

Mary Efrosini Gregory

**FREEDOM
IN FRENCH
ENLIGHTENMENT
THOUGHT**



*Currents in Comparative
Romance Languages and Literatures*

Freedom in French Enlightenment Thought examines how five eighteenth-century French theorists—Montesquieu, Diderot, Rousseau, Voltaire, and Condorcet—kindled the flame of freedom in America and France. Each thinker laid down a building block that would eventually inspire the language in constitutions around the world. They held that citizens have certain inalienable rights that are dictated by natural law and endowed to all by our Creator; that these rights include equality before the law, justice, safety and security of persons and property, and freedom of speech, press, assembly, and religion. Montesquieu recommended three separate branches of government that function independently of each other. Diderot held that there is no true sovereign, except the nation; that there is no true legislator, except the people. Rousseau advised that the individual will must be subordinate to the general will and private interest to that of the community: he warned against legislators who act from their own financial interests and enact laws to aggrandize themselves. Voltaire believed that selfishness, greed, and the desire for luxury are not only part of human nature, but that they compel people to achieve, trade with others, search, explore, and invent: the passions are the engine that makes capitalism run and that stimulate all human endeavor. Condorcet, a champion of civil rights, boldly proclaimed equality for women, blacks, and the poor. The philosophes held that free and universal public education will permit more citizens to participate in the progress of the arts and sciences and will improve the standard of living among all strata of society. An unrestrained press permits citizens to make informed decisions. Their polemics have indeed changed the face of the world.

MARY EFROSINI GREGORY received her B.A. and her M.A. in French from Queens College and her M.Phil. in French from Columbia University. She is the author of *Diderot and the Metamorphosis of Species* (2007), *An Eastern Orthodox View of Pascal* (2008), *Evolutionism in Eighteenth-Century French Thought* (2008), and *Miracles of the Orthodox Church* (2009). Two other books, one on Christianity and twenty-first century science and the other on government experimentation on American citizens, are in the pre-publication stage.

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Introduction

In an extensive republic there are men of large fortunes, and consequently of less moderation; there are trusts too considerable to be placed in any single subject; he has interests of his own; he soon begins to think that he may be happy and glorious, by oppressing his fellow-citizens; and that he may raise himself to grandeur on the ruins of his country.¹

Montesquieu, *Spirit of Laws* (1748)

In February 1778 Benjamin Franklin, the first U.S. ambassador to France, paid a visit to Voltaire at Ferney. Franklin was accompanied by his 7 year old grandson, Benjamin Franklin Bache, and he asked Voltaire to bestow his blessing upon the lad.² Voltaire ceremoniously placed his hand upon the boy's head and solemnly pronounced in English, "God and liberty." News of the dramatic encounter swept the Continent like wildfire and captivated the imagination of all. Franklin and Voltaire, towering figures universally known on both continents, were often compared to Solon and Sophocles: one, because he was a renown statesman, and the other, a playwright. Voltaire was also famous for his novels, poetry, and essays.

Two months later, on April 29, 1778, Franklin and Voltaire met again at the Académie royale des sciences. Voltaire, gaunt and frail, who would die within a month, embraced Franklin. Onlookers watched with reverential awe and admiration. As the two embraced and kissed each other on the cheeks, European style, the audience, comprised of celebrated figures such as Condorcet and John Adams, was greatly enthused.

John Adams reported on the histrionics that took place that day at the Académie with some mirth:

There was a general cry that M. Voltaire and M. Franklin should be introduced to each other. This was no satisfaction; there must be something more. Neither of our philosophers seemed to divine what was wished or expected; they however took each other by the hand. But this was not enough. The clamor continued until the

explanation came out: Il faut s'embrasser à la française. The two aged actors upon this great theater of philosophy and frivolity then embraced each other by hugging one another in their arms and kissing each other's cheeks, and then the tumult subsided. And the cry immediately spread through the kingdom, and I suppose all over Europe: Qu'il est charmant de voir embrasser Solon et Sophocles.³

On another occasion, when had rumors started to circulate that Voltaire had died, Voltaire quipped that the reports were indeed true, only premature.

