is more telling than the proofs he adduces.

After all these explications, there is no need for us to emphasise, as was done by *Laharpe* and by many others,

that it was not for possession of a beautiful mistress that *Newton engaged in his colossal mathematical calculations*. Of course, not! This truth, however, does not take us a single step forward either in the science of “man” or in the history of philosophy. There exist matters of far greater moment than the assertion of such “*truths*”.

Can it be seriously thought that Helvetius could have imagined man only as a sensual and intelligent being? It will suffice to turn the leaves of his writings to see that this was not the case. He was well aware, for example, that there existed people who “transported in spirit into the future and anticipating the eulogies and the esteem of posterity” ... renounced the glory and the esteem of the moment for the sometimes distant hope of winning greater glory and esteem; these were people who, on the whole, “desire only the esteem of estimable citizens”. [22] They realised very clearly that they will not enjoy *much sensual pleasure*. Helvetius went on to say that there were people *who held nothing higher than justice*, and explained that, in such people’s memories, the idea of justice was closely linked with that of happiness, the two ideas forming a single and indivisible whole. The habit appeared of recollecting them simultaneously, and “once this habit has become established, it is a matter of pride to be always just and virtuous, and then there is nothing one will not sacrifice to that noble pride.” [23] To be guided by justice, such people, of course, no longer needed to bring up voluptuous pictures in their minds. Moreover, our philosopher voiced the opinion that man is made just or unjust by his *upbringing*, that the power of the latter is boundless, and that “*a man of morality is entirely the product of upbringing and imitation*”. [24] He spoke of the *mechanism* our sentiments

and the force of the *association of ideas* in the following terms: “If, because of the form of government, I have everything to fear from high personages, I shall automatically respect any grandeur, even in a foreign lord who can do nothing against me. If, in my memory, I have associated the idea of virtue with that of happiness, I shall cultivate virtue even when it becomes an object of persecution. I am well aware that these two ideas will ultimately become disunited, but that will be the work of time, even of a long time”. In conclusion he added: “It is only after deep thought on this fact that one will find the solution to an infinity of moral problems that cannot be solved without a knowledge of this association of our ideas”. [25] But what does all this mean? A mass of contradictions, one more howling than another? Indubitably so! The *metaphysicians* often fall victim to such contradictions. Contradicting themselves at every step is a kind of occupational disease with them, their only way of reconciling their built-in dilemma. Helvetius was far from an exception to this general rule. On the contrary, a lively and searching mind, he paid in this coin more frequently than others for the errors of his method. The fact of this error has to be established, thus showing the advantages of the dialectical method, but it should not be thought that such errors can be eradicated by inappropriate moral indignation, or by several infinitely petty truths, which, into the bargain, are as old as the world.

“One notices, as one reads him,” Laharpe wrote of our philosopher, “that his imagination is inspired only by brilliant and voluptuous ideas: nothing is less befitting to the mind of the philosopher.” [26] This means that Helvetius spoke of “sensory impressions” and made them the point of

departure for his research, only because he was excessively inclined to sensual motivations. There are many stories about his love of “beautiful mistresses”; this love was depicted as supplementing his vanity. We shall refrain from any appraisal of such “critical” devices. However, we consider it of interest to draw a comparison, in this respect, between *Helvetius* and *Chernyshevsky*. The great *Russian Enlightener* was anything but an “elegant” man, or a “farmer-general”, or “vain” (nobody ever accused him of this weakness), or a lover of “beautiful slave girls”. Yet, of all the eighteenth-century French philosophers, Helvetius resembles him the most closely. In substantiating some assertion he had made, Chernyshevsky was marked by the same logical fearlessness, the same contempt for sentimentality, the same method, the same kind of tastes, the same rationalist mode of adducing proof, and often by the same conclusions and examples, down to the most minute. [27] How is such a coincidence to be accounted for? Is this plagiarism on the part of the Russian writer? Till now nobody has made so bold as to hurl such an accusation against Chernyshevsky. Let us imagine that grounds exist for that. Then we should have to say that Chernyshevsky stole Helvetius’s ideas, which, in their turn, derived from the latter’s voluptuous temperament and boundless vanity. What astounding clarity! What a profound philosophy of the history of human thought!

In taking note of Helvetius’s errors, we should not forget that he was mistaken on the very same point as all *idealist* (or rather *dualist*) philosophy had been, which had waged a struggle against French materialism. Spinoza and Leibnitz sometimes made very skilful use of the dialectical weapon (especially the latter in *Nouveaux essais*

sur l'entendement humain), yet their commonstand remained metaphysical.

Besides, *Leibnitz* and *Spinoza* played a far from leading role in French official eighteenth century philosophy, which was dominated by a more or less modified and vulgarised Cartesianism. The latter, however, contained not the faintest notion of development. [28] Helplessness of method was, in certain measure, something that *materialism* inherited from its *dualist* precursors: one should not deceive oneself on that score. If the materialists are wrong, that in no way means that their opponents are right. Nothing of the kind! Their opponents are doubly and trebly mistaken – in short, infinitely more.

What do we learn of the origin of our moral sentiments from Laharpe, who undoubtedly missed no opportunity of aiming all the heavy guns of the good old philosophy against Helvetius? Alas, very little! He assures us that “all our passions are given *directly by Nature*” that they “are of our nature” (italicised by Laharpe), “though they may become excessive only as a result of the corruption of grand societies”. He goes on to tell us that “society is of a natural order”, so that Helvetius was “utterly mistaken in calling artificial that which results from a natural and necessary order”; that man has “another measure for his judgements than his own interest”, and that “that measure is a sense of justice”; that “pleasure and affliction can be sole driving force in the lower animals alone”; but “God, conscience, and the laws that derive from these two – that is what man should be guided by”. [29] Very profound this, is it not? At last matters have been made quite clear!

Let us now cast an admiring glance at another opponent of our “sophist”, this time a man of the nineteenth century. After reading in *De l’Esprit* that the common interest is the measure of virtue, that any society considers those actions virtuous that are beneficial to it, and that men’s judgements of the actions of those about them undergo change in keeping with their interests, this man gave vent, with triumphant mien, to a veritable spate of words: “If it is asserted that the public’s judgements regarding individual actions are entitled to infallibility inasmuch as they are hacked by the majority of individuals, then a number of conclusions drawn from this principle have to be recognised, each more absurd than the next one, as, for instance: only the opinions of the majority are in agreement with the truth.... Truth becomes delusion when it ceases from being the opinion of the majority and turns into the opinion of the minority, and, conversely, delusion becomes truth when it becomes the opinion of the majority after having been for long the opinion of the minority.” [30] What a naive man! His refutation of Helvetius, whose theories he was never able to grasp, is indeed marked by “novelty”.

Even people of far greater calibre, such as, for instance, Lange, see in this doctrine nothing but an apologia for “personal interest”. It is considered axiomatic that Adam Smith’s doctrine of morals has nothing in common with the French materialists’ ethics. These two doctrines are antipodes. Lange, who expressed only disdain for Helvetius, had the highest esteem for Adam Smith as a moralist. “Adam Smith’s inference of morality from sympathy,” he wrote, “although insufficiently grounded even for the time, still remains, down to our days, one of the most productive attempts at a natural and rational substantiation of

morality.” Baudrillart, the French author of a commentary on *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* considered it a healthy reaction against “the systems of materialism and selfishness”. Smith himself felt hardly any “sympathy” for the materialists’ systems of ethics. He must have found Helvetius’s theory, like *Mandeville’s*, “*exuberant*”. Indeed, at first glance, Smith’s theory seems the opposite of what we find in the works of Helvetius. The reader, we hope, has not yet forgotten how the latter accounts for the regret we feel over the loss of a friend. Let us now read what the celebrated Englishman wrote on the matter: “We sympathise even with the dead ... It is miserable, we think, to be deprived of the light of the sun; to be shut out from life and conversation; to be laid in the cold grave, a prey to corruption and the reptiles of the earth; to be no more thought of in this world, but to be obliterated in a little time, from the affections, and almost from the memory, of their dearest friends and relations... That our sympathy can afford them no consolation seems to be an addition to their calamity” [31] ..., etc. This is, of course, something quite different! But let us take a closer look at this argument. What is meant by Adam Smith’s “*sympathy*”? “How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it ... That we often derive sorrow from the sorrow of others, is a matter of fact too obvious to require any instances to prove it.” The source of this sensitivity to the sorrow of others is seen in the following: “... As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in tie like situation ...” [32] Do

you think there is nothing resembling this theory of sympathy in the works of Helvetius? In his book *De l'Homme* (sect.II, ch.VII) he asks himself what is meant by a humane man. and replies: “*One to whom the spectacle of the misery of others is a mournful spectacle.*” But what does this ability to feel another’s sorrow derive from? We owe it to memories that teach us to identify ourselves with others. “If the child has acquired the habit of identifying itself with the unfortunate, it is the more moved by their misery that, in deploring their plight, it shows compassion for mankind as a whole, and consequently for itself in particular. An infinity of various sentiments then blend with the initial feeling, the sum of these comprising an overall feeling of pleasure which rejoices a noble soul, while giving relief to the unfortunate, a feeling *he is not always able to analyse.*”

