

INTRODUCTION

You can lose for all sorts of reasons—because you are not determined enough or because you are too fanatical, not flexible enough or too indifferent, not sufficiently strong, simply unlucky, too immersed in the details or too ignorant of them, too far behind your time or too far ahead of it. You can be a coward in victory and a true hero in defeat.

What is true for the living also holds for the dead. There is something like a stock market for reputations, which is watched anxiously by big investors in the prevailing version of history and with amusement by gamblers taking a punt on an obscure poet or a forgotten musician or philosopher trying to reestablish or tarnish his or her reputation. The workings of this marketplace are important to our present, because those whose stocks are highest, those with the most powerful and most numerous investors behind them, determine the ways we think about ourselves, the stories we tell about our world, the repertoire of our ideas. If Plato's stock is riding above that of Aristotle and completely obliterating the value of Epicurus, then we are more likely to translate Plato's thinking into our language, to tell our own stories along the lines he marked out for us.

On a beautiful summer's day in Paris I went looking for two men who had triumphed in a historic battle but lost their very last. Once they had held in their hands the keys to a society that might have been freer and more just, less repressed and happier. They fought for this vision courageously and at great risk to themselves, but their ideas fell from grace, were deluged by the roaring tide of the French Revolution, and were eventually all but written out of history. They had lived magnificently, but after their death more than two hundred years ago, they had lost the battle for posterity, for the memory of future generations.

Today one of these men, Baron Paul-Thierry d'Holbach (1723–1789), is

forgotten by all but a few specialized scholars, while the other, Denis Diderot (1713–1784), is known mainly as the editor of the great *Encyclopédie* and the author of a handful of innovative works of fiction. And yet Holbach was not only host to some of the most brilliant minds of the century but also an important philosophical writer in his own right, author of the first uncompromisingly atheist books published since antiquity. His work is ignored, while Diderot has been reduced to the role he most despised: that of collator of other people's articles and ideas. His own philosophy—so fresh, so humane, so liberating—does not even appear in many histories of philosophy. His message was too disquieting, too anarchic, too dangerous to be released into the world at large.

Walking through the streets of Paris, I wanted to visit the places they had known, the houses in which they had lived, and especially the house at which Holbach had held his then-legendary salon. The circle of friends around Baron Holbach and his close friend and collaborator Diderot remains a kind of phantom ship in the history of philosophy to which rumors and legends have attached themselves like barnacles. Its members were part of a vast conspiracy that planned the French Revolution under the guise of debating questions of economics, some said; they were operating a factory for illegal books, which were written, revised, and disseminated by the thousands to bring down the monarchy, others believed. Most of their contemporaries agreed that Holbach and his cohorts were vile atheists who should be burned at the stake.

Sometimes historical reality is more rewarding and more exciting than even legend. Baron Holbach's salon and its principal protagonists did ferment revolutionary ideas, but it was more than a mere political revolution they were thinking about; they did write and publish subversive books, but they wanted to bring down something infinitely more vast than the monarchy or even the Catholic Church. The vision they discussed around the baron's dinner table was one in which women and men would no longer be oppressed by the fear and ignorance instilled by religion but could instead live their lives to the full. Instead of sacrificing their desires to the vain hope of reward in the afterlife, they would be able to walk freely, to understand their place in the universe as intelligent machines of flesh and blood and pour their energies into building individual lives and communities based on their inheritance of desire, empathy, and reason. Desire, erotic and otherwise, would make their world beautiful and rich; empathy would make it kind and livable; reason would allow an understanding

of the world's immutable laws.

Before this paradisiacal and remote vision could be reached, the enemies of reason and of desire had to be defeated. The church condemned desire as lust and reason as pride—mortal sins both—and perverted empathy into the practice of making people suffer now so that they could reap rewards after their death. The Enlightenment radicals saw it as their duty to convince their contemporaries that there is no life after death, no God and no Providence, no divine plan, but only a physical world of life and death and the struggle to survive—a world of ignorant necessity and without higher meaning, into which kindness and lust can inject a fleeting beauty. During the eighteenth century, when such thoughts were regarded as heretical and punishable by death, defending these ideas was a truly herculean challenge.

Back in modern-day Paris, I faced a challenge of my own. Finding Holbach's town house proved more difficult than I had anticipated. I knew that it was in what was once the rue Royale Saint-Roch (pronounced "rock"), but the modern map diverges from the eighteenth-century city. The modern rue Saint-Roch is not identical with the previous one, which was renamed. The whole layout of the city had been changed during the nineteenth century, when Baron Hausmann realized his plans for a new Paris and demolished thousands of buildings and streets to create wide avenues (ideal for using artillery to crush the revolutions and popular uprisings for which the city was so famous) and spectacular visual axes throughout the city.