The French *philosophes*—Montesquieu, Diderot, Rousseau, Voltaire, and Condorcet—like their ideological cousins on the other side of the Atlantic, devoted their lives to boldly promoting values that would one day be formalized in the American Constitution: they held that citizens have certain inalienable rights that are dictated by natural law and endowed to all by our Creator; that these rights include equality before the law, justice, the safety and security of persons and property, and freedom of speech, press, assembly, and religion. They staunchly opposed monarchical absolutism, militarism, slavery, and religious fanaticism, and they did so in the face of severe censorship and threats of imprisonment, exile, torture, beheading and/or being burned at the stake. They held that the way to actualize freedom, justice and equality for all is through education: knowledge and reason gradually propel society forward and eventually replace ignorance, superstition, and irrationality, if not in this generation, certainly in the next. Their polemics did indeed succeed in changing the face of the world.

The ideals articulated by the French *philosophes* inspired the American and French Revolutions and their subsequent constitutions. This book will provide an overview of the contributions that Montesquieu, Diderot, Rousseau, Voltaire, and Condorcet made to the spirit of freedom. In addition, chapter 6 on race, reprinted from *Evolutionism in Eighteenth-Century French Thought*, will address some of the *philosophes'* contributions to the abolitionist movement in France.

While the *philosophes* espoused freedom and opposed the despotic tendencies of unrestrained government, they differed widely as to their politics and particular views on human nature. For example, Voltaire remained a staunch monarchist, even though he was forced to live most of his life in exile because of his outspoken views. He was also an ardent capitalist: he believed that selfishness, greed, and the desire for luxury are not only part of human nature, but that these passions can be useful to man—they compel people to achieve, to trade with others, to search, to explore and

to invent, albeit for profit. Voltaire held that the passions are the engine that makes capitalism run and stimulates all human endeavor. Rousseau, on the other hand, was a fervent republican and he lauded the freedoms afforded to the citizens of the confederated cantons of Switzerland as examples to emulate. Moreover, he viewed inequality, luxury and greed not as natural, but rather as evils that resulted when men banded together to form societies. Diderot, for his part, did not concern himself with specific regimes or forms of government—rather, he was more concerned with the functioning of institutions and the economy and he thought that this was critical as to whether people would enjoy freedom, equality, and happiness. He was a vociferous critic of the tyrannies of unrestrained monarchy and defended separate branches of government, even when the executive branch was comprised of a king. Montesquieu, who was more prudent about antagonizing the French monarchy, diplomatically described all forms of government and permitted his readers to see for themselves that of all regimes, the republic is the most preferable.

Liberty

Let us begin by examining the definition of liberty. In the eighteenth century liberty referred to the power to either choose or to refrain from choosing; to not being forced to submit to the commands of another human being; to the state of being a free man as opposed to being a slave; to the form of government in which sovereign power resides in the nobility or in the people; to the ability to being able to do what one wants to do without being restrained from doing it. In 1694 the French dictionary defined liberty [*liberté*] thus:

- The power that the soul has to choose between one thing or the other, to do or not to do. *God gave freedom to man. free will. freedom to ratify or to veto. passions diminish freedom.*⁴
- It is often understood to mean every kind of freedom from the authority of another. *Full freedom. full and complete freedom. he does not want to devote himself to anyone, he loves his freedom too much...*⁵

- It is also understood as a person's state of being free and not subjugated: And in this sense it is opposed to slavery.⁶
- In reference to a State, to a country, *Freedom* is understood as a form of government in which the people has sovereign authority. *Whereas Rome enjoyed its freedom, a tyrant who oppressed the freedom of his country. this city, this province shook off the yoke, & got freedom. the protector, the restorer of freedom.*⁷
- It also means, Power to do something without being prevented. *That is contrary to public freedom. the laws are the guardians of freedom...freedom of conscience,* means, Permission to profess whatever Religion one wants.⁸

It is significant that the French dictionary of 1762 retained the definitions of 1694 with one notable exception: while the 1694 dictionary defined freedom as the form of government in which the people has sovereign authority, the 1762 dictionary inserted the word “nobility” in the text so that it read thus: “In reference to a State, to a Country, *Freedom* is understood as a form of government in which the Nobility or the People has sovereign authority.”⁹ This concurs with Montesquieu's definition that there are two kinds of republics: aristocracies, in which a part of the people rule, and democracies, in which all of the people rule. Montesquieu thought that it is possible for liberty to exist in an aristocracy because nobles recognize that they have to repress personal interest to some degree in order to work with each other to the mutual benefit of all. Hence, nobles cannot act wantonly to the detriment of others; they behave with some degree of virtue in order to gain the cooperation of others to the benefit of the group.