The reader will agree that Smith regarded the point of departure in his conclusion – sympathy – in exactly the same way. Helvetius, however, associated sympathy with other and less attractive sentiments. In his opinion, “*One consoles the unfortunate:* 1) to get rid of the physical pangs caused by the view of their sufferings; 2) to enjoy the spectacle of gratitude, which evokes in us at least a vague hope of some distant advantage; 3) to perform an act of power, the exercise of which is always pleasant, because it creates in our minds an image of the pleasures associated with that power; 4) because the idea of happiness is always associated, given good education, with the idea of charity; since that charity, by winning us the esteem and affection of people, can be regarded, like wealth, as a power or means to escape from affliction and derive pleasure.” Of course, this is not quite what Smith said, but it changes nothing in what pertains to sympathy; it shows that Helvetius arrived at

results quite the reverse of the conclusions drawn by the author of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. To the latter, the sense of sympathy is inherent in our “nature”; to Helvetius, our nature contains merely a “sensory impression”. He saw himself constrained to break down into components that which Smith did not even think of touching upon. Smith advanced in one direction; Helvetius chose the *opposite* direction. What grounds are there for surprise if they diverged more and more, and ultimately never met again?

No doubt Helvetius was in no way inclined to pass all our feelings through the filter of sympathy as one of the stages of their development. In this respect, he was not “one-sided”. Smith’s “sympathy” made him eschew the *utilitarian* point of view. To him, just as to Helvetius, social interest provided the foundation and sanction for morality. [33] Only it never occurred to him to deduce that foundation and sanction from the primary elements of human nature. He did not ask himself what formed the foundation of the “supreme wisdom” that controlled the system of human proclivities. He saw a naked *fact* where Helvetius could already see a *process of development*. “That whole account of human nature, however,” Smith remarked, “which deduces all sentiments and affections from self-love ... seems to me to have arisen from some confused misapprehension of the system of sympathy.” [34] He should have said that that system was an attempt to reveal the *origin* of our affections and sentiments, whilst he himself was content with a more or less competent *description* of them. [35]

The contradictions Helvetius was entangled in were, as we have pointed out several times, a consequence of his

metaphysical method. There were also many contradictions caused by his often narrowing his *theoretical point of view* in order to bring out the possibility and ease of achieving certain practical aims. This, incidentally, is to be seen in the instance of our author's "slander" of Regulus.

Helvetius was out to prove that, as a military leader and in keeping with ancient Roman customs, Regulus could not have acted otherwise than he did, even were he pursuing his private ends. This was the "slander" that aroused *Jean-Jacques's* indignation. However, Helvetius did not at all mean that Regulus had *really* pursued his own ends. "*Regulus's deed was, no doubt, the effect of an impetuous enthusiasm that induced him to virtue.*" What, then, was the purpose of his "slander"? It was intended to show that "such enthusiasm could have been kindled in Rome alone". The Republic's most "perfect" legislation could intimately bind its citizens' private interests to those of the State. [36] Hence the heroism of the ancient Romans. *The practical conclusion to be drawn was that if people learnt to act in the same way, then heroic men such as Regulus would certainly appear.* For this conclusion to strike the reader, Helvetius showed him only one side of the question, but that is no proof of his having lost sight of the influence of habit, the association of ideas, "sympathies", "enthusiasm", noble pride, and so on. Nothing of the kind: he only was unable always to find the links between that influence and personal interest, or "sensory impressions", though he did try to do so, since he never forgot that *man is nothing but sensation.* If he did not cope with the task, it was only because of the metaphysical nature of the materialism of his times, but it will always stand to his credit that he drew all the conclusions from his fundamental principle.

The same predominance of the *practical trend* accounted for his perfunctory attitude to the question of whether all men are born with the same abilities. He could not even pose this question correctly. But what did he wish to say in touching upon it? This was very well understood by *Grimm*, who was no great theorist. In his *Correspondance littéraire* (November 1773), he wrote of *De l'Homme* in the following terms: "Its main purpose is to show that the genius, virtues and talents to which nations owe their grandeur and felicity are the effects, not of differences in food, temperament or the live senses, on which laws and administration exert no influence, but of education, over which laws and government have full control." [37] *The practical value* of this kind of view in times of revolutionary ferment can be readily understood.

If man is nothing but a machine driven by "sensory impressions", a machine that is *obliged* to do everything done by the latter, then the role of "*free will*" in the life of any people or individual is equal to nil. If "sensory impressions" make up the principle of people's volitions, needs, passions, sociality, ideas, judgements and actions, then it is clear that the key to mankind's destinies should not be sought in man or his "*nature*"; if all men are equally endowed spiritually, then the imaginary features of race or national character cannot, of course, explain anything in a nation's present-day or past condition. These three logically inescapable conclusions are already highly important *prolegomena* to the philosophy of history as a whole.

According to Helvetius, all nations living *in the same conditions* have *the same kind of laws*, are marked by the same spirit, and are impelled by the same passions. "For this reason, *we find among the American Indians the customs of the ancient Germans*"; for this reason, "*Asia, inhabited for*

the most part by the Malayans, is governed by our ancient feudal laws"; for this reason, "*fetishism was not only the first of religions, but its cult, still preserved today in almost all of Africa, ... was once the universal cult*"; for the same reason, *Greek mythology* has many features similar to those in *Celtic mythology*; for the same reason, finally, the most various peoples often have the same *sayings*. In general, there exists an amazing similarity in the institutions, spirit and faiths of primitive peoples. Like individuals, peoples resemble one another far *more than it seems*.

Footnotes

1. J. Demogeot, *Histoire de la littérature française depuis ses origines jusqu'à nos jours*, 22^o edition, Paris 1886, pp.493-94. The book forms part of *Histoire universelle* which was published by a group of professors under the editorship of V. Duruy.

2. "How illusions horn of the spirit of system should he mistrusted! Helvetius had virtues, but his book is the destruction of all virtue" (La Harpe, *Refutation du livre De l'Esprit*, prononcée au Lycée républicain, dans les séances des 26 et 29 mars et des 3 et 5 avril, Paris l'an V [1797], p.87).

3. Marat also disliked Helvetius. He considered this philosopher merely "a false and superficial mind", his "system" absurd, and his book "a continuous tissue of sophisms carefully embellished with a conceited show of a vast erudition". (Cf. *De l'homme ou des principes et des lois de l'influence de l'âme sur le corps et du corps sur l'âme* par Jean-Paul Marat, docteur en médecine, Amsterdam 1775, pp.XV, XVI, des Discours préliminaire). This book by Marat does not belong to the revolutionary period of his life. Besides, the opinions of revolutionaries are not always revolutionary opinions. According to Marat, "Man, like any animal, is composed of two distinct substances – Soul and Body" ... "Eternal Wisdom" has placed the Soul in the envelope of the brain (!). "It is the fluid of the nerves that is the link of communications between these two disparate substances". "The nervous fluid is the prime agent in mechanical acts. In free acts, it is subordinate to the soul and

becomes the instrument it uses to perform them” (I, pp.24, 40, 107). All this is amazingly trite. In his interpretation of his predecessors and his irritable self-esteem, Marat is highly reminiscent of Dühring.

4. *Geschichte des Materialismus*, 2. Aufl., Iserlohn 1873, I, S.360.

5. *Bréviaire de l’histoire du materialisme*, Paris 1883, pp.645-46.

6. In Helvetius’s opinion, we consider as evident only our own existence, on the contrary, the existence of other bodies is only a probability, “a probability which is no doubt very great and, in practical life, tantamount to manifestness, yet is only probability”. Anyone else voicing something of the kind would have been ranked by Lange among the “critical” minds. However, no “criticism” was able to rehabilitate Helvetius and remove the blot of “superficiality”, which was the first to strike the eye of this thorough historian of materialism.

7. *De l’Esprit*, Discours I, chap.IV.

8. This affinity seems due to Helvetius having had ascribed to him a book entitled *Les progrès de la Raison dans la recherche du vrai*, which was republished in the Paris edition of his works in 1818. The book does not contain a single page of original writing. It consists partly of a translation of some of Toland’s *Letters to Serena* to which were appended several passages from *Système de la Nature* and other more or less known books of the time. All these were carelessly put together and poorly understood by the unknown “author”. Helvetius could not have had anything to do with such a work.

Another book exists, which was ascribed to him: *Le vrai sens du Système de la Nature*. It may have been written by him but we have no firm evidence on this score, and shall refrain from quoting from it, the more so because it adds nothing to what can be found in his books *De l’Esprit* and *De l’Homme*.