"If you want to know which street used to be the rue Royale Saint-Roch you need to ask the parish priest," someone had told me. "He knows everything about the history of the *quartier*." The priest was easy to find: a very elegant, elderly gentleman, white hair combed back, wearing an ecclesiastical collar under a fine suit, sitting on a small café terrace directly beside his church, the *église* Saint-Roch. With exquisite politeness he explained to me that yes, he had heard about a Baron Holbach living in this part of town during the eighteenth century but no, he had no idea where the street I was looking for

was, and no, he could not tell me anything else about the baron. “*Au revoir, Monsieur,*” he said to me, leaving no doubt that he had no desire whatsoever to see me again.

Not willing to give up so easily, I continued my research in the area. After several false starts, I found the street and, indeed, the house in which Holbach had lived and received his guests. The street is now called rue des Moulins, and his house is not even five hundred meters from the terrace on which I met the priest. Obviously, the baron’s atheism was not yet forgotten. Then I discovered something else: Both Holbach and Diderot had been interred in the very church of Saint-Roch, whose knowledgeable parish priest knew nothing about their whereabouts. They are resting in unmarked graves, under the well-worn stone slabs in front of the main altar.

On a later visit to Paris, I took the opportunity to visit the *église* Saint-Roch once again, this time with the objective of locating the exact graves of Diderot and Holbach. The priest I had met previously had since retired, and I introduced myself to his successor, a man with a finely drawn face and also an enthusiast for the history of his church. Of course he knew where Diderot lay buried, he said. There was an ossuary underneath the altar. Unfortunately it had been desecrated twice, he added, once during the Revolution and a second time in 1871, during the Paris Commune. Bones and skulls of the people buried there were now strewn randomly on the floor, “and nobody knows what’s whose,” he added, with a tinge of amusement. He regretted that it would be impossible to visit the room. It awaited restoration, which was a matter for the state. “But Diderot is not alone down there,” he informed me cordially. “Many important artists were buried in this church. André le Notre is there, too, and Pierre Corneille, and the great salonière Madame Geoffrin . . .” “And the baron Holbach,” I added. The priest looked surprised. “Who did you say?” I repeated his name, this time in full: Baron Paul Thierry d’Holbach. “Now, I’m not sure about that,” he replied, in a cool and official voice. “A lot of people had masses read here but were never interred in these walls.” I did not insist, but the priest’s reaction is a good indication why Diderot and Holbach lost the battle for posterity: They have still not been forgiven for their unpalatably radical ideas. Both men believed that there is nothing in the world but atoms organized in countless and complex ways, no inherent meaning, no higher purpose than life itself. While more moderate Enlightenment

represented by thinkers such as Voltaire believed that there must be a God, a supreme watchmaker who had created the mechanism of the world, the friends at Holbach's salon (or most of them) were already convinced that the world had not been created but had evolved through chance and natural selection, without any guiding intelligence, any higher being.

Their philosophy provoked strong reactions from the very first. In the ancien régime, before the French Revolution, it was dangerous to speak one's mind. Those opposed to the teachings of the church were threatened with prison and even public execution. It was important to know whom one could trust and in front of whom you could speak freely. Holbach's salon, open to like minds every Thursday and Sunday, offered ideal conditions for the Enlightenment radicals. He was wealthy and employed an excellent chef; his cellar and his library were equally well stocked.

In these congenial surroundings in which everybody knew everybody else, Holbach's friends could test their ideas, debate philosophical and scientific questions, read and criticize new work. Diderot, one of the greatest conversationalists of the century, was at the center of every discussion—to the admiration and occasionally also the acute frustration of the other guests. The ultimate goal of these discussions was not personal enjoyment but philosophical and political influence. The thinkers of the radical Enlightenment wanted to change the general way of thinking, and to do this they had to intervene in the public discussion. This they did indirectly through Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, a twenty-eight-volume Trojan horse, carrying a cargo of subversive ideas into the homes of unsuspecting readers, and directly through a stream of books and pamphlets they had to publish clandestinely and anonymously. They were printed abroad, then smuggled them back into the country, and sold in strict secrecy.