Virtue

An examination of the spirit of freedom in eighteenth-century French thought also reveals another frequently recurring term: virtue [*vertu*]. Montesquieu thought that virtue is essential to democracy. When citizens cease to be virtuous, the republic is lost and the end of democracy has come. Without virtue there can be no freedom. Therefore, let us see how the eighteenth century defined virtue.

The French dictionary of 1694 defined the noun “virtue” as “The propensity that the soul has that leads it to do good and avoid evil.”¹⁰ Hence, it was believed that virtue is an innate quality of the soul, a trait with which all humans, Christian or pagan, are born. As examples the 1694 dictionary cited, “*Christian virtue. moral virtue. intellectual virtue. natural virtues. acquired virtues...the virtues of Pagans...*”¹¹ This definition was retained in the dictionary of 1762.

In 1694 the adjective “virtuous” [*vertueux, vertueuse*] addressed Christian virtues, and chastity in particular. “Virtuous” was defined as “He who has moral or Christian virtue. *He is very virtuous...* It is also said, of a woman, that *She is virtuous*, to mean that she is chaste.”¹² This mention of chastity did not appear in the dictionary definition of 1762.

Although sexual virtue is left out of the 1762 dictionary, Montesquieu declares that it is essential to the existence of the republic (*Spirit of Laws*, Book 7, Chapter 8, entitled, “Of Public Contingency,” and again in Book 7, Chapters 9–14). Continence indicates an absence of the self-interest that leads citizens to behave selfishly and use others any way that they can. Promiscuity, like greed and the lust to acquire money and material goods, indicates that the citizen cares more about himself than his fellow citizen. This form of selfishness, like all other vices, is the enemy of the republic because it is a step down the slippery slope in which people become narcissistic, self-serving, and opportunistic.

Montesquieu advises that in a democracy virtue is necessary for the government to survive (*Spirit of Laws*, 3.3). The person entrusted with the execution of laws knows that he, like those he governs, is subject to the law. As an example, Montesquieu points to the Greeks, who lived under a popular government and knew no other support than virtue. However, “when virtue is banished, ambition invades the mind of those who are disposed to receive it, and avarice possesses the whole community. The objects of their desires are changed; what they were fond of before has become indifferent; they were free while under the restraint of laws, but they would fain now be free to act against law...” (3.3).¹³ When virtue flees, the passions and private interest fill the void—men act out of greed and respond only to fear; men cease to obey the law and that is the end of the republic.

As virtue is necessary in a democracy, it is also necessary in an aristocracy, but it is not absolutely requisite. The nobles form a body that acts in its own interest. When they execute laws against their colleagues,

they find that they are acting against themselves. Therefore, they have to act virtuously in order to gain the cooperation of each other; they suppress their own private interests as far as they must in order to gain the cooperation of other nobles. Thus, they act by an inferior virtue that puts them on a level with each other and their preservation depends on mutual cooperation (3.4).

Montesquieu advises that virtue is not the principle of a monarchy, but rather, honor is. Monarchies are characterized by “ambition in idleness; meanness mixed with pride; a desire of riches without industry; aversion to truth; flattery, perfidy, violation of engagements, contempt of civil duties, fear of the prince’s virtue, hope from his weakness, but, above all, a perpetual ridicule cast upon virtue, are, I think the characteristics by which most courtiers in all ages and countries have been constantly distinguished” (3.5).¹⁴

The *philosophes* defined virtue as being more concerned about the welfare of one’s fellow citizens than about one’s own personal self-interest; it was held to be virtuous to put the general will before the particular will. This notion was a central thesis of Rousseau. In *A Discourse on Political Economy* (1755), Rousseau defines virtue thus: “If you would have the general will accomplished, bring all the particular wills into conformity with it; in other words, as virtue is nothing more than this conformity of the particular wills with the general will, establish the reign of virtue.”¹⁵ In this study we will see that the *philosophes* consistently promoted concern about the welfare of the other and that they held that legislation is required to deter selfishness, inequality, injustice, poverty, and misery.