9. *Geschichte des Materialismus*, I, S.378. It is surprising how Lange finds “an element” of the Kantian doctrine in Robinet, who said of a thing-in-itself only what was said by Holbach and Helvetius. It is no less surprising that the author of *De la Nature* is numbered among the materialists by Lange, while Helvetius is considered merely to have approached them. What a strange criterion Lange was guided by!

10. Quoted from the book *De l’Homme*, section II, chap.II. In the 1773 edition of this book, it is indicated that the quotation was from

A Treatise on the Principles of Chemistry, which we have been unable to locate. However, we can quote what Priestley said in his discussion with Price: "To make my meaning, if possible, better understood, I will use the following comparison. The power of cutting, in a razor, depends upon a certain cohesion, and arrangement of the parts of which it consists. If we suppose this razor to be wholly dissolved in any acid liquor, its power of cutting will certainly be lost, or cease to be, though no particle of the metal that constituted the razor be annihilated by the process; and its former shape, and power of cutting, etc., may be restored to it after the metal has been precipitated. Thus when the body is dissolved by putrefaction, its power of thinking entirely ceases ..." (A Free Discussion of the Doctrine of Materialism, etc., London 1778, pp.82, 83). This was indeed the viewpoint of the chemist quoted by Helvetius. In this case, we are in no way interested in the religious views that Priestley was able to reconcile with his materialism. Neither is there any need to emphasise that the views on chemistry held by the materialists of the last century are not the views of our days.

11. De l'Homme, section II, chap.X. Helvetius was well aware that man is endowed with memory. However, the organ of memory, he said, is purely physical, its function consisting in reviving our past impressions. It should therefore evoke actual sensations in us. Thus, it is all a matter of the faculty of sensation. Everything in man is sensation.

12. *ibid.*, chap.XVI, the last note to this chapter.

13. Charles Darwin was well aware of what the moralising philosophers understand but rarely: "It was assumed formerly by philosophers ... that the foundation of morality lay in a form of Selfishness; but more recently the 'Greatest happiness principle' has been brought prominently forward. It is, however, more correct to speak of the latter principle as the standard, and not as the motive of conduct", [Plekhanov is quoting from the German translation of Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man*] (*Die Abstammung des Menschen und die geschlechtliche Zuchtwahl*, Stuttgart 1875, S.154).

14. *Système de la Nature*, London 1781, I, p.268.

15. *Geschichte des Materialismus*, I, S.363.

16. *Literaturgeschichte des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Braunschweig 1881, 2. T., S.398.

17. De l'Homme, section IV, chap.IV; De l'Esprit, Discours III, chap.XV.

18. De l'Homme, section II, chap.X.

19. De l'Esprit, Discours III, chap.IX.

20. [Plekhanov is quoting from the German translation of Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man*] *Die Abstammung des Menschen*, Stuttgart 1875, S.166.

21. [... From any time Any genus can be born
And trees would always yield
Constant but changing fruit: anything could produce anything.]

22. De l'Homme, section IV, chap.VI.

23. *ibid.*, chap.X, the last note to this chapter.

24. *ibid.*, chap.XXII.

25. *ibid.*, section VIII, chap.IV.

26. *Réfutation du livre De l'Esprit*, p.8.

27. Helvetius recommended following the example of the geometers. "If some complex problem in mechanics is proposed to them, what do they do? They simplify it; they calculate the speed of bodies in movement, disregarding their density, the resistance of the surrounding fluids, the friction of other bodies, etc." (*De l'Homme*, section IX, chap.I). In almost the same terms, Chernyshevsky recommended simplification of problems of political economy. Helvetius was accused of having slandered Socrates and Regulus. But what Chernyshevsky said of the celebrated suicide of the chaste Lucretia, who did not wish to go on living after her violation, is remarkably reminiscent of Helvetius's thoughts about the heroic captive of the Carthaginians. Chernyshevsky thought that political economy should deal mainly, not with that which exists but with that which should be. Compare this with what Helvetius wrote in a letter to Montesquieu: "Remember that during a discussion at La Brede" (about Montesquieu's *Principes*), "I acknowledged that they apply to the actual conditions; but that a writer who would be useful to people should occupy himself with true maxims in a future and better order of things, rather than with canonising principles that become dangerous from the moment they are taken over by prejudice, with the purpose of utilising and perpetuating them" (Cf. *Œuvres complètes d'Helvétius*, Paris 1818, III, p.261). Many other examples might be added to this surprising one, but we prefer to show the coincidence in the views of these two writers, who were separated by almost a century, only inasmuch as the opportunity has presented itself in our account of Helvetius's theory.

28. “Descartes,” says Flint, “shows incidentally in many passages of his writings that he had looked on social facts with a clear and keen gaze. And so does Malebranche.” But the selfsame Flint acknowledges that “of a science of history Descartes had no notion whatever”, and that “it was only with the decay of Cartesianism that historical science began to flourish in France ...” (cf. *The Philosophy of History in France and Germany, Edinburgh and London 1874*, pp.76-78).

29. *Réfutation du livre De l’Esprit*, pp.57, 61 63, 68 et 69.

30. *Nouvelle réfutation du livre De l’Esprit, à Clermont-Ferrand 1817*, p.46. The anonymous author’s method of adducing proofs reminds one of the arguments used by the highly learned – “learned!” – Damiron. At the beginning of *De l’Esprit*, Helvetius wrote that man owes his superiority over the animals, among other reasons, to the structure of his extremities. “You think,” Damiron thunders, “that giving the horse man’s hands would endow it with man’s mind. It would give it nothing except making it impossible for it to live as a horse” (*Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire de la philosophie au dix-huitième siècle Paris, 1858, I, p.406*). In just the same manner, a certain naive professor of divinity in St. Petersburg disputed Darwin’s theory: “Throw a hen into the water,” he said, “and, according to Darwin, it will grow webs between its digits. I, however, affirm that the poor animal will perish most miserably.”

31. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, London 1873, pp.12, 13. This work published in 1757.

32. *op. cit.*, pp.9, 10.

33. “We do not love our country merely as a part of the great society of mankind: we love it for its own sake, and independently of any such consideration. That wisdom which contrived the system of human affections, as well as that of every other part of nature, seems to have judged that the interest of the great society of mankind would be best promoted by directing the principal attention of each individual to that particular portion of it, which was most within the sphere both of his abilities and of his understanding...” (*op. cit.*, pp.203, 204).

34. *ibid.*, p.281.

35. All this is quite plain, yet seems hard to understand. “Virtue,” said Huxley, “is undoubtedly beneficent; but the man is to be envied to whom her ways seem in anywise playful ... The calculation of the greatest happiness is not performed quite so easily as a rule of

three sum ... The moral law ... rests in the long run upon instinctive intuitions...” [Plekhanov is quoting from the French translation of Huxley’s Hume (English Men of Letters).] (Hume, sa vie, sa philosophie, trad, par G. Compayre, Paris 1880, pp.281, 284). If the great English natural scientist wished to disprove, by such considerations, eighteenth-century materialist morality, he was greatly in error and had forgotten his Darwin. Incidentally, he must have been thinking only of lesser men, such as Bentham and John Stuart Mill. In that case, he was right.

36. De l’Esprit, Discours III, chap.XXII.

37. Holbach did not share this opinion of Helvetius’s, though he called him a “celebrated moralist”. It was, in his opinion, “mistaken to think that upbringing can do everything with man; it can only make use of the material given by Nature; it can sow successfully only in soil provided by Nature” (cf. La morale universelle, section V, chap.III; cf. also op. cit., section I, chap.IV). Holbach does not ask, besides, what part society provided in what he called the individual’s nature. Incidentally, Helvetius was himself well aware that his view could not be precisely proved. He only thought that it could at least be asserted that “this influence” (i.e., that of organisation on the minds of fairly well-developed people) “was so small that it might be considered a negligible quantity in algebraic calculations, so that what had previously been ascribed to the effect of physical properties and had not been accounted for by this cause, was fully explicable by moral causes” (i.e., the influence of the social environment – G.P.). It was almost in the same terms that Chernyshevsky spoke of the influence of race on the destinies of peoples.

Notes

1*. Actually it was Marquise Dudefin who said so; she also, like de Bouffler, held a celebrated literary salon.

2*. *Frau Buchholtz* – a character from a series of novels by the mid-nineteenth century German humourist Stinde; an embodiment of Prussian philistinism.

III

Marx

The eighteenth-century materialists thought that they had done with idealism. The old metaphysics was dead and buried, and Reason wished to hear no more of it. However, things soon look a new turn: already in the epoch of the “philosophers”, a revival of speculative philosophy began in Germany, and during the first four decades of the current nineteenth century a deaf ear was turned to materialism, which was itself now considered dead and buried. To the entire world of philosophy and literature, the materialist doctrine seemed “drab”, “gloomy” and “deadening,” as it did to Goethe: “it made people shudder as though it were a spectre”. [1] For its part the speculative philosophy thought that its rival had been overcome for all time.