The friends' evolutionist conception of nature and of humanity had momentous consequences. Without a Creator who had revealed his will to his creatures through the Bible, ideas of good and evil had to be rethought. In the brave new world envisaged by Diderot, Holbach, and their like-minded friends, there was suddenly no sin anymore and no reward or punishment in the afterlife; instead, there was only the search for pleasure and the fear of pain. Diderot and friends went further than traditional philosophy, which considered human beings as inherently rational and reason, being the closest approximation of the divine accessible to humans, the supreme faculty. Therefore,

other Enlightenment philosophers replicated the Christian disdain for the passions and based their ideas about a better future for humanity on an exclusively rationalist utopia in which there was little space for irrational impulses such as passion, instinct, or the yearning for beauty.

The radicals argued that human nature was exactly the opposite. Nature expressed itself through individuals in the form of strong and blind passions, the real driving forces of existence. They could be directed by reason much as the sails of a ship may allow sailors to navigate the storms, the waves and currents of a mighty ocean. Nevertheless, reason is always secondary, always weaker than the basic reality of passion.

Religious critics threw up their hands in horror. All this was nothing but a license for wickedness and debauchery, they wrote. Without God's law, there was no goodness in the world; without divine reason, there was no reason to exist. But the Enlightenment radicals had a clear answer to these charges. Their morality was not one of wild orgies, unrestrained greed, and heedless indulgence, but of a society based on mutual respect, without masters and slaves, without oppressors and oppressed.

While in a godless universe there is no transcendental yardstick of an absolute, revealed Truth and Goodness, it is perfectly easy to see what is beneficial and what is harmful to people here and now. This insight alone should be the principle of all morality. It was a dangerous idea, because a moral code based on the pursuit of happiness in this life had truly revolutionary implications. Without a God who has set some people above others, everybody—regardless of social station, sex, race, and creed—has an equal right to seek pleasure and, ultimately, happiness. A duchess has no higher claim to happiness than the humblest peasant, and a society in which happiness is possible not just for the privileged few can be achieved only through solidarity and cooperation. There was no place in this vision for an aristocracy, for birthright, or for social hierarchy. In ancien régime France, an absolute monarchy, this was tantamount to treason, but it also attracted an array of exceptional and courageous people to Holbach's salon.

Even today, this vision has lost none of its persuasiveness and appeal.

During their lifetime, Holbach and Diderot were equally feted and reviled, fixed stars in the intellectual universe even of those who wanted to see them burned at the stake (and there were many). Today, however, if you consult any Paris tourist guide or ask any educated person where to visit the graves of two

important eighteenth-century philosophers whose work changed the world, you will not be sent to the *église* Saint-Roch but to the Panthéon, close to the Jardins du Luxembourg. There, in the crypt, you will find the sarcophagi of Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, two of the first famous dead to be accorded the honor of having their remains transferred here. With revolutionary pomp and ceremony, Voltaire was reinterred in the crypt of the Panthéon in 1791, Rousseau in 1794. Upstairs, in the nave of the building, there is a monument dedicated to Diderot, installed, as an afterthought, in 1925.

The Panthéon is official history cut in stone. There is something deceptively plausible about this version. You have to make an effort to remember that the fabric of the present has not grown as it had to grow, simply and organically, but is the result of countless decisions and acts of violence, forcing each present moment to conform to the dreams and nightmares of those in power. So why is it that Voltaire and Rousseau are lying in state in the central, secular sanctuary of the French Republic, dedicated to the *grands hommes* of France (Marie Curie, the first *grande femme* was allowed in only in 1995), while their contemporaries Diderot and Holbach are in unknown graves in a church whose priest disclaims all knowledge of them to a casual visitor? One answer might be, of course, that Voltaire and Rousseau simply were better, more original philosophers who were more deserving of this special honor. Voltaire was, after all, the great champion of human rights and Enlightenment ideas, the very embodiment of the battle between reason and superstition. Rousseau is still revered as the voice of human freedom and radical personal honesty, a wise friend leading societies to freedom, a pioneer of the unconscious, and a tireless investigator of the emotional dimension of life. Without a doubt Voltaire was the most influential and best-known figure of the Enlightenment, but his philosophical contribution does not go much beyond solid common sense liberally sprinkled with ironic wit. His political activities reveal him to be a shrewd operator interested mainly in his own reputation and his financial fortune. As for Rousseau, he is altogether more original and important as a thinker, but also in possession of a far more sinister, self-serving, and self-consuming mind. Moreover, he was a compulsive liar, which makes for compelling biography but not for great philosophy. Rousseau and Diderot had been close personal friends once, but they fell out very publicly and very spectacularly. Their friendship ended not only because of Rousseau's paranoia, but more significantly because he came to hate

the Enlightenment Diderot stood for, a life free from fear of the unknown and from self-disgust, a clear-eyed and serene acceptance of our place in the world as highly intelligent, morally conscious apes.