Let us take a look at the definition of virtue that Voltaire provides in the *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764): “What is virtue? Doing good to one’s neighbor...I am in danger, you come to my help; I am deceived, you tell me the truth; I am neglected, you console me; I am ignorant, you instruct me: I do not find it difficult to call you virtuous.”¹⁶

Natural Law

There is one more term that requires examination as it is intimately intertwined with the notion of freedom: that of natural law. The 1762 dictionary defined natural law as “the feelings & the principles of justice and equity instilled in all men by the Author of nature.”¹⁷ As an example of

usage, the dictionary added, “Natural law is engraved in the heart of all men.”¹⁸ Therefore, natural law is the theory that there exists a universal system of justice that exists in all of nature and that is common to all humans and animals. Natural law may be contrasted to positive law, which is a system of justice derived from the rules of society. Natural law is dictated by God; positive law is comprised of the laws of men. It is possible that these two systems may not concur with each other.

The idea that the universal law of nature may conflict with the laws that society makes dates back to the ancients. Aristotle (384–322 BC) recognized that what is just by nature may not be just by men’s laws. The Greeks distinguished between nature (*physis*, φύσις) and man’s law (*nomos*, νόμος). They recognized that laws fabricated by men could vary from country to country, but that rules imposed by nature were the same everywhere. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle observes that aside from particular laws that each society devises for itself, one could argue that perhaps such laws might be contrary to a common law that is dictated by nature (*Rhetoric*, 1373b2–8). Hence, he advised that a rhetorician could appeal to a higher, natural law, distinguishable from men’s positive law.

Aristotle distinguishes between the two kinds of law in the following passage: “Particular law is that which each community lays down and applies to its own members...Universal law is the law of Nature. For there really is, as everyone to some extent deduces, a natural justice or injustice that is binding on all men, even on those who have no association or covenant with each other. It is this that Sophocles’ Antigone clearly means when she says that the burial of Polyneices was a just act...she means that it was just by nature. ‘It is not of today or yesterday, but it lives eternal: no one can date its birth.’ And Empedocles, also, when he implores us not to kill any living creature, says that doing this is not just for some people while unjust for others, ‘No, but, it is an all-embracing law, it stretches unbroken through the realms of the sky, and over the earth’s immensity’” (*Rhetoric*, 1373b).

The Stoics developed this notion further: they conceived of an egalitarian law of nature that conforms to human reason. The Stoics asserted the existence of a rational and purposeful order in the universe (a divine or eternal law) and that living a life of virtue was the means by which a rational being conforms to this natural law. The Stoics pointed out that individual worth, moral duty and brotherhood are exponents of natural law.

The Roman jurists were greatly influenced by this philosophy and they employed it in their legal theory. They recognized that natural law dictates that man and the animals have certain instincts and emotions such as self-preservation and the love of their offspring. They concluded that in its ethical sense, natural law is the rule of conduct prescribed by nature.

St. Thomas Aquinas held that natural law is the rational creature's participation in God's eternal law. Man has been endowed by his Creator with two qualities—intelligence and free will—therefore, one could say that man's free will and reason are part of natural law. Moreover, natural law dictates self-preservation: we must eat to nourish our bodies; to withhold food or to overeat to our detriment would be contrary to natural law. We use our reason, which is intended by God to be the guide and dictator of our conduct. We live peacefully in society because man is gregarious by nature and nature requires that he live in a state of society.

Therefore, thinkers have agreed that there are two essential characteristics of natural law. First, it is universal—it applies to the entire human race. Secondly, it is immutable—it is eternal and it will exist as long as there is a human race.

Thomas Hobbes held that in the state of nature, men are continually at war with each other. He defined the right of nature [*jus naturale*] as the liberty that each man has to use his power to save his life (self-preservation); he also defined the law of nature [*lex naturalis*] as the rule by which man is forbidden to do what is destructive to his life.

John Locke departed from Hobbes' notion that men are continually at war: rather, he described the state of nature as a state of society with free and equal men who already observe natural law. Locke advised that if a ruler went against natural law and failed to protect life, liberty, and property, the citizenry could justifiably overthrow the existing state and create a new one.