It must be acknowledged that speculative philosophy possessed a considerable advantage over materialism. It made a study of things in their *development*, their *inception* and *destruction*. However, to examine things from this latter point of view meant eschewing a mode of examination so characteristic of the Enlighteners, which, by eliminating from phenomena every internal movement of life, turned them into fossils whose nature and nexus were incomprehensible. Hegel, that nineteenth-century titan of idealism, never ceased from waging the struggle against this mode of examination; to him, it was “not free and objective

thinking, since *it did not allow the object to freely determine itself from within itself but presupposed it as being ready*". [2] The restored idealist philosophy lauded a method that was the diametrical opposite – the *dialectical* – and used it with amazing success. Since we have had frequent occasion to mention this method, and since we shall have further to deal with it, it may be useful to describe it in the words of Hegel himself, that master of idealist dialectics.

“Dialectic,” he says, “is usually regarded as an external skill which arbitrarily brings confusion into certain notions and creates in them merely an *appearance of contradictions*, so that it is not these definitions that are illusory, but this appearance, whereas the definitions of the intellect, on the contrary, are true. Indeed, dialectic is often nothing else but a subjective play which arbitrarily advances now proofs and now denials of a definite proposition – a reasoning in which content is absent and whose emptiness is concealed behind this ingenuity, which creates that kind of reasoning. However, in its real character, dialectic is the genuine own nature of the definitions of the intellect, of things, and of the finite in general. Reflection is in itself a movement of thought which transcends isolated definiteness and correlates it with others, thanks to which this definiteness is brought into a certain connection, but, besides that, preserves its former isolated significance. Dialectic is, on the contrary, an immanent transition of one definition into another, in which it is revealed that these definitions of the intellect are one-sided and limited, i.e., contain a negation of themselves. *Everything finite is doomed to self-destruction*. Consequently, dialectic is the motive soul of any scientific advance of thought and is a principle which alone brings into the content of science an *immanent connection and necessity*.”

Everything that surrounds us can serve as an instance of dialectic. “A planet now stands in this place, but in itself tends to be in another place, giving effect to its Otherness by

its being in motion ... As for the presence of dialectic in the spiritual world, and in particular, in the legal and moral domains, it should here merely be recalled that, according to the experience of all men, any state of affairs or action carried to extremes changes into its opposite; this dialectic, we shall note in passing, is recognised in many proverbs. Thus, there is a proverb that says: *Summuin jus, summa injuria*, which means that an abstract right carried to extremes changes into injustice” ..., etc. [3]

The French materialists' metaphysical method refers to the dialectical method of German idealism in the same way as elementary mathematics stands to higher mathematics. In the former, the notions are strictly limited and separated from one another as by an “abyss”: a polygon is a polygon and nothing else; a circle is a circle and nothing else. Already in planimetry, however, we are obliged to use what is known as the *method of limits*, which rocks our worthy and immovable notions and strangely brings them close to one another. How is it proved that the area of a circle is equal to the product of the perimeter and half of the radius? It is said that the difference between the area of a regular polygon inscribed in a circle and the area of that circle can be made an arbitrarily small magnitude, given the condition that we take a sufficiently large number of its sides. If we indicate the area, perimeter and diagonal of a regular polygon, inscribed in a circle, by means of a , p , and r , respectively, then we get that $a = p \cdot \frac{1}{2}r$; here a and $p \cdot \frac{1}{2}r$ are magnitudes that change together with the number of sides but always remain equal among themselves; therefore their *limits* will also be equal. If we denote by means of A , C and R the area, circumference and radius of a circle respectively then A is the limit of a , C is the limit of p , and R is the limit of r ;

therefore $A = C \cdot \frac{1}{2}R$. Thus, a *polygon turns* into a circle; it is thus that the circle is considered *in the process of its becoming*. This is already a remarkable upheaval in mathematical notions, and it is this upheaval that the higher analysis takes as its *points of departure*. Differential calculus deals with *infinitesimal* magnitudes, or, as Hegel puts it, “it has to do with magnitudes which *are in the process of disappearing* – neither *before* their disappearance, for then they are finite magnitudes, not *after*, for then they are nothing.” [4]

However strange and paradoxical this device may seem, it renders mathematics incalculable services, thereby proving that it is the diametrical opposite of the *absurdity* it might be taken for at first. The eighteenth-century “philosophers” had a high appreciation of its advantages, and they engaged a great deal in the higher analysis. But these very people, who, like *Condorcet*, for instance, made excellent use of this weapon in their calculations, would have been greatly surprised to learn that this dialectical device should be applied in the study of *all the phenomena science deals with, irrespective of the sphere they pertain to*. They would have replied that *human nature* is at least just as firm and eternal as the rights and duties of people and citizens, which derive from that nature. The German idealists held a different view. Hegel affirmed that “*there is nothing that is not a condition ... between Being and Nothingness*”.

As long as, in the field of *geology*, there held sway the theory of cataclysms, sudden upheavals, which with one hammer blow changed the surface of the globe and destroyed the old species of animals and plants to make room for new ones, the mode of thinking was metaphysical. But when this

theory was rejected, yielding place to the idea of the slow development of the Earth's crust under the lengthy influence of the same forces that also operate in our days, then the *dialectical* standpoint was taken up.

As long as it was thought in *biology* that species are *immutable*, the mode of thinking was *metaphysical*. This was the view held by the French materialists, who were constantly returning to it even when trying to give it up. Present-day biology has shed this view once and for all. The theory that bears the name of Darwin is a *dialectical* theory in its essence.

At this point, the following remark must be made. However healthy the reaction against the old metaphysical theories in natural science was, it created, in its turn, much regrettable muddled thinking. There appeared a trend towards interpreting new theories in the sense of the old expression: *natura non facit salturn*, this leading to another extreme: attention was now being paid only to the process of *gradual quantitative change* in a given phenomenon; its going over into another phenomenon remained quite incomprehensible. *This was the old metaphysics but placed on its head*. In just the same old way, phenomena remained separated from one another by an *unbridgeable gulf*. So firmly is this metaphysics established in the minds of the present-day evolutionists that there are now a number of "*sociologists*" who reveal a total lack of understanding whenever their researches come up against *revolution*. As they see it, *revolution* is incompatible with *evolution*: *historia non facit saltum*. They are not in the least disturbed if, despite this historical wisdom, revolutions, and even great ones, take place. They hold fast to their theory: so much the

worse for revolutions, which disturb its peacefulness; they are considered “*maladies*”. *Dialectical* idealism had already condemned this appalling confusion of ideas, and fought against it. Here is what Hegel says in respect of the above-mentioned expression: “It is said *natura non facit saltum*; and ordinary imagination, when it has to conceive a *becoming* or *passing away*, thinks it has conceived them when it imagines them as a *gradual emergence* or disappearance”. However, dialectic most convincingly shows that “changes of Being are, in general, not only a transition of one quantity into another but also a transition from the qualitative into the quantitative and conversely: a process of becoming something else which *breaks off gradualness* and is qualitatively something else as against the preceding being. Water, on being cooled, does not become hard little by little, gradually reaching the consistency of ice after having passed through the consistency of a paste, but is suddenly hard; when it has already attained freezing-point, it may, if standing still, be wholly liquid, and a slight shake brings it into the condition of hardness.

“The notion of the gradualness of becoming is based upon the idea that that which becomes is already, sensibly or otherwise, Actually there, and is imperceptible only on account of its smallness; the gradualness of vanishing is based on the idea that Notbeing or the Other which is assuming its place is equally there, only is not yet noticeable; there, not in the sense that the Other is contained in *itself* in the Other which is there, but that it is there as Determinate Being, only unnoticeable.” [5]

Thus:

1. *all that is finite is such that cancels itself, is transmuted into its opposite.* This transition is effected with the aid of the nature inherent in every phenomenon, which contains forces that engender its opposite.

2. The gradual *quantitative* changes in a given content ultimately turn into *qualitative* distinctions. The features of that conversion are those of a *leap, a break in the gradualness*. It is highly erroneous to think that Nature or history makes no leaps.

Such are the characteristic features of the dialectical worldoutlook, which it would be useful to note here.