Profoundly disgusted with himself as well as fearful of his own desires, Jean-Jacques Rousseau became the avowed enemy of those he had previously loved. In the nineteenth century, the art historian John Ruskin coined the term “pathetic fallacy” for the error of imputing intentions to inanimate objects—leaves that dance, books waiting to be read, nature being alternately kind and cruel. Rousseau’s pathetic fallacy was to believe the entire world was united to ruin him. Out of this fear he formulated a philosophy suggesting at first glance a defense of freedom and human dignity, while actually laying the foundation for a deeply oppressive, intensely pessimistic view of life. The ideal society he advocated was based on ideological manipulation, political repression, and violence, and on a philosophy of guilt and paranoia that turned out to be ideally suited to justifying totalitarian regimes of all stripes. It is no accident that Rousseau was the philosophical idol of Maximilien Robespierre, the most terrifying of all leaders of the French Revolution, whose favorite political instrument was the guillotine.

What makes the thinking of the radical Enlightenment so essential today is its power, its simplicity, and its moral courage. What makes it more important than ever is the fact that it is Rousseau, not Diderot, who has won the battle for posterity, and his influence is continuing to cloud our debates and our societies. Rousseau rediscovered religion for himself, though not a religion of the institutional kind. He believed in an afterlife, he wrote, because this life was simply too awful to be all he could hope for—a classic case of the wish being father of the thought. He was an intensely religious man at war with the world at large and with himself, and his philosophy reflected his situation by taking Christian concepts out of their religious context and making them accessible in a not explicitly religious, philosophical context. During the nineteenth century, in a world still smarting from the decline of religion, this offer was gratefully accepted. Rousseau showed how it was possible to incorporate originally Christian beliefs into a modern worldview without having to speak the language of theology.

Even today, the public discussion about moral and political issues is no longer framed in an explicitly religious context, but the change in terminology only conceals the all-pervasive influence of the unexamined theological ideas

underlying it. Our vocabulary has changed, of course: We no longer speak about the soul but about the psyche; we have exchanged original sin for inherited, psychological guilt. But the cultural soil on which these ideas flourish has remained the same, and all too often our worldview is inherently religious without our even realizing it.

When we look into the future, we instinctively fear the apocalypse and fully expect either paradise or purgatory. Next to the beatific vision of a perfect market, a science-fiction future without wars and energy problems, a perfect Socialist society, or whatever other dreams we happen to subscribe to, is the looming prospect of an overheating planet, a nuclear World War Three, collapsing ecosystems, wars about water and other natural resources, destructive asteroids on collision course with earth—an ultimate, murderous clash of civilizations. The possibility of humanity's simply muddling through for millennia to come (the most likely scenario by far), avoiding some catastrophes while suffering others (some of them self-inflicted), is simply less instinctive to our theologically conditioned brains than the thought of salvation or damnation, of heaven or hell.

So deeply ingrained are these cultural instincts that Rousseau's totalitarian utopia can seem more natural and sensible than Holbach's utilitarian tinkering. Utopians are always religious at heart, and it comes as little surprise that Rousseau was a direct inspiration not only for Robespierre but also for Lenin and Pol Pot. The latter studied Rousseau's works in Paris during the 1950s, before his murderous campaign forced Cambodia back into the Iron Age, under the guise of creating a society of virtuous peasants isolated from the corrupting influences of higher civilization.

Not only are our utopias theological in nature, but our relation to desire and passion bears the same religious imprint, as the map of every city will show. The red light districts in our cities bear witness to a very Christian revulsion toward physical pleasure. They are situated on the periphery (though nowadays cities have often sprawled around them, putting them close to the center of a seemingly endless conurbation) and in less desirable areas; they are seedy and depressing, vulgar and cheap. They serve a shameful desire, guiltily satisfied in dim and grubby corners or by the lurid light of neon signs. Sex itself is dirty, and women willing to sleep with men are often still referred to as "sluts," "whores," or worse. Not for us the celebration of physical beauty of antiquity or the joyful erotic ornaments and amulets adorning everyday

life in ancient Rome or decorating Indian temples. We are still ashamed of ourselves, and we have internalized this shame in our popular culture: In the Hollywood blockbusters washing across our movie screens, a glimpse of a naked body is deemed offensive and obscene, but the gratuitous and pornographically detailed depiction of extreme violence is not.