The eighteenth-century French *philosophes* accepted the notion that there are certain basic human instincts and desires. Montesquieu, in the *Spirit of Laws, Book I, Chapter 2*, entitled, "Of the Laws of Nature," advises that the laws of nature antecede those of society and that they derive from the constitution of our being. In order to understand natural law, one must examine primeval man before he joined society. Montesquieu holds that the first natural law is peace. Natural man felt his weakness in the midst of the untamed forces of nature (such as cold weather and wild animals); therefore, he did not seek to attack the other, but rather, sought peace at all costs in order to ensure self-preservation. Here Montesquieu parts company with

Hobbes, who posited that men are naturally at war with each other. Montesquieu, on the contrary, points out that man must have become bellicose only after he joined society: the notions of empire and domination are so complex, they would certainly be not among the first ideas that primitive man would have. He goes on to enumerate that the second law of nature is to seek nourishment; the third law is propagation of the species; the fourth is the desire to live in society.

Diderot, in the article that he penned for the great *Encyclopedia*, entitled, “Natural law” [*droit naturelle*], declares that natural law is the foundation or principal source of justice; Diderot then defines justice as the obligation to render to each person what is due to him. This raises the question as to what is due to each person. After several pages of reasoning, Diderot decides that mankind alone (the general will) must answer the question because humanity has no other end than the good of all. Private interest may be flawed, deleterious or suspect, it may be good or bad, but the general will (common good) is always good. It is for the general will to determine our duties as citizens: the individual has the natural right to do everything that is not contrary to the whole human race. The individual must subordinate his will to that of the general will. This general will resides in the law of nature and it is manifest in the prescribed law (positive law) of all civilized nations as well as in the social practices of people living under the most primitive conditions.

Therefore, Diderot asserts that one may conclude three things. First, the person who follows only his private interest is the enemy of the human race. Secondly, the general will can be heard in the human heart when the passions are silent; or to put it another way, it is instinctively known when private interest steps aside for a moment. Thirdly, the general will determines the conduct of individuals among themselves, the conduct of the individual towards society, and that of society itself towards other societies. Thus, Diderot, echoing Rousseau, held that the general will should reflect laws that guarantee the safety and security of each citizen, his freedom, happiness, equality before the law, and justice.

Rousseau, for his part, hypothesized that natural man, before entering society, was governed by the two principles of natural law: self-preservation and compassion (repugnance to see another human being suffer). He held that primeval man, living in the wild, was truly free; he was motivated by hunger, self-preservation, and the perpetuation of the species. After he

joined society, he retained these basic needs, but now he also requires justice, equity, and a different kind of freedom, one by which human-made laws protect his person and property.

Recurrent themes in eighteenth-century French literature are man's desire to acquire justice, equity, and freedom, and that these values should be enjoyed by all human beings regardless of race, religion or gender. Although despots and absolute monarchs withhold them from populaces, notions of them exist nevertheless in the human heart; with due time man will rebel and recover what rightfully belongs to him according to natural law. It is inevitable because all forms of government are cyclical.

The notion that the French *philosophes* had of natural law profoundly influenced the founding fathers of America. Thomas Jefferson appealed to natural law and unalienable rights in the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

The objective of this study will be to examine the spirit of freedom articulated by the luminaries of the French Enlightenment.

Overview

Chapter 1 ("Montesquieu") addresses the baron de La Brède's advocacy of a gamut of freedoms—of thought, speech, press, religion, for women, for slaves—in the *Persian Letters* (1721) and his analyses of governments, past and present, in the *Spirit of Laws* (1748). In the *Persian Letters* Montesquieu's rococo style paints a colorful and multifaceted tableau of the politics, economy, and customs of France; the oriental theme serves as a foil for the manners and mores of France and points out the long journey that civilized Europe still had to take before all human beings could enjoy equality and justice. In the *Spirit of Laws* Montesquieu describes all forms of government and leaves it up to the reader to decide for himself as to which system might suit him the best. The work makes it evident that as of 1748, the loose confederation of Swiss cantons, which formed a republic, as well as the British parliamentary monarchy, provided the best examples of justice because 1) the establishment of separate, but equal powers ensured a balance

of power and the absence of despotism and 2) the rule of law, not men, prevailed in these societies.

Montesquieu observes that all government is cyclical and that in the past, even the best of republics have metamorphosed into despotic states with time. He calls out to us across the corridors of time, reminding us that virtue constitutes the very foundation of a free state and warning us that when citizens are no longer virtuous, but are ruled by private interest, greed, and the passions, when the citizenry is consumed by the desire to amass fortune and