In its application to social phenomena (and we are dealing with them alone), the dialectical method has created a veritable revolution. It will be no exaggeration to say that to it we owe an understanding of human history as a *law-governed process*. The materialist “philosophers” saw in the history of mankind merely the *conscious* acts of more or less wise and virtuous people, but in the main of not very wise and quite unvirtuous people. Dialectical idealism surmised the existence of *necessity* where a first glance reveals merely the *unordered play of chance*, merely an endless struggle between individual passions and purposes. Even Helvetius, who, with his “*assumption*” that in history, just as in Nature, everything “*occurs and acts of itself*” (these are his own words), drew closer to the dialectical point of view; even he accounted for historical events only through the qualities of *individuals* in possession of political power. In his opinion, Montesquieu was in error when, in his book *Sur la grandeur et la décadence des Romains*, he *ignored the fortunate play of circumstances that had been of service to Rome*. He said that Montesquieu “fell into the shortcoming, all too common with reasoners, of wishing to ascribe Reason to everything, while at the same time falling into the error of all armchair scholars who, forgetful of mankind, ascribe with excessive ease constant views and uniform principles to all bodies” (Helvetius is speaking here of political “bodies” such

as the Roman Senate) “while very often it is an individual who conducts to his own liking the grave assemblies called Senates”. [6]

How different from this is the theory of Schelling, who asserts that, in history, *freedom* (i.e., *the conscious acts of people*) *turns into necessity, while necessity turns into freedom*. Schelling regards the following question as *the most important problem of philosophy*: “what is it that, parallel with our acting perfectly freely, i.e., with full consciousness, leads to something arising in us in the form of something conscious, which has never existed in our minds and could never have arisen if our freedom were granted full play?” [7]

To *Hegel*, “world history is progress in the consciousness of freedom, a progress we have to cognise in its necessity”. Like *Schelling* he thinks that “in world history, thanks to the acts of men in general, results are also obtained which are somewhat different from those which they have striven for and achieved, from results they have immediate knowledge of, and wish; they are out to ensure that their interests are met, but, thanks to that, something further is realised, something that is latent in them, but is not consciously realised and formed no part of their intention”. [8]

It is clear that, from this point of view, it is not men’s “opinions” that “govern the world”, and it is not in them that one should seek for a key to historical events. In its development, “public opinion” obeys laws which mould it with the same necessity that determines the movement of celestial bodies. It was thus that a solution was found for the

antinomy that the “philosophers” were constantly coming up against:

1. *Public opinion governs the world; it determines the relations among members of society; it creates the social environment.*
2. *Man is a product of the social environment; his opinions are determined by the features of that environment.[9]*

Everything depends on legislation, the “philosophers” reiterated, firmly convinced that any people’s mores depend on its legislation. On the other hand, they reiterated just as often that it was corrupt morals that led to the downfall of the civilisation of antiquity. What we have here is just another *antinomy*: 1) legislation creates morals; 2) morals create legislation. Such antinomies comprised, so to say, both the essence and the misfortune of eighteenth-century philosophical thought, which was incapable of solving them, getting rid of them, or comprehending the causes of the horrible muddle in which it found itself again and again.

The *metaphysician* considers and studies things one after another and in their isolation from one another. When he feels the need to provide an overall picture, he examines things in their *interaction*; at this point he comes to a halt, and does not, and cannot, go any further, since to him things remain separated from one another by a gulf, and since he has no conception of their development to explain either their origins or the relations existing between them.

Dialectical idealism crosses these borders, which the metaphysicians find impassable. It regards both aspects of the relation of interaction, not as “directly given” but as “moments of something tertiary and higher, which is

Notion". Thus, Hegel examines the morals and state structure of Sparta. "If, for example," he says, "we consider the *mores* of the Spartan people as the result of their state structure and, conversely, their state structure as the result of their *mores*, this mode of examination may be correct, yet it does not give final satisfaction, because in fact we have understood neither the state structure nor the *mores* of this people. That is possible only if it is realised that these two aspects, and also all the other aspects revealed by the life and history of the Spartan people, have a Notion as their foundation." [10]

The French philosophers harboured only *contempt*, or rather only *hatred*, for the *Middle Ages*. Helvetius looked upon feudalism as the "*height of absurdity*". Though Hegel was very far from any romantic idealization of the *mores* and institutions of medieval times, he regarded the latter as a necessary element in mankind's development. *Moreover*, he already saw that the internal contradictions of medieval social life had given rise to present-day society.

The French philosophers saw in religion merely a mass of superstitions springing from mankind's own stupidity and the fraud practised by the priests and the prophets. They could only *wage a struggle* against religion. However useful this kind of work was for their times, it made not the least contribution to the scientific study of religion. That study *was prepared* by dialectical materialism. It will suffice merely to compare *Strauss's Das Leben Jesu* with *Holbach's Critical History of Jesus Christ* to see the vast step forward made in the philosophy of religion under the beneficial influence of Hegel's dialectical method. [11]

When the “philosophers” made a study of the history of philosophy they did so to cull therein arguments supporting their views, or else to destroy the systems of their idealistic predecessors. Hegel did not dispute his precursors’ systems, which he considered various stages in the development of a “*single philosophy*”. Any particular philosophy is a daughter of its times; “the most recent philosophy is the outcome of all preceding philosophies and must therefore contain the principles of all of them; therefore, if only it is a philosophy, it is the most developed, richest and most concrete philosophy”. [12]

A “perfect legislation” was one of the favourite subjects studied by the philosophers, each of whom had his own Utopia on this score. Dialectical idealism cold-shouldered such studies. “A State,” says Hegel, “is an individual totality, of which you cannot take any particular side, even a supremely important one, such as its political constitution; and deliberate and decide on it in isolation.... One must understand the spirit of a people from which everything in the State springs; it develops of itself, and in its development one can distinguish certain periods, for each of which a certain constitution is necessary, which is not a matter of choice but is in keeping with the spirit of the times ... Second and further: it is not only the constitution that is determined by the spirit of a people, but that spirit of a people is a link in the course of the development of the World Spirit, in which individual constitutions occur.” [13]

In a word, dialectical idealism regarded the Universe as a single whole “*developing from its own Notion*”. A cognition of that integrity and a revelation of the process of its development – such was the task that philosophy set itself –

a noble, majestic and admirable task! A philosophy that set itself such a task could not seem “drab” or “deadening” to anybody. Quite the reverse: it evoked universal admiration by the fullness of its life, the irresistible force of its movement, and the beauty of its brilliant colours. Yet the noble attempt launched by idealistic dialectical philosophy remained uncompleted; it did not and could not complete it. After rendering the human spirit invaluable services, German idealism fell into decline in order, as it were, to provide fresh proof for its own theory, and show from its own example that “*all that is finite is such that cancels itself, is transmuted into its opposite*”. Ten years after Hegel’s death, *materialism* again appeared on the arena of philosophical development, and to this day has not ceased from scoring victories over its old opponent.

What is that *Notion*, that Absolute Idea, that World Spirit of which German speculative philosophy kept on speaking? Is there any means of cognising that mysterious being which, it was thought, gives movement and life to everything?

Indeed, there exists such a means, and a very simple one at that; only it calls for careful examination. If that is given, a most wonderful transformation takes place. That *Absolute Idea*, which is so irresistible in its movement, so luscious and fruitful, mother to everything that has been, is and will be in future centuries, loses all lustre, becomes immovable, proves a *pure abstraction* and, very far from being able to explain anything, humbly asks for the least explanation of itself. *Sic transit gloria ... ideae*.

The Absolute Idea, with all its immanent laws, is merely a personification of the *process of our own thinking*. Anyone

who appeals to that Idea for an explanation of the phenomenon of Nature or social evolution abandons the firm soil of facts and enters the *realm of shadows*. That is exactly what happened to the German idealists.

In a book that came out in Frankfort on the Main in 1845 and was written by two men whose names won fame in the second half of the nineteenth century, we find a splendid exposure of the “*mystery of speculative constructions*”.

“If from real apples, pears, strawberries and almonds I form the general idea ‘Fruit’, if I go further and *imagine* that my abstract idea ‘Fruit’, derived from real fruit, is an entity existing outside me, is indeed the *true* essence of the pear, the apple, etc., then – in the *language of speculative philosophy* – I am declaring that ‘Fruit’ is the ‘*Substance*’ of the pear, the apple, the almond, etc. I am saying, therefore, that to be a pear is not essential to the pear, that to be an apple is not essential to the apple; that what is essential to these things is not their real existence, perceptible to the senses, but the essence that I have abstracted from them and then foisted on them, the essence of my idea – ‘Fruit’. I therefore declare apples, pears, almonds, etc., to be mere forms of existence, *modi*, of ‘Fruit’. My finite understanding supported by my senses does, of course, *distinguish* an apple from a pear and a pear from an almond, but my speculative reason declares these sensuous differences inessential and irrelevant. It sees in the apple *the same* as in the pear, and in the pear the same as in the almond, namely, ‘Fruit’. Particular real fruits are no more than *semblances*, whose true essence is ‘*the Substance*’ – ‘*Fruit*’.” [14]

In essence, however, German speculative philosophy did not adhere to the viewpoint of substance. “Absolute substance,” says Hegel, “is truth, but it is not yet all the truth; it must also be understood as effective and living of itself, and for that reason be denned as Spirit”. Let us see how this higher and more truthful point of view is achieved.

“If apples, pears, almonds and strawberries are really nothing: but ‘*the Substance*’, ‘*the Fruit*’, the question arises: Why does ‘*the Fruit*’ manifest itself to me sometimes as an apple, sometimes as a pear, sometimes as an almond? Why this *appearance of diversity* which so obviously contradicts my speculative conception of ‘*Unity*’, ‘*the Substance*’, ‘*the Fruit*’?”