There is a direct line from this seemingly ultra-secular world of seamy seduction to Puritan preachers invoking hellfire against lust and to self-hating hermits. One could be forgiven for thinking that the endless images of beautiful people being young, slim, rich, and irrepressibly happy owe more to Epicurus than to Ecclesia, but in fact their unachievable perfection makes them essentially religious.

Believers in the Western gospel of earthly bliss must detest their bodies and their actual lives just like the nuns and monks of old. Pious Christians used to chastise themselves by fasting, by denying themselves everyday pleasures, by stifling their desires and crushing their self-respect, by starving their bodies and their desires to gain the life eternal. Their modern, secular opposites no longer fast to save their immortal souls, but they diet, curbing their desires, forever chasing after a youthful body that will never again be theirs, forever feeling guilty about being too old, too flabby, insufficiently fit. The icons of our day may be fashion models instead of saints, but they still function by making us suffer. They instil guilt, humiliate us, and spur us to emulate an impossible ideal, as we vainly hope for a better afterlife, a remote vision of being wealthy, tanned, and cool that has replaced the beatitudes of the church. Christianity is the religion of the suffering God. Christ was made flesh and had to die, to be tortured to death, thus allowing God the Creator to forgive humanity for its wickedness. Holbach and Diderot wrote all there is to be written about the perversity of this argument, but even the most irreligious of Westerners still believe in the positive, transformative value of suffering.

We have all internalized the Romantic stereotype of the solitary, suffering genius (a figure almost single-handedly invented by Rousseau in his *Confessions*).

We love stories in which people triumph over adversity, in which they are almost crushed by wickedness or misfortune, only to emerge again, to be resurrected.

This kind of story is found in many cultures, but not in all. The ancient Greeks attached no moral value to suffering: After journeying around the Mediterranean for twenty years and surviving many dangers, Homer's Odysseus is older but not wiser.

For the many who opt out of this very religious game of guilt and suffering, of responsibility and striving for a better afterlife (and, possibly, of hope), there is nothing left but a void to be filled by entertainment and indulgence, an endless presence punctuated by gadgets, accessories, and conspicuous consumption. The Enlightenment radicals were adamant that society and individuals must build on education and solidarity. Those in our society who feel they cannot or do not want to aspire to the secular ideals of our church of brand-name canonization have made a choice: Instead of chasing after an unattainable ideal, they have let go of all aspirations and replaced all hope of a better tomorrow with maximum consumption.

A religious matrix—theology in secular clothes—permeates our lives, and theological preconceptions continue to confuse many of the debates that will shape our future. Arguments put forward in the ongoing debate about genetic research and its possibilities show how much we still regard ourselves as beings endowed with a soul and a destiny by a Creator. Cloning of animals is controversial, the mere thought of human cloning makes us deeply uneasy, stem cell research causes virulent debate, and the only reason to oppose abortion in the very early stages of pregnancy must be the idea that even a cluster of as yet unspecialized cells already has a human soul attached to it, that it is already a full person in the eyes of God.

The legacy of nineteenth-century idealism and Romanticism has created our intellectual world, ruled not by the secularized, scientific mind many historians have written about but, on the contrary, by a fundamentally Christian worldview that has merely been stripped of its outward signs and rituals. This is why the work of the radical authors who came together in Holbach's salon has lost very little of its freshness, its capacity to shock, and its ability to inspire constructive reflections about our own cultural, scientific, and political landscape. We are still grappling with many of the questions Diderot, Holbach, and their friends wrote about, and we still have not learned their lesson that any philosophical or moral debate must start from the scientific facts. Beginning with the idea, so brilliantly exposed by Holbach, that it is simply narcissistic to believe that there must be a Providence, a higher intelligence,

because otherwise life would be meaningless, the thinkers of the rue Royale believed we must accept the meaninglessness of the existence of *Homo sapiens*. Only then can each individual's quest to seek pleasure and flee pain become the beginning of a common story. The realization that no one is completely autonomous, coupled with our strong feeling of empathy, leads directly to a morality of mutual solidarity, to social meaning.

Diderot and Holbach may appear to have lost the battle for posterity, but they have not yet lost the war, still raging, for our civilization and its dreams, which could be so much more generous, more lucid, and more humane than they are now. Their works still richly repay rereading, and their careers can serve as both an inspiration and a warning to us. They demonstrate both what we have gained since their day and what we are in danger of losing once again, as we are faced not only by threats from the outside but also by our own laziness, indifference, and muddled thinking.