

CT. 136

A

PHILOSOPHICAL CONVERSATION.

TRANSLATED .

FROM THE FRENCH OF DIDEROT.

By E. N.



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P R E F A C E.

THIS dialogue, entitled 'Entretien d'un Philosophe avec la Maréchale de * * *' was originally published in Italian and French, professing to be translated from a posthumous work of the poet Crudéli. It is written in the most natural style, and few dialogues in the French language give such a perfect illusion of two persons conversing. But, under a style worthy of the best writers of comedy, the most powerful arguments are to be seen, and a volume might be written in development of the points touched upon in these few pages. Except in a few instances where explanation or reference seemed desirable, I have refrained from adding notes; the thinking reader will be able to apprehend the arguments, even those which, latent in the dialogue, would develop most brilliantly under dramatic interpretation.

Diderot's writings are too little known in England; he is hardly ever mentioned; but his thoughts may be traced in more than one modern work. Apart from the errors common to all social philosophy before Malthus wrote, and a

style perhaps too much seasoned with Gallic salt for English taste in the present day, Diderot stands in the first rank of philosophers and literary men. To none does Humanity owe more. As a writer, he excelled in lifelike dialogue; an admirable specimen of it, 'Le Neveu de Rameau' was recently translated in the *Fortnightly Review*; his 'Paradoxe sur le Comédien,' a most artistic production, will, I hope, soon find a translator capable of doing justice to it. In the piece now translated, the nature of the subject compels rather strict adherence to the letter of the author, and prevents his spirit from being conveyed as well as it might be in a purely literary composition.

D I D E R O T ' S
P H I L O S O P H I C A L C O N V E R S A T I O N .

HAVING some business with the *maréchal de* * * *, I called on him one morning ; he was out, but I waited for him and was shown in to the *maréchale*. She is a charming woman, an angel of beauty and piety ; sweet temper is depicted on her countenance, the tone of her voice and the simplicity of her conversation agree perfectly with the expression of her features. She was still at her toilet table ; I was asked to sit down, and we began to talk. At some remark of mine which edified and surprised her (for she believed that a man who denies the Holy Trinity is a rogue who will end at the gallows), she said :—

La Maréchale. Are you not Monsieur Crudéli ?

CRUDÉLI.—Yes, Madam.

L. M.—Then you are the man who believes in nothing ?

CR.—The same.

L. M.—Nevertheless you profess the same moral principles as a believer.

CR.—Why should I not, if I am an honest man ?

L. M.—And do you put these principles in practice ?

CR.—As well as I can.

L. M.—What ! you never steal ; you are neither a murderer nor a robber ?

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CR.—Very rarely.

L. M.—Then what do you gain by your unbelief?

CR.—Nothing; is one to believe because of something to be gained thereby?

L. M.—That I can hardly say; but the motive of personal interest is not amiss in the business either of this world or of the next. I am rather sorry for the credit of poor humanity; it is not saying much for us. But, really! do you never steal?

CR.—Never, on my word.

L. M.—If you are neither a murderer nor a thief, you must own that your conduct is unreasonable and inconsistent.

CR.—How so?

L. M.—Because it seems to me that if I had nothing to hope or to fear when I am out of this world, there are many little indulgences which I should not deprive myself of now that I am in it. I own to investing my good works in expectation of repayment with enormous interest.

CR.—You think you do.

L. M.—I do not merely think so; it is a fact.

CR.—And might I ask you what things you would permit yourself if you were an unbeliever?

L. M.—If you please, no; I keep that subject for the confessional.

CR.—My investment of good works is a poor speculation; I shall never see my capital again.

L. M.—That is an unthrifty investment.

CR.—Would you rather I should be a usurer?

L. M.—Well, yes; you may practise usury to any extent in your dealings with God, you cannot ruin him. I know that it is a rather shabby proceeding, but what does that matter? The point is to get into heaven by hook or by crook; we must make the best of everything and neglect nothing which can bring us in a return. Alas! whatever we do, our investment will always be pitifully small in comparison with

the handsome return we expect for it. And so you expect no return ?

CR.—Nothing.

L. M.—How sad ! You must own that you are either very wicked or very foolish ?

CR.—Indeed I cannot say which.

L. M.—What motive for being good can an unbeliever have if he is in his right mind ? Please tell me that.

CR.—I can tell you.

L. M.—I shall be glad to know.

CR.—Do you not think it possible that one may be so fortunately born as to find a natural pleasure in doing good ?

L. M.—I think it is possible.

CR.—That one may have received an excellent education which strengthens the natural inclination towards good deeds ?

L. M.—Certainly.

CR.—And that in after-life experience may have convinced us that, taking everything into consideration, it is better for one's happiness in this world to be an honest man than a rogue ?

L. M.—Yes indeed ; but can one be honest supposing that bad principles combine with the passions to lead us towards evil ?

CR.—One may not act in consequence ; and what do we more commonly see than actions at variance with principles ?

L. M.—Alas ! it is unfortunately so ; believers constantly act as if they did not believe.

CR.—And without believing one may act nearly as well as if one believed.

L. M.—I am glad to hear you say so ; but what inconvenience would there be in having a reason the more, religion, for doing good, and a reason the less, unbelief, for doing evil ?

CR.—None, if religion were a motive for doing good and unbelief a motive for doing evil.

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L. M.—Can there be any doubt on that point? Does not the spirit of religion incessantly thwart the promptings of this vile corrupted human nature, and does not the spirit of unbelief abandon it to its evil ways by relieving it from all fear?

CR.—*Madame la maréchale*, this will lead us into a long discussion.

L. M.—And what if it does? The Marshal will not be back for some time, and we are better employed talking sense than taking away our neighbours' good names.

CR.—You see that I shall have to take up the subject rather far back.

L. M.—As far back as you like, provided I understand you.

CR.—If you do not understand me it will certainly be my fault.

L. M.—I thank you for the compliment; but you must know that I have never read anything but my prayer-book, and that my occupations have been exclusively confined to putting the gospel in practice and looking after my children.

CR.—Two duties that you have well fulfilled.

L. M.—Yes, as regards the children. But begin.

CR.—*Madame la maréchale*, is there in this world any good without some drawback?

L. M.—None.

CR.—What, then, do you call good and evil?