“This, answers the speculative philosopher, is because ‘*the Fruit*’ is not dead, undifferentiated, motionless, but living, self-differentiating moving essence. The diversity of the ordinary fruits is significant not only to *my* sensuous understanding, but also for ‘*the Fruit*’ itself and for speculative reason. The different ordinary fruits are different manifestations of the life of the ‘*one Fruit*’; they are crystallisations of ‘*the Fruit*’ itself. Thus in the apple ‘*the Fruit*’ gives itself an apple-like existence, in the pear – a pear-like existence. We must therefore no longer say, as one might from the standpoint of the Substance: a pear is; ‘*the Fruit*’, an apple is ‘*the Fruit*’, an almond is ‘*the Fruit*’, but ‘*the Fruit*’ presents itself as a pear, ‘*the Fruit*’ presents itself as an apple, ‘*the Fruit*’ presents itself as an almond; and the differences which distinguish apples, pears, and almonds from one another are the self-differentiations of ‘*the Fruit*’ and make the particular fruits different members of the life-process of ‘*the Fruit*’ ...

“We see that if the Christian religion knows only *one* Incarnation of God, speculative philosophy has as many incarnations as there are things, just as it has here in every fruit an incarnation of the Substance, of the Absolute Fruit. The main interest for the speculative philosopher is therefore to produce the *existence* of the real ordinary fruits and to say in some mysterious way Ilial there are apples, pears, almonds and raisins ...

“It goes without saying that the speculative philosopher accomplishes this continuous creation only by representing universally known qualities of the apple, the pear, etc., which exist in reality, as determining features *invented* by him, by giving the *names* of the real things to what abstract reason alone can create, to abstract formulas of reason, finally, by declaring his *own* activity, by which *he* passes from the idea

of an apple to the idea of a pear, to be the *self-activity* of the Absolute Subject, 'the Fruit'." [15]

This materialist criticism of idealism is as harsh as it is just. The "Absolute Idea", the "Spirit" of German speculative philosophy, was nothing but an abstraction. However, an abstraction which is considered the ultimate solution of the most profound problems of science, can be only detrimental to the latter's progress. And if those thinkers who addressed themselves to this abstraction rendered great services to human thought, they did so *despite* that abstraction, not *thanks* to it, inasmuch as it did not hamper their study of the actual movement of things. We find splendid thoughts in Schelling's philosophy of Nature. He possessed considerable knowledge in the realm of the natural sciences, but to him the "*material universe*" was nothing but the "*revealed world of Ideas*". Perhaps he was not contradicting himself when he asserted that "*magnetism is a universal act of inspiration, the implanting of unity in multiplicity, of notion in difference*" and that "that very intrusion of the subjective into the objective, which in the ideal ... is self-consciousness, is here expressed in being". But does this take us a single step towards a cognition of magnetic phenomena or an understanding of magnetism's nature? Not only have we failed to make any progress but we run tremendous risk of denying actual facts to please a theory which may seem to us more or less ingenious but in any case is absolutely arbitrary.

The same may be said of the history of mankind. As Sir Alexander Grant once put it, to borrow philosophy from Hegel's *History of Philosophy* is tantamount to borrowing poetry from Shakespeare, i.e., is almost inevitable. In certain respects, a study of Hegel's philosophy of history, or of his

aesthetics, his philosophy of law or his logic, is necessary at present too. But it is not the idealist point of view that gives all these works their value. On the contrary, that point of view is quite *barren*: it is *fruitful* only in respect of *engendering confusion*. Thus, for instance, Hegel describes, with an ingenuity that would do credit to an expert, the influence of the geographical environment on the historical development of human societies. But is he able to explain anything at all when he says that “the Determinate Spirit of a people, since it is active and its freedom derives from Nature, bears a specific geographical and climatic impress thanks to the latter”? Or – to take up an example he himself makes use of – does he bring us a single step closer to an understanding of the history of Sparta when he says that the mores of that country, like its State structure, were merely moments in the evolution of notion? It is true, of course, that the viewpoint of the “French philosophers”, against whom he cites this example (the viewpoint of interaction, which remains an insurmountable boundary of their most fruitful researches), is quite insufficient. It is, however, not enough to reject this point of view; what is essential is to show in what measure a “*Notion*” can be a secret mainspring promoting social progress. Not only was Hegel *never able* to reply to this perfectly lawful question but he seems to have been little satisfied with the light notion allegedly shed on the history of mankind. He felt the need to stand on firm ground and make a careful study of *social relations*, so he ended up by categorically stating that “*property inequality was the main cause of Lacedaemon’s decline.*” All this is true, but that truth does not contain a jot of *absolute idealism*. [16]

Try to imagine that someone has explained to us with amazing” clarity the mechanism of the movements of animals but then goes on to say, with the utmost gravity, that the vital and concealed cause of all these movements is to be found in the *shadows* cast by moving bodies. That someone is an “*absolute*” idealist. Perhaps, we shall share the views of this idealist for a certain, time, but I hope that in the final analysis we shall understand the *science of mechanics* and bid “a long farewell” to his “*philosophy of mechanics*”.

That, at least, is how various disciples of Hegel behaved. Though they were capable of a high appreciation of the advantages provided by the great thinker’s method, they went over to the *materialist point of view*. The excerpts from *The Holy Family* cited above will suffice to show how definitive and ruthless their criticism of idealist speculative philosophy was.

The dialectical method is the most characteristic feature of present-day materialism; therein lies its essential distinction from the old metaphysical materialism of the eighteenth century. One can therefore form an opinion of the profundity of the views and the seriousness of those historians of literature and philosophy who have not deigned to notice that distinction. The late Lange divided his *History of Materialism* into two parts – materialism *before* and *after* Kant.

Another kind of division must of necessity suggest itself to anyone who has not been blinded by the spirit of some school or by cut-and-dried concepts: materialism after *Hegel* was no longer what it had been *prior* to him. But

could anything else have been expected? To judge of the influence nineteenth-century idealism has had on the development of materialism, one should first and foremost realise what the latter has become today. This was something that Lange never did. Though in his book he spoke of all and sundry, even of nonentities like *Heinrich Szolbe*, he made no mention at all of dialectical materialism. This learned historian of materialism did not even suspect that there were contemporary materialists who were remarkable in quite a different way than Messrs. Vogt, Moleschott and Co. [17]

The ease with which dialectical materialism was able to overcome idealism should seem inexplicable to anyone who lacks a clear understanding of the fundamental question separating the materialists from the idealists. People guided by *dualist* prejudices usually think, for example, that there are *two completely different substances in man: body or matter*, on the one hand, and on the other, the *soul, the spirit*. Though they do not know and often do not even ask how one of these substances can affect the other, people nevertheless consider that they are fully aware it would be “*one-sided*” to explain phenomena with the aid of only one of these two substances. Such people are smugly aware of their superiority over the two extremes, and are *neither* idealists *nor* materialists. However venerable the age of this longstanding mode of considering philosophical questions may be, it is in essence worthy only of the philistine. Philosophy has never been able to feel satisfaction with such “*many-sidedness*”: on the contrary, it has tried to rid itself of the *dualism* so beloved of *eclectic* minds. The most outstanding philosophical systems have always been monist, i.e., have regarded *spirit* and *matter* merely as two

classes of phenomena whose cause is inseparably one and the same. We have already seen that the French materialists regarded the “*faculty of sensation*” as *one of the properties of matter*. To Hegel, Nature was merely an “*otherness*” of the Absolute Idea. This “*otherness*” is in certain measure the Idea’s Fall from Grace; Nature is the creation of the Spirit, existing only thanks to its favour. This imaginary Fall in no way precludes the identity in substance between Nature and Spirit; on the contrary, it *presupposes* that identity. Hegel’s Absolute Spirit is not the *limited* spirit of the philosophy of *limited* minds. Hegel was well able to ridicule those who saw in Matter and Spirit two different substances “just as mutually impenetrable as any matter is assumed to be in respect of another, existing only in their mutual non-being in each other pores, just like with Epicurus who gave the gods sojourn in the pores of the Cosmos, but quite consistently burdened them with no communion with the world”. Despite his hostility towards materialism, Hegel appreciated its *monist trend*. [18] But if we have adopted the *monist* point of view, it is experience itself that should decide which of the two theories – *idealism* or *materialism* – provides the better explanation of the phenomena we encounter in the study of Nature and human societies. It will easily be seen that even in the field of *psychology*, a science studying facts that can be called mostly phenomena of the spirit, our work proceeds with greater success when we accept Nature as *primary*, and consider the actions of the spirit as necessary consequences of the movement of matter. “Surely no one,” says *agnostic* Huxley, “who is cognisant of the facts of the case, nowadays doubts that the roots of psychology lie in the physiology of the nervous system. What we call the operations of the mind are functions of the brain, and the

materials of consciousness are products of cerebral activity. Cabanis may have made use of crude and misleading phraseology when he said that the brain secretes thought as the liver secretes bile; but the conception which that much-abused phrase embodies is, nevertheless, far more consistent with fact than the popular notion that the mind is a metaphysical entity seated in the head, but as independent of the brain as a telegraph operator is of his instrument.” [19] In the area of the social sciences as understood in the broad sense of the term, idealism, as we have already pointed out, has often arrived at a consciousness of its incapacity, and resorted to a purely materialist explanation of historical facts. We shall again emphasise that the great revolution in German philosophy in the fifth decade of our century was greatly fostered by the essentially *monist* nature of German idealism. “It is, in fact, the case,” Robert Flint says, “that Hegelianism, although the most elaborate of all idealistic systems, presents only the feeblest of barriers even to materialism.” This is perfectly true, though Flint should have said “as a consequence of being” instead of “although”.

The selfsame Flint is quite right when he goes on to say the following: “It is true that thought is placed by it” (Hegel’s system. – *G.P.*) “before matter, and matter is represented as the stage of a process of thought; but since the thought which is placed before matter is unconscious thought – thought which is neither subject nor object, which is therefore not real thought, nor even so much as a ghost or phantasm of thought – *matter is still the first reality*, the first actual existence, and the power in matter, the tendency in it to rise above itself, the root and basis of spirit subjective, objective, and absolute.” [20] It will easily be

understood how this inconsistency, *inevitable* in idealism, facilitated the revolution in philosophy we are referring to. This inconsistency makes itself particularly felt in the *philosophy of history*. “Hegel is guilty of being doubly half-hearted: firstly in that, while declaring that philosophy is the mode of existence of the Absolute Spirit, he refuses to recognise the *actual* philosophical individual as the Absolute Spirit; secondly, in that he lets the Absolute Spirit as the Absolute Spirit make history only *in appearance*. For since the Absolute Spirit becomes *conscious* of itself as the creative World Spirit only *post festum* in the philosopher, its making of history exists only in the consciousness, in the opinion and conception of the philosopher, i.e., only in the speculative imagination.” These lines come from *Karl Marx*, the father of present-day dialectical materialism. [21]

The significance of the philosophical revolution brought about by this man of genius was expressed by him in the following brief words: “My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. To Hegel, the life-process of the human brain, *i.e.*, the process of thinking, which, under the name of ‘the Idea’, he even transforms into an independent subject, is the *demiurgos* of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of ‘the Idea’. With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought.” [22]

Before setting forth the results Marx obtained with the aid of this method, we shall make a cursory review of the trends that emerged in French historical science during the *Restoration*.

The French “philosophers” were convinced that it was public opinion that governed the world. When they recollected that, according to their own sensualist theory, man, with his opinions, is a product of the social environment, they averred that “*everything depends on legislation*”, supposing that this brief but instructive reply settled the question. Further, to them “legislation” meant first and foremost *public law*, the “government” of each particular country. During the first decades of our century, this point of view was ever more rejected. It was beginning to be asked whether it would not be more correct to seek for the roots of *political institutions in civil law*. [23] The replies to this question were now affirmative.

“It is through an examination of political institutions,” Guizot wrote, “that most writers, scholars, historians or publicists have sought to understand the condition of society, and the degree or brand of its civilisation. It would have been wiser to begin with a study of society itself in order to ascertain and understand its political institutions. Prior to becoming cause, institutions are an effect; society creates them before itself being modified by their influence and, instead of trying to discover in the system or forms of government what the condition of a people has been, one should first and foremost examine the condition of a people to learn what its government should or could be ... Society, its composition, the way of life of individuals according to their social standing, the relations between various classes of individuals, and finally the *status of individuals* – this is assuredly the first question that attracts the attention of the historian who wishes to know how peoples lived, and of the publicist writer who wishes to learn how they were governed.” [24]

What we have here is a complete revolution in the historical views of the “philosophers”. But Guizot goes even farther in his analysis of the “composition of society”. In his opinion, the civil life of all *modern peoples* is intimately linked

with *landed-property relations*, which is why the latter should be studied before civil life. "To understand political institutions, one should know the various social conditions and their relations. To understand the various social conditions one should know the nature and relations of landed property." [25] It was from this point of view that Guizot examined the history of France under the *Merovingians* and the *Carolingians*. In his history of the English Revolution, he took a new step forward in regarding that event as an episode in the class struggle of modern society, making *property relations* rather than *landed-property relations* the backbone of political movements.

Augustin Thierry arrived at the same views. In his writings on the history of England and France, he regarded the development of society as the motivation of political events. He was very far from thinking that the world was governed by public opinion, which to him meant only a more or less appropriate expression of social interests. Here is an example of his understanding of the struggle waged by Parliament against Charles I.

"Anyone whose ancestors came over with the Conqueror, left his castle for the Royalist camp to take a position in keeping with his rank. The townsmen flocked to the opposite camp ... Idlers and those who wanted only enjoyment without labour, irrespective of the caste they belonged to, joined the Royalist forces to defend their own interests; at the same time families of the caste of former conquerors who had made good in industry joined the Parliamentary party. On both sides the war was conducted for these positive interests. All the rest was merely a semblance or a pretext. Those who defended the cause of the *subjects* were mostly *Presbyterians*, i.e., were opposed to all and any subordination even in religion. Those who supported the opposite cause belonged to the Church of England or the Catholic faith. That was because, even in the

realm of religion, they wanted power and the right to tax others.” [26]

This is fairly clear, *but seems clearer than it actually is*. Political revolutions are indeed a consequence of the struggle that classes wage for their positive interests, their *economic* interests. But what is the cause that gives the economic interests of a particular class one form or another? What is the cause that gives rise to classes in society? True, Augustin Thierry speaks of “*manufactures*”, but with him this concept is very vague, and to cope with this difficulty, he goes back to the Norman Conquest. Thus, the classes whose struggle gave rise to the English Revolution owed their descent to the Norman Conquest. “*All this began with the Conquest,*” he says, “*and it is the Conquest that underlies the whole matter.*” But what is to be understood by conquest? Does it not return us to the activities of “*government*”, for which we have attempted to find an explanation? Even if we disregard all this, the fact of conquest can never account for the *nodal consequences* of that conquest. Prior to the conquest of Gaul by the Barbarians, it had been conquered by the Romans, but the social consequences of these two conquests were quite different. Wherein lay the cause? Without any doubt, the Gauls of Caesar’s times lived in conditions different from that of the fifth-century Gauls; neither can there be any doubt that the Roman conquerors in no way resembled the “Barbarians” – the Franks and the Burgundians. But can all these distinctions be accounted for by other conquests? We can enumerate all kinds of *known* and all *possible* conquests. Nevertheless, we shall remain within a vicious circle; each time we return to the inescapable conclusion that there is, in the life of peoples, a something,

an x, an unknown quantity, to which the “*strength*” of the peoples themselves and of the various classes existing in them owes its *origin*, its *direction* and its *modifications*. In short, it is clear that such “strength” is based on a something, so that the question can be reduced to a definition of the nature of that unknown quantity. [27]

Guizot is also hemmed in by the selfsame contradictions. What do the “*property relations*” in the peoples spoken of in his *Essais* owe their origin to? They stem from the actions of *conquerors*: “After the conquest, the Franks became landowners ... The absolute independence of their landed property was their right, just as the independence of their persons was; that independence had no other guarantee than the strength of the possessor but, in using his strength to defend it, he thought he was exercising his right”, etc. [28]

It is no less characteristic that, for Guizot, civil life was closely linked with “landed-property relations” *only* in the case of “modern peoples”.

Neither Mignet nor any other French historian of the time (and the French historians of the time were outstanding in more than one respect) was able to extricate himself from the difficulty that brought Guizot and Augustin Thierry to a standstill. They were already well aware that the cause of society’s development should be sought in its economic relations. They already realised that underlying *political movements* were *economic interests*, which were paving a way there. *After* the French Revolution, that epic struggle waged by the bourgeoisie against the nobility and the clergy, [29] it would have been hard to fail to understand that. However, they were unable to explain the *origin* of

society's economic structure. Whenever they dealt with this subject, they addressed themselves to conquest, harking back to the viewpoint held in the eighteenth century, since the conqueror was also a "legislator", only from without.

Thus, Hegel, against his will, so to say, arrived at the conclusion that the solution of the mystery of the peoples' historical destinies should be sought in their *social conditions* (in "*property*"). The French historians of the Restoration, for their part, *deliberately* referred to "positive *interests*", to economic conditions, as an explanation of the origin and development of various forms of "*government*". However, neither of them – neither the idealist philosopher nor the positive historiographers – were able to solve the grand problem that inescapably confronted them: on what, in its turn, did the *structure of society, property relations*, depend. As long as this grand problem remained unsolved, all research into what was called in France *les sciences morales et politiques* was not built on any genuinely scientific foundation, it was with full justice that these pseudo-sciences could be contrasted with mathematics and the natural sciences as the sole "*exact*" sciences, those specifically termed sciences.