L. M.—Evil must be that in which the drawbacks are greater than the advantages, while good must, on the contrary, be that which has advantages greater than the drawbacks.

CR.—Will you please to bear in mind your definition of good and evil?

L. M.—I will remember it. Do you call that a definition?

CR.—Yes.

L. M.—This is philosophy, then?

CR.—Excellent philosophy.

L. M.—The last thing I should have thought myself capable of.

CR.—So you are persuaded that religion has more advantages than drawbacks, and that for this reason you call it good?

L. M.—Yes.

CR.—For my own part I do not doubt that your steward robs you somewhat less on Good Friday than on Easter Monday; and that now and then religion prevents a number of little evils and produces a number of little benefits.

L. M.—Little by little, the sum mounts up.

CR.—But do you believe that such wretched little advantages can sufficiently compensate the terrible ravages which religion has caused in past times, and which it will still cause in times to come? Consider the violent antipathy which it has created between nations, and which it still keeps up. There is not a Mussulman who would not imagine he was doing an act agreeable to God and the holy prophet in exterminating all the Christians, who, on their side, are hardly more tolerant. Consider the dissensions which it has created and perpetuated in the midst of nearly every nation, dissensions which have rarely been stifled without bloodshed. Our own history offers us examples which are only too recent and too disastrous. Consider that it has created, and still keeps up the most violent and undying hatred between the members of society, between the individuals of a family. Christ said he had come to divide the man from his wife, the mother from her children, the brother from his sister, the friend from the friend, and his prediction has only been too completely fulfilled.

L. M.—That may be the abuse of the thing without being the thing itself.

CR.—It is the thing itself, if the abuses are inseparable from it.

L. M.—And how can you show me that the abuses of religion are inseparable from religion?

CR.—Very easily. Tell me this: supposing a man-hater had desired to render the human race as unhappy as possible, what could he have invented for the purpose better than belief in an incomprehensible being about whom men could never be able to agree, and whom they should regard as more important than their own lives? * And is it possible to form a conception of a deity without attaching to it the deepest incomprehensibility and the highest importance?

L. M.—No.

CR.—Then draw your conclusion.

L. M.—I conclude that it is an idea not without serious consequence in the mind of fools.

CR.—And add that fools always have been and always will be the majority of mankind, that the most dangerous fools are those rendered so by religion, and that these are the men whom the disturbers of society know how to work when they have need of them.

L. M.—But we must have something to frighten men from such bad actions as escape the severity of the law; and, if you destroy religion, what can you substitute for it?

CR.—Even if I had nothing to substitute for it, there would be always a terrible prejudice the less, without counting that in no age and in no country have religious opinions formed the basis of national manners. The gods adored by the old Greeks and Romans, the finest people on earth, † were a most dissolute set of rascals; a Jupiter who deserved the faggot and the stake, a Venus worthy of the House of Correction, a Mercury whose proper place was in jail.

L. M.—And so you think that it is quite a matter

* See Appendix, Note I.

† See Note II.

of indifference whether we be Christians or Pagans ; that as Pagans we should be equally good and that as Christians we are no better ?

CR.—Indeed I am convinced of it ; excepting that as Pagans we should be rather merrier.

L. M.—It is impossible.

CR.—But, *Madame la maréchale*, are there any Christians ? I have never seen any.

L. M.—That is a nice thing to say to me.

CR.—I am not saying it to you : I was thinking of a lady who is a neighbour of mine, good and pious as you are, and who believed herself in all sincerity to be a Christian, just as you do.

L. M.—And you showed her that she was mistaken ?

CR.—At once.

L. M.—How did you manage that ?

CR.—I opened a New Testament, a well-read one, for it was considerably worn. I read her the Sermon on the Mount, and at each article of it I asked her :—“Do you act up to this ?” I went on further. She is a beautiful woman, and although very pious she is not unconscious of her attraction ; she has a most delicate fair complexion, and although she does not attach much value to this perishable charm, she is not displeased if it excites admiration ; her bust is perfect, and, although very modest, she is not averse to its beauty being observed.

L. M.—Provided, of course, that she and her husband should alone be aware of this.

CR.—I believe that her husband knows it much better than any one else ; but for a woman who prides herself on high Christian principles that is not enough. I said to her :—“Is it not written in the gospel that he who has coveted his neighbour's wife has committed adultery already in his heart ?”

L. M.—I suppose she answered yes ?

CR.—I said to her:—"And does not adultery committed in the heart damn as surely as a more complete adultery?"

L. M.—I suppose she answered yes?

CR.—I said, "And if the man is damned for adultery committed in heart, what will be the fate of the woman who invites all those who come near her to commit that crime?" This last question rather embarrassed her.

L. M.—I understand; she did not cover up that perfect bust as completely as she might.

CR.—Not quite. She answered that it was a custom, as if nothing was more customary than to call oneself Christian and yet not to be so; that it was wrong to dress in a ridiculous manner, as if there could be any comparison between a petty ridiculous act and the eternal damnation of one's self and one's neighbours; that she did not interfere with her dress-maker, as if it were not better to change one's dress-maker than to be false to one's religion; that it was her husband's fancy, as if a husband could be mad enough to demand that his wife should push obedience to a wrong-headed husband so far as to disobey the will of God and to contemn the threats of her Redeemer!

L. M.—I was well aware of all those childish reasons; I might even have answered as your neighbour did; but both she and I would have been taken at a disadvantage. However, what conduct did she adopt, after your remonstrance?

CR.—The day after this conversation was a holy day; I was going upstairs to my room, when my neighbour was coming downstairs on her way to mass.

L. M.—Dressed as usual?

CR.—Dressed as usual. I smiled, she smiled; and we passed one another without speaking. This was a good woman! a Christian! a pious woman! After

this example and a hundred thousand others of the same sort, what real influence on conduct can I grant religion to have? Hardly any: and so much the better.

L. M.—How so much the better ?

CR.—Yes, I mean it. Supposing that twenty thousand of the inhabitants of Paris took it into their heads to conform strictly to the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount. . . .