Thus the task of *dialectical materialism* was determined in advance. Philosophy, which had in past centuries rendered vast services to *natural science*, now had to lead *social science* out of the labyrinth of its contradictions. On accomplishing that task, philosophy might say: "*I have fulfilled my duty, and can now depart*", since *exact science* is bound, in the future, to render *the hypotheses of philosophy* quite useless.

The features of a new understanding of history, excellently formulated and set forth with the utmost clarity, are already contained in articles by Marx and Engels in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, Paris 1844; *The Holy Family* by the same two authors; *The Condition of the Working Class in England* by Engels; *The Poverty of Philosophy* by Marx; *Manifesto of the Communist Party* by Marx and Engels, and *Wage Labour and Capital* by Marx. However, we find a systematic if brief outline in Marx's book *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Berlin 1859.

“In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines] their consciousness.” [30]

But what is meant by *relations of production*? It is what is called in legal parlance *property relations*, of which Guizot and Hegel spoke. In explaining the origin of these relations, Marx's theory thus replies to a question that the representatives of science and philosophy prior to him had been unable to answer.

Man, together with his “*opinions*” and “*education*”, is a product of his social environment as was well known to the *French materialists of the eighteenth century*, though

they often lost sight of this. The historical development of “public opinion”, like the entire history of mankind, is a *law-governed process*, as was stated by the *German idealists* of the nineteenth century. This process, however, is determined, not by the properties of the “*World Spirit*”, as such idealists thought, but by the *actual conditions of man’s existence*. The forms of “*government*”, of which the philosophers had so much to say, are rooted in what *Guizot* tersely called *society*, and *Hegel* *civil society*. But the development of civil society is *determined by the development of the productive forces at men’s disposal*. Marx’s understanding of history, called *narrow-minded* and *one-sided* by the ignoramuses, is in fact the lawful outcome of centuries of development of historical ideas. It contains them all, inasmuch as they possess genuine value; it places them on far firmer ground than they ever stood on during any period of their efflorescence. That is why, to use an already quoted expression of *Hegel’s*, it is *the most developed, rich and concrete* of them.

Footnotes

1. See Book XI of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, in which *Goethe* describes his impression of *Système de la Nature*.
2. *Encyklopädie* herausgegeben von L.v. *Henning*, § 31.
3. *ibid.*, § 81 and Supplement.
4. *Wissenschaft der Logik*, *Nürnberg* 1812, I. Band, I. Buch. S.42.
5. *Logik*, I. Band, I. Buch, S.313.
6. Cf. *Pensées et réflexions d’Helvetius*, in Vol.III of his *Œuvres complètes*, *Paris* 1818, p.307.
7. *System des transcendentalen Idealismus*, *Tübingen*, 1800, S.426 und f.

8. Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte, 9. Bd. der Hegelschen Werke, herausgegeben von E. Gans, S.22, 30. Cf. Schelling, op. cit., S.424.

9. Cf. our essay on Holbach.

10. Encyclopädie, I. Teil, § 156, Zusatz.

11. Incidentally, instead of reading Holbach's book, the German reader might turn the pages of *Leben Jesu* (H.E. Paulus, Heidelberg 1828), which sets forth the same point of view. Only the German Enlightener tries to laud that which the French philosopher fought against so passionately. Paulus sees a miracle of goodness and wisdom in a person who produced on Holbach the impression of an ignorant and depraved idler.

12. Encyclopädie, § 13.

13. *Philosophie der Geschichte*, S.50-51.

14. *Die heilige Familie, oder Kritik der kritischen Kritik. Gegen Bruno Bauer und Konsorten.* Von F. Engels und K. Marx, Frankfurt a.M. 1845, S.79. [1*]

15. *Die heilige Familie*, S.80-84. [2*]

16. For other examples of the same kind we shall refer the reader to our article *For the Sixtieth Anniversary of Hegel's Death*, *Neue Zeit* 1891-92, Nos.7, 8, 9. [3*]

17. In this respect, incidentally, Lange followed the views and customs of all learned writers belonging to "good society". In his turn, Hettner often compared the doctrine of Diderot with that of the modern materialists. But whom did he consider as representative of modern materialists? Moleschott! Hettner knows so little of the condition of modern materialism that he is sure he is expressing something very profound in writing: "In the doctrine of morality, materialism has not yet risen above such miserable attempts (i.e., those made by the eighteenth-century materialists. – G.P.). If materialism would adduce proof of its viability, then its immediate and most important task lies in evolving a doctrine of morality" (*Literaturgeschichte des 18. Jahrhunderts*, 2. Teil, Braunschweig, 1881, S.402). You are late to recall it, dear Sir!

18. "Yet one should recognise in materialism an enthusiastic striving to emerge from the limits of a dualism which assumes two different worlds as equally substantial and true, and to do away with the sunderance of the initial unity." (*Encyclopädie*, III. Teil, § 389 und Zusatz). We shall note, in passing, that in his *History of Philosophy*

Hegel gave in a few words a better appraisal of French materialism and of such men as Helvetius than the professional historians of materialism did.

19. [Plekhanov is quoting from the French translation of Huxley's Hume. (English Men of Letters)] Hume, sa vie, sa philosophie, trad. de l'anglais par G. Compayré, Paris 1880, p.108. It would be correct to say that, despite everything, agnosticism is simply a cowardly materialism that tries to preserve an air of decency.

20. Philosophy of History in France and Germany, Edinburgh and London 1874. p.503.

21. Die heilige Familie, S.127. [4*]

22. Das Kapital, I. Band, 3. Aufl., Vorwort zur 2. Aufl., S.XIX. [5*]

23. Following the events of the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, it was no longer so easy to think that "it is public opinion that governs the world": those events often revealed the impotence of public opinion. "So many events decided by force; so many crimes absolved by success; so many virtues branded by censure; so many misfortunes insulted by might; so many generous sentiments made the butt of mockery; so many vile calculations hypocritically commented on; all these wore down hope even in those who were most devoted to the cult of reason ...", wrote Mme. de Staël in the eighth year of the French republic (*De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales*, t.I, p.IV, Introduction). Indeed, all the utopians of the Restoration [6*] and Louis-Philippe period were convinced that public opinion governed the world. This was the underlying principle of their philosophy of history. However, we shall not deal here with the psychology of the utopians.

24. *Essais sur l'Histoire de France*, 10e ed., Paris 1860, pp.73-74. The first edition of these *Essais* appeared in 1822.

25. *Essais sur l'Histoire de France*, pp.75-76.

26. *Œuvres complètes de M. Augustin Thierry*, VI tome, 10 éd., Paris 1866, p.60. The article we are quoting from – *Vues des révolutions d'Angleterre* – was published in *Censeur Européen* in 1817, i.e., several years before the appearance of Guizot's *Essais*.

27. Augustin Thierry owed the clearest of his historical views to Saint-Simon, who did very much to explain mankind's historical development. However, he was unable to define the x we have mentioned above. To him, human nature was in essence a sufficient

cause of mankind's development. He came up against the same stumbling block as the eighteenth-century materialist philosophers. Incidentally, we hope to be able to set forth Saint-Simon's views in a special essay. [7*]

28. Guizot, *op. cit.*, pp.81-83.

29. The liberal French historians of the Restoration often spoke of the class struggle and, moreover, made sympathetic reference to it. They were not even horrified by the spilling of blood. "... So I repeat that war, that is to say the revolution, was necessary," Thiers exclaimed in a note to his *History of the French Revolution* (éd. de 1834, t.I, p.365). "God has given people justice only at the price of struggle." As long as the bourgeoisie had not yet completed its struggle against the aristocracy, the theorists of the bourgeoisie had no objections to the class struggle. The appearance on the historical scene of the proletariat, with its struggle against the bourgeoisie, brought considerable changes into the views of those theorists, who today find the standpoint of the "class struggle" too "narrow-minded". *Tempora mutantur et nos mutamur in illis!*

30. *Zur Kritik der politischen Oekonomie*, Vorwort, S.V. [8*]

Notes

1*. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol.4, Moscow, 1975, pp.57-58.

2*. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol.4, Moscow 1975, pp.58-59.

3*. See present edition, Vol.I, pp.401-26.

4*. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol.4, Moscow 1975, p.86.

5*. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Moscow 1974, Vol.I, p.29.

6*. This refers to the period of the restoration of the Bourbons (1814-30) interrupted by Napoleon's Hundred Days (1815).

7*. Plekhanov did not write a special essay on Saint-Simon though he devoted several pages to the latter in his articles *Utopian Socialism in the Nineteenth Century* and *French Utopian Socialism of the Nineteenth Century*.

8*. Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Moscow 1970, pp.20-21.