L. M.—There would be some ladies' shoulders better covered than at present.

CR.—And so many lunatics that the police would be at their wits' end to find room for them all in the madhouses. In all inspired books there are two kinds of morality; one general and common to every nation, to every religion, and which is followed pretty nearly; another peculiar to each nation and to each religion, in which men believe, which they preach in their churches, which they teach in their homes, and which they do not follow at all.*

L. M.—What is the reason of this contradiction ?

CR.—In the impossibility of subjecting a people to a rule which only agrees with a few melancholy men who have drawn it from a model found in their own character. Religions are like monastic rules; all become relaxed in time. They are follies which cannot hold ground against the constant efforts of nature to bring us back to her laws. Let the statesman take care that the welfare of individuals should be so bound up with the common weal that a citizen can hardly harm society without hurting himself; let virtue be rewarded as certainly as wickedness is punished; let merit, in whatever position it exist, and without distinction of sect, be eligible for state employment, and only count as wicked the small number of men whom an incorrigible perversity of

** See Note III.

nature has dragged into vice. Temptation is too near and hell is too far off; it is not worth the while of a legislator to take in hand a system of crooked opinions which can only keep children under its yoke, which encourages crime by the facility of its expiation;* which sends the culprit to ask pardon from God for the injuries inflicted on man, and which degrades the order of natural and moral duties by making it subordinate to an order of chimerical duties.

L. M.—I do not understand you.

CR.—I will explain; but I think I hear the Marshal's carriage coming, just in time to prevent me from saying something which you might think impudent.

L. M.—If what you are about to say is impudent, I shall not hear it; I have a good habit of only hearing what I choose.

CR.—*Madame la maréchale*, ask the curate of your parish which is the more atrocious crime: to defile one of the eucharistic vessels or to blacken the good name of an honest woman? He will shudder with horror at the first, he will cry sacrilege; and the civil law which takes hardly any notice of calumny while it punishes sacrilege by the stake,† will finish the confusion of moral ideas and the corruption of the public mind.

L. M.—I know more than one woman who would scruple to eat meat on a Friday, and yet would . . . I was also going to say my piece of impudence. Continue.

CR.—But, Madam, I must really go and see the Marshal.

L. M.—Another minute, and then we will go together and see him. I don't know how to answer you, and yet you do not persuade me.

* See Note IV.

† See Note V.

CR.—I had no intention of persuading you. It is the same with religion as with marriage. Although marriage has caused misery to so many others, it has given happiness to you and the Marshal. Religion which has made, which still makes, and will yet make so many men wicked, has rendered you better than before; you do well in keeping to it. It pleases you to imagine, above your head, a great and powerful being, who watches your journey through life; this idea strengthens your steps. Continue, Madam, to enjoy the thought of this august keeper of your mind, at once a spectator and a sublime model of your actions.

L. M.—I see that you are not possessed by the mania of proselytism.

CR.—By no means.

L. M.—And I esteem you the more for it.

CR.—I permit every one to think in his way, provided he does not interfere with mine; and, besides, those who are destined to deliver themselves from these prejudices have no need of being catechized.

L. M.—Do you think that man can do without superstition?

CR.—No; not as long as he remains ignorant and timorous.

L. M.—Well then, superstition for superstition, as well ours as another.

CR.—I do not think so.

L. M.—Tell me truly, have you no repugnance for the idea of being nothing after death?

CR.—I would prefer to retain my existence; notwithstanding that I see no reason why a Being who has already been able to render me unhappy without any reason, might not amuse himself again in the same way.*

L. M.—If, notwithstanding that drawback, the

* See Note VI.

hope of a life to come appears sweet and consoling, even to you, why tear it from us?

CR.—I have no such hope, for my desire does not imply an expectation which I know to be vain; but I take it away from no one.* If any person can believe that he will see when he has no eyes, that he will hear when he has no ears, that he will think when he has no brain, that he will love when he has no heart, that he will feel when he has no sensation, that he will exist when he will be nowhere, that he will be a something without measure or place,—I have no objection.

L. M.—But this world, who made it?

CR.—Perhaps you can inform me.

L. M.—God.

CR.—And what is God?

L. M.—A spirit.

CR.—If a spirit can make matter, why should not matter make a spirit?

L. M.—And why should it?

CR.—Because I see it do so every day. Do you believe that animals have souls?

L. M.—Certainly I believe so.

CR.—And could you tell me what becomes, for instance, of the soul of the Peruvian serpent which is hung up in a chimney to dry, and remains in the smoke for one or two years?

L. M.—Let it go where it pleases; what does that matter to me?

CR.—You are probably not aware that this serpent, smoked and dried, revives, and comes to life again.†

L. M.—I don't believe it.

CR.—Nevertheless, a clever man, Bouguer, asserts that it is so.

* The terseness of the original deserves notice. "Je n'ai pas cet espoir, parceque le désir ne m'en a point donné la vanité; mais je ne l'ôte à personne." Another reading gives "dérobé" instead of "donné;" the translation would then be, "for my desire has not deceived me as to its vanity."

† See Note VII.

L. M.—Your clever man has told a story.

CR.—Suppose what he says were true ?

L. M.—Well, I should have to believe that animals are machines.

CR.—Remembering that man is only a rather more perfect animal than the rest. . . . But I think the Marshal is . . .

L. M.—One more question ; the last. Are you at ease in your unbelief ?

CR.—Impossible to be more so.

L. M.—Yet, if it turned out that you were mistaken ?

CR.—Well, and if I were mistaken ?

L. M.—All that you believe to be false would come true, and you would be cast amongst the damned. Monsieur Crudéli, it is a terrible thing to be condemned to hell, to burn there for all eternity !*

CR.—La Fontaine believed that we should be as comfortable there as fish in the water.

L. M.—You may laugh now ; but remember that La Fontaine became very serious at his last moments ; and this is the point where I make my stand against you.

CR.—I answer for nothing when my head will be no longer right ; but if I die from one of those diseases which leave the expiring man his whole reason, I shall not be more disturbed at the moment you mention than I am at present.

L. M.—I am confounded at your boldness.

CR.—I think there is much more boldness in the man who dies believing in a severe judge who weighs our most secret thoughts and in whose scales the most upright man would be lost through vanity, did he not tremble through fear of being found wanting ; if this dying man had then the choice either of annihilation or of judgment, his boldness would impress

* See Note VIII.

me more should he hesitate to choose the former alternative; unless he were more insane than the companion of St. Bruno, or more intoxicated with his own merits than Bohola.

L. M.—I have read the story of St. Bruno's companion, but I have never heard of Bohola.

CR.—He was a Jesuit of the college of Pinsk in Lithuania, who left at his death a coffer full of money, with a memorandum which he had written and signed.

L. M.—And what was the memorandum about?

CR.—It ran thus: "I request the dear brother to whom I have confided this coffer, to open it when I shall have performed miracles. The money which it contains will pay the expenses of my canonization. I have left some authentic memoirs for the confirmation of my virtues and the guidance of those who undertake to write my life."

L. M.—What a ridiculous story!

CR.—It may be so to me, Madam, but in your case a joke on such a subject may offend God.

L. M.—Indeed, you are right.

CR.—It is so easy to sin grievously against your law.

L. M.—I admit that it is.

CR.—The justice which will decide your fate is very rigorous.

L. M.—True.

CR.—And if you believe the oracles of your religion on the number of the elect, it will be very small.

L. M.—Oh! but I am not a Jansenist; I only look at the consoling side of the question; the blood of Jesus Christ covers, in my eyes, a multitude of sins; and it would seem to me very singular if the Devil had the best share of mankind, although he did not give up a son to death.

CR.—Do you damn Socrates, Phocion, Aristides, Cato, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius?

L. M.—Certainly not; no one but a wild beast could think of such a thing. St. Paul says that every man shall be judged by the law which he has known, and St. Paul is right.

CR.—And by what law is the unbeliever to be judged?

L. M.—Your case is rather different. You are one of the accursed inhabitants of Chorazin and Bethsaida, who shut their eyes to the light which shone on them and stopped their ears so as not to hear the voice of truth speaking to them.

CR.—The people of Chorazin and Bethsaida were men such as never existed elsewhere, if they were free to believe or not to believe.

L. M.—They saw mighty works which would have made sackcloth and ashes more valuable than gold, had they been done in Tyre and Sidon.

CR.—Well, you see, the inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon were clever people, while those of Chorazin and Bethsaida were fools. I told you a story just now, I should like to tell you another. Once upon a time, a young Mexican . . . But, the Marshal . . .

L. M.—I will send and find out if he is disengaged. Well, what about the young Mexican?

CR.—Feeling weary of his work, was walking one day along the sea-shore. He saw a plank, one end of which was floating while the other was aground. He sat down on the plank, and then, gazing over the vast expanse of sea, said to himself: "My grandmother must be doting when she tells that story about those people, who at some long time ago landed here from somewhere or other beyond the seas. What nonsense! is it not plain that the sea and the sky join in the distance? Can I believe, against the evidence of my senses, an old story the date of which is unknown, which every one tells in his own fashion, and which is nothing but a tissue of absurd traditions about which people tear their own hearts and one another's

eyes?" While he was thus meditating, the rippling waters were rocking him as he lay on the plank and he soon fell asleep. The wind rose and the tide carried the plank out to sea with our young reasoner still lying asleep on it.

L. M.—Alas! that is a true image of mankind: we are each of us floating on a plank, the wind rises and the tide carries us out to sea.

CR.—When he awoke he was already far from the land. Much as he was surprised to find himself out at sea, he was still more surprised when the land disappeared and the sea joined with the sky over the place where he had not long ago been walking. Then he began to suspect that he might very possibly have been mistaken in his incredulity, and that if the wind continued from the same point, he might perhaps be carried to the coast inhabited by the people of whom his grandmother had so often spoken to him.

L. M.—You say nothing about the anxiety he must have felt.

CR. He had none. He said to himself:—"What does it matter provided I get to land. I have reasoned rather clumsily, I must own; but I was sincere, and that is all that can be expected of me. If cleverness is not a virtue, stupidity cannot be a crime." In the meantime the wind continued to blow, the plank and its freight floated on, the unknown shore soon began to appear, and before very long he arrived there and landed.

L. M.—We shall meet on that shore one day, Monsieur Crudéli.

CR.—I hope so, *Madame la maréchale*; wherever it be I shall always be delighted at an opportunity of paying my respects to you. Scarcely had he left the plank and set foot on shore, when he perceived a venerable old man standing at his side. He asked where he was and to whom he had the honour of speaking. "I am the sovereign of this country,"

replied the old man. "You denied my existence?"—"True, I did."—"And that of my empire?"—"True, I did."—"I pardon you, because I am He who sees to the bottom of hearts, and I have read in yours that you were in good faith; but all your thoughts and deeds have not been so innocent." Whereupon the old man took him gently by the ear, recalled to him all the faults of his life, and at each one the young Mexican bowed down, beat his breast, and asked forgiveness. Now, *Madame la maréchale*, put yourself for a moment in the place of the old man and tell me what you would have done? Would you have seized this young fool and taken a pleasure in dragging him round the beach by the hair for all eternity?

L. M.—Indeed, no.

CR.—If one of those pretty children of yours had escaped from the house, and after doing all sorts of foolish things, came back repentant?

L. M.—I should rush to meet him, I should take him in my arms and embrace him with tears. But his father, the Marshal, would not take things so gently.

CR.—The Marshal is not exactly a tiger.

L. M.—Not by any means.

CR.—He would require a little persuasion, but he would certainly end by forgiving.

L. M.—Certainly.

CR.—Especially if he came to think that, before causing the birth of this child, he knew its whole life, and that the punishment of its faults would be useless, either for himself, for the culprit, or for the other children.

L. M.—But the old man and the Marshal are two very different persons.

CR.—Do you mean that the Marshal is kinder than the old man?

L. M.—God forbid! I only mean that if my justice is not the same as the Marshal's, his may not be the same as the old man's.

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CR.—Ah! Madam, you do not foresee the consequences of that answer. Either the general definition of justice is equally applicable to you, to the Marshal, to me, to the young Mexican and to the old man, or else I don't know what justice is and am totally in the dark as to the means by which the old man is pleased or displeased.

At this point of our conversation, we were told that the Marshal was waiting for us. As I shook hands with the *maréchale*, she said:—It is enough to make one giddy, isn't it?

CR.—Why should it, if the head is firm?

L. M.—After all, the shortest way is to behave as if the old man existed.

CR.—Even if one doesn't believe it.

L. M.—And if you do believe it, not to count on his goodness.

CR.—If that is not the politest conduct, at least it is the safest.

L. M.—By the way, suppose you were taken before the magistrates to give an account of your religious principles, would you confess them?

CR.—I should do my best to save the authorities from committing an atrocious act.*

L. M.—Ah! you are a coward! And if you were at the point of death, would you submit to receive the sacraments of the church?

CR.—I would not fail to do so.

L. M.—For shame! you wicked hypocrite!

* See Note IX.

APPENDIX.

NOTE I., page 10.

Compare the opinions of James Mill, as recorded in his son's *Autobiography*, Chapter II. "His aversion to religion, in the sense usually attached to the term, was of the same kind with that of Lucretius; he regarded it with the feelings due, not to a mere mental delusion, but to a great moral evil. He looked upon it as the greatest enemy of morality; first, by setting up fictitious excellences—belief in creeds, devotional feelings and ceremonies, not connected with the good of human kind,—and causing these to be accepted as substitutes for genuine virtues: but above all, by radically vitiating the standard of morals. . . . He was as well aware as any one that Christians do not in general undergo the demoralising consequences which seem inherent in such a creed, in the manner, or to the extent which might have been expected from it. The same slovenliness of thought, and subjection of the reason to fears, wishes, and affections, which enable them to accept a theory involving a contradiction in terms, prevents them from perceiving the logical consequences of the theory."

NOTE II., page 10.

Exception may possibly be taken to the Greeks and Romans being called "*les plus honnêtes gens de la terre.*" I apprehend that Diderot's meaning will be understood from the following remarks of John Stuart Mill. "We greatly doubt if most of the positive virtues were not better conceived and more highly prized by the public opinion of Greece than by that of Great Britain . . . and it may be questioned, if even private duties are, on the whole, better understood, while duties to the public, unless in cases of special trust, have almost dropped out of the catalogue; that idea, so powerful in the free states of Greece, has faded into a mere rhetorical ornament."—(Review of Grote's 'History of Greece.')

Speaking on the use of the Greek and Roman literatures, Mill also says, "They exhibit, in the military and agricultural commonwealths of antiquity, precisely that order of virtues in which commercial society is apt to be deficient; and

they altogether show human nature on a grander scale ; with less benevolence but more patriotism ; less sentiment but more self-control ; if a lower average of virtue, more striking individual examples of it ; fewer small goodnesses, but more greatness and appreciation of greatness ; more which tends to exalt the imagination and inspire high conceptions of the capabilities of human nature."—(Review of De Tocqueville on 'Democracy in America.')

It is possible that European society may have become more honest since the middle of the eighteenth century, but at that time Diderot might with reason regret the ancient standard of virtue.

NOTE III., page 13.

This passage is developed by John Stuart Mill, in his Essay 'On Liberty':—"To what an extent doctrines intrinsically fitted to make the deepest impression upon the mind may remain in it as dead beliefs, without being ever realised in the imagination, the feelings or the understanding, is exemplified by the manner in which the majority of believers hold the doctrines of Christianity. By Christianity, I here mean what is accounted such by all churches and sects—the maxims and precepts contained in the New Testament. These are considered sacred, and accepted as laws, by all professing Christians. Yet it is scarcely too much to say that not one Christian in a thousand guides or tests his individual conduct by reference to those laws. The standard to which he does refer it is the custom of his nation, his class, or his religious profession. He has thus, on the one hand, a collection of ethical maxims, which he believes to have been vouchsafed to him by infallible wisdom as rules for his government ; and on the other a set of every day judgments and practices, which go a certain length with some of those maxims, not so great a length with others, stand in direct opposition to some, and are, on the whole, a compromise between the Christian creed and the interests and suggestions of worldly life. To the first of these standards he gives his homage ; to the other his real allegiance. All Christians believe that the blessed are the poor and humble, and those who are ill-used by the world ; that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven ; that they should judge not, lest they be judged : that they should swear not at all ; that they should love their neighbour as themselves ; that if one take their cloak, they should give him their coat also ; that they should take no thought

for the morrow ; that if they would be perfect they should sell all that they have and give it to the poor. They are not insincere when they say that they believe these things. They do believe them, as people believe what they have always heard lauded, and never discussed. But in the sense of that living belief which regulates conduct, they believe these doctrines just up to the point to which it is usual to act upon them. The doctrines, in their integrity, are serviceable to pelt adversaries with ; and it is understood that they are to be put forward (when possible), as the reasons for whatever people do that they think laudable. But any one who reminded them that the maxims require an infinity of things which they never even think of doing, would gain nothing but to be classed among those very unpopular characters who affect to be better than other people. The doctrines have no hold on ordinary believers—are not a power in their minds. They have an habitual respect for the sound of them, but no feeling which spreads from the words to the things signified, and forces the mind to take them in, and make them conform to the formula. Whenever conduct is concerned they look round for Mr A. and B., to direct them how far to go in obeying Christ.”

NOTE IV., page 14.

See in Voltaire's 'Philosophical Dictionary' the article "Ravaillac." It is in the form of a dialogue between a doctor in theology and a page of the Duke of Sully. The dialogue begins thus : "Thank God, my dear boy, Ravaillac died in holiness. He made his confession to me ; he repented of his sin, and made a firm resolve not to fall into it again. He wished to receive the holy communion, but that is not allowed here as at Rome ; his repentance stood in place of it, and it is certain that he is now in paradise. . . . He was most contrite, and contrition, combined with the sacrament of confession, effects salvation, which leads straight to paradise, where he is now praying to God for you."

NOTE V., page 14.

This dialogue was written within a few years of the condemnation of La Barre and D'Etallonde for sacrilege. They were accused of having insulted a crucifix set up in a public thoroughfare ; the alleged offence was committed at night, and the evidence was far from satisfactory. D'Etallonde fled, and was provided for by Frederick the Great at Voltaire's request ; La Barre was condemned by the Parliament of Abbeville ; he was racked, his tongue was torn out, and he was then beheaded.

NOTE VI., page 15.

The desirability of a future life is well treated in the *Westminster Review* for April, 1873 (Mr Gladstone's "Defence of the Faith.") I will only quote the following sentence for comparison with Diderot: "No doubt the prospect of future non-existence may not be an altogether pleasant element to mingle with our ideas for a few short years to come; but by no ingenuity can non-existence itself be represented as unpleasant." Compare also Mill's 'Three Essays,' page 118.

NOTE VII., page 16.

The serpent was adored in Peru, as it is in other parts of the world, as an emblem of eternity and of resurrection, as well as of destruction and of regeneration. This incident in the dialogue is evidently an allusion to the idea of resurrection; Diderot, without entering into the hopeless labyrinth of a discussion on the soul, contents himself with leading his interlocutor into a dilemma and leaving her there.

Metaphysicians have successively given animals souls, degraded them to machines (as compared with soul-possessing man), and finally, perceiving the awkwardness of either position, decided on allowing them a compromise called instinct.

NOTE VIII., page 17.

The expediency of "hedging," so frequently urged on waverers in faith, is apparently an argument not confined to modern Evangelical Christians.

NOTE IX., page 22.

It must not be thought that Diderot was himself so cautious as he represents his philosopher. Although he had, with the tolerance which was his characteristic, confided the article *Soul* in his Encyclopædia to a theologian of well-known orthodoxy, he was attacked for the materialistic tendencies of this very article, and the work was proscribed. His prospects were looking gloomy; Voltaire begged him to leave his ungrateful country, and to accept the noble hospitality offered by Catherine of Russia; he was in vain reminded of the fate of the Chevalier La Barre. But Diderot scorned to seek safety in flight, and, with the scaffold before his eyes, answered Voltaire in the following terms: "I know that when a wild beast has tasted human blood it can no longer do without it; I know that this beast, having devoured the Jesuits, is about to spring on the philosophers; I know that it has cast eyes on me, and that I shall perhaps be the first devoured. . . I know that one of them has had the atrocity to say that nothing will be done as long as only books are burnt. . . I know that before the end of the year I may remember your advice, and

cry Solon! Solon! . . . What is existence to me if I can only preserve it by renouncing all that is dear to me? And then, I rise every morning with the hope that the wicked have repented during the night, that there are no more fanatics. . . If I meet the fate of Socrates, remember that it is not enough to die like him in order to merit comparison with him. . . Illustrious and tender-hearted friend of humanity, I salute and embrace you. No man with a spark of generosity but would pardon fanaticism for cutting a few years off his life if those years could be added to yours. If we do not join in your efforts to crush the *beast*,* it is because we are within reach of its claws, and if, knowing its ferocity, we yet hesitate to retreat, it is from considerations of which the supremacy influences every upright and sensitive nature."

POSTSCRIPTUM.

Since writing these notes I have observed some remarkable coincidences between the opening of the argument in Diderot's 'Conversation' (page 8) with that in Philip Beauchamp's 'Analysis of the Influence of Natural Religion on the Temporal Happiness of Mankind.' The latter, published in 1822† under an assumed name, is generally understood to be the work of George Grote, and it is acknowledged by John Stuart Mill to have had great influence on his intellectual development. At pages 1 and 2 are the following passages:—

"The warmest partisan of natural religion cannot deny that by the influence of it (occasionally at least) bad effects have been produced; nor can any one, on the other hand, venture to deny that it has, on other occasions, brought about good effects. The question, therefore, is throughout only as to the comparative magnitude, number, and proportion of each."

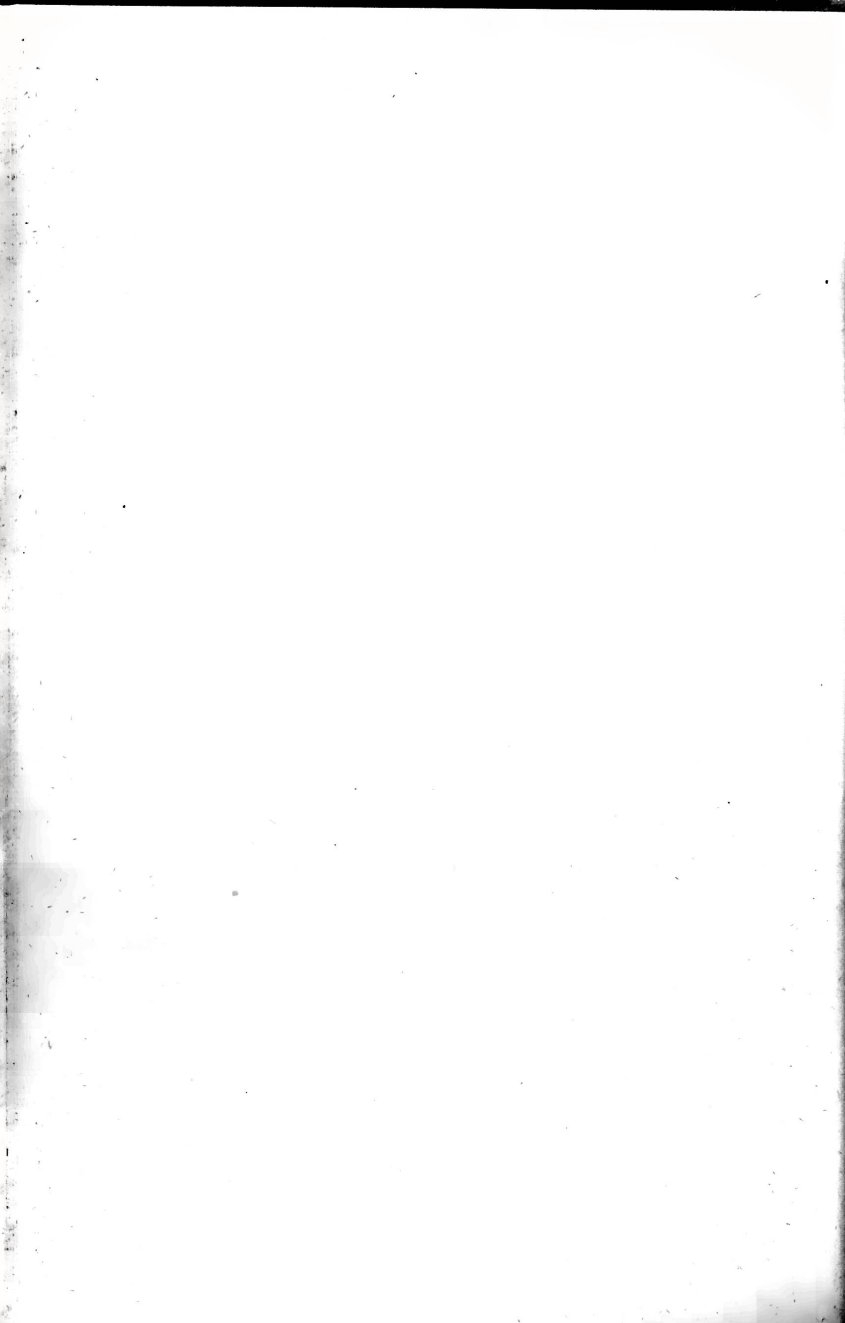
"The injurious effects have avowedly been thrown aside under the pretence that they are *abuses of religion*; that the abuse of a thing cannot be urged against its use, since the most beneficent preparations may be erroneously or criminally applied."

"By the use of a thing is meant the good which it produces; by the abuse, the evil which it occasions. To pronounce upon the merits of the thing under discussion, previously erasing from the reckoning all the evil which it occasions, is most preposterous and unwarrantable."

Chapter VI. is a development of Diderot's argument at page 14—"Temptation is too near," &c.

* The *bête* was fanaticism, that referred to in Voltaire's watchword, "*Ecrasez l'infâme.*"

† It has recently been reprinted by Truelove, 256 High Holborn.



"ADDITION
TO THE PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHTS"
OF
DIDEROT.

A very rare little work has fallen into my hands, entitled 'Various Objections to the Writings of different Theologians.' Curtailed, and written with a little more vivacity, it would form a very good sequel to the 'Philosophical Thoughts.' I give here a few of the best ideas of the anonymous author in question:—

1.

Doubts, in matters of religion, far from being acts of impiety, should be looked upon as good works, when they are those of a man who humbly acknowledges his ignorance and when they arise from the fear of displeasing God by the abuse of reason.

2.

To admit some conformity between the reason of man and eternal reason, which is God, and to pretend that God exacts the sacrifice of human reason, is to lay down that He at once *will* and *will not*.

3.

When God, from whom we have our reason, requires the sacrifice of it, He becomes a juggler who artfully takes away what he has given.

4.

If I give up my reason, I have no longer any guide.

I must blindly adopt a secondary principle and *suppose* what is in question.

5.

If reason is a gift of heaven, and if we can say the same thing of faith, heaven has made us two presents which are incompatible and contradictory.

6.

To remove this difficulty, we must say that faith is a chimerical principle, and that it does not exist in nature.

7.

Pascal Nicole, and others have said, "That a God should punish with eternal torments the fault of a guilty father in his innocent children, is a proposition above and not contrary to reason." But what then *is* a proposition contrary to reason if that which evidently asserts a blasphemy is not so?

8.

Wandering about an immense forest during the night, I have but a feeble light to guide me. A stranger approaches and says to me, "Blow out thy candle, my friend, in order better to find thy way." This stranger is a theologian.

9.

If my reason comes from on high, it is the voice of heaven which speaks to me through it; I am bound to listen to it.

10.

Merit and demerit cannot apply to the use of reason, because all the goodwill in the world cannot avail a blind man to discern colours. I am forced to perceive evidence where it *is*, and the want of evidence where it is not, unless I be an imbecile,—now imbecility is a misfortune and not a vice.

11.

The author of nature, who will not reward me for

having been a man of sense, said M. Diderot, will not damn me for having been a fool.

12.

And He will not damn thee even for having been a wicked man, for hast thou not already been sufficiently unhappy in having been wicked?

13.

Every virtuous action is accompanied by inward satisfaction, every criminal action by remorse; now the mind owns without shame and without remorse its repugnance to such and such propositions; there is then neither virtue nor guilt either in believing or in rejecting them.

14.

If we still need grace in order to do well, what was the use of the death of Jesus Christ?

15.

If there are a hundred thousand damned for one saved, the devil has still the advantage without having abandoned his son to death.

16.

The God of the Christians is a father who sets great store by his apples and very little by his children.

17.

Take away from a Christian the fear of Hell and you will take from him his faith.

18.

A true religion interesting all men in all times and in all places must have been eternal, universal, and evident; none has these characteristics; all then are thrice demonstrated false.

19.

The facts of which some men only can be witnesses are insufficient to demonstrate a religion which ought to be equally believed by the whole world.

20.

The facts by which religions are supported are ancient and marvellous; that is, the most doubtful possible to prove the most incredible thing.

21.

To prove the Gospel by a miracle is to prove an absurdity by a thing against nature.

22.

But what will God do to those who have never heard speak of His Son? Will He punish the deaf for not having heard?

23.

What will He do to those who, having heard tell of His religion, have not been able to comprehend it? Will he punish pigmies for not having been able to walk with the steps of a giant?

24.

Why are the miracles of Jesus Christ true, and those of Esculapius, of Apollonius and of Mahomet false?

25.

But all the Jews who were at Jerusalem were probably converted at the sight of the miracles of Jesus Christ? Not at all. Far from believing in him, they crucified him. We must agree that these Jews are unlike all other men; everywhere we have seen people carried away by a single false miracle and Jesus Christ was unable to make anything of the Jewish people with an infinity of true miracles.

26.

It is this miracle of incredulity on the part of the Jews which should be placed in the strongest light, and not that of his resurrection.

27.

It is as true as that two and two make four that Cæsar existed; it is as sure that Jesus Christ existed as

Cæsar. It is then, as sure that Jesus Christ rose again as that he or Cæsar existed. What logic! The existence of Jesus and of Cæsar is not a miracle.

28.

We read in the life of M. de Turenne, that a house having caught fire, the presence of the Blessed *Holy* Sacrament suddenly arrested the flames. Well, but we read also in history that a monk having poisoned a consecrated host, an Emperor of Germany had no sooner swallowed it than he expired.

29.

There was something more there than the appearances of the bread and wine, or we must say that the poison had incorporated itself with the body and the blood of Jesus Christ.

30.

This body becomes mouldy, this wine becomes sour, this God is devoured by mites upon his altar. Blind people, imbecile Egyptians open your eyes!

31.

The religion of Jesus Christ announced by ignorant persons made the first Christians. The same religion preached by the learned and by doctors now only makes sceptics.

32.

It is objected that submission to a legislative authority dispenses one from reasoning; but where on the surface of the earth is the religion without such an authority?

33.

It is the education of his childhood which prevents a Mahometan from being baptized; it is the education of his childhood which prevents a Christian from being circumcised; it is the reason of the grown man which equally despises baptism and circumcision.

34.

It is said in Saint Luke, that God the Father is greater than God the Son. *Pater major me est.* Yet, in spite of a passage so express, the Church pronounces anathema on any scrupulous believer who adheres literally to the words of his father's testament.

35.

If authority has been able to dispose at its pleasure of the sense of this passage, and as there is not one in all the Scriptures more precise, neither is there one that we can flatter ourselves we understand, and of which the Church may not make what it pleases in future.

36.

"*Tu es Petrus, et super hanc petram œdificabo ecclesiam meam.*" Is that the language of a God, or a medley worthy of the *Seigneur des accords*?

37.

"*In dolore paries.*" "Thou shalt bring forth in pain" said God to the prevaricating woman; and what have the females of animals done to offend Him which also bring forth in pain?

38.

If we are to understand literally *Pater major me est*, Jesus Christ is not God. If we are to understand literally *hoc est corpus meum*, he gave himself to his apostles with his own hands, which is as absurd as to say that Saint Denis kissed his head after it had been cut off!

39.

It is said that he retired to the Mount of Olives, and that he prayed, and to whom did he pray? He prayed to himself!

40.

This God who causes God to die in order to appease God is an excellent saying of Baron de la

Houtan. Less evidence results from a hundred folio volumes written for or against Christianity than from the absurdity of these two lines.

41.

To say that man is a compound of strength and weakness, of light and blindness, of littleness and of greatness, is not to state his case, it is to define it.

42.

Man is as God or nature has made him, and God or nature makes nothing evil.

43.

What we call original sin, Ninon de Lenclos called *le péché original*.*

44.

It is unexampled impudence to cite the conformity of the *Evangelists*, since in some of them there are very important facts of which not a word is said in the others.

45.

Plato considered the Divinity under three aspects, goodness, wisdom, and power. One's eyes must be closed not to see in this the Trinity of the Christians. It was nearly three thousand years since the philosopher of Athens called *Logos* what we call the Word.

46.

The divine persons are either three accidents or three substances. There is no medium. If they are three accidents, we are Atheists or Deists; if they are three substances, we are Pagans.

47.

God the Father judges man worthy of His eternal vengeance; God the Son judges them worthy of His

* There is a pun here; *originel* is the French for "original," while *original* means "queer."

infinite mercy; the Holy Ghost remains neuter. How can this senseless Catholic verbiage be reconciled with the unity of the divine will?

48.

Theologians have long been asked to reconcile the dogma of eternal torture with the infinite mercy of God, and they are just where they were.

49.

And why punish a culprit when there is no longer any good to be derived from his chastisement?

50.

He who punishes for his own sake alone is very cruel and very wicked.

51.

There is no good father who would wish to resemble our heavenly Father.

52.

What proportion is there between the offender and the offended? what proportion between the offence and the punishment? What a heap of absurdities and atrocities!

53.

And at what is this God so angry? Would not one say that *I* could do something for or against His glory, for or against His peace, for or against His happiness?

54.

It is asserted that God causes the wicked man, who is powerless against Him, to burn in a fire which will endure everlastingly, yet scarcely would a father be permitted to give temporary death to a son who should compromise his life, his honour, and his fortune!

55.

O Christians! you have, then, two different ideas

of goodness and of wickedness, of truth and of falsehood. You are, then, the most absurd of dogmatists or the most outrageous of Pyrrhonists.

56.

All the evil of which one is capable is not all the evil possible; no it is only he who could commit all the evil possible who could also deserve eternal punishment. To make of God an infinitely vindictive being, you transform a worm of the earth into an infinitely powerful being.

57.

That which these atrocious Christians have translated by *eternal*, signifies in Hebrew only *durable*. It is from the ignorance of a Hebrewism and from the ferocious disposition of an interpreter that the dogma of the eternity of torment proceeds.

58.

Pascal has said, "If your religion is false, you risk nothing in believing it true; if it is true, you risk everything in believing it false." An Imaun can say just as much as Pascal.

59.

That Jesus Christ, who is God, should have been tempted by the Devil, is a tale worthy the *Thousand-and-one Nights*.

60.

I should be very glad if a Christian, particularly a Jansenist, would make me feel the *cui bono* of the incarnation. Again, would it not need to swell to infinity the number of the damned if one desires to turn this dogma to any advantage.

61.

But why do Leda's swan and the little flames of Castor and Pollux make us laugh? and why do we not laugh at the dove and the tongues of fire of the Gospel?

62.

In the first centuries there were sixty Gospels almost equally believed. Fifty-six of them have been rejected as containing puerilities and folly. Does there remain nothing of all that in those which have been preserved?

63.

God gives a first law to men; he then abolishes this law. Is not such conduct a little like that of a legislator who has been mistaken and discovers it in time? Is it like a perfect Being to change his mind?

64.

There are as many kinds of faith as there are religions in the world.

65.

All the Sectarians in the world are but heretical deists.

66.

If man is unhappy without having been born guilty, may it not be that he is destined to enjoy eternal happiness without being able, by his nature, ever to make himself worthy of it?

67.

What I think of the Christian dogma, and saying but one word of its morality, is this: that for a Catholic father of a family, convinced that the maxims of the Gospel must be carried out to the letter, under pain of what is called Hell, seeing the extreme difficulty of attaining to that degree of perfection of which human weakness is incapable, I see no other expedient than to take his child by the foot and to dash him to the earth, or to stifle him at birth. By this act he saves him from the danger of damnation, and insures him eternal felicity; and I maintain that such an act, far from being criminal, should be esteemed infinitely praiseworthy, since it is founded

on the motive of paternal love, which demands that every good father should do for his children all the good possible.

68.

I ask whether the precept of religion and the law of society, which forbid the murder of the innocent, are not in reality very absurd and very cruel, when, by killing them, we insure to them infinite happiness, whereas, in suffering them to live, we devote them almost certainly to eternal misery ?

69.

How! Monsieur de la Condamine. Can it be allowable to inoculate one's son to save him from the small-pox, and not allowable to kill him in order to save him from Hell ? You are jesting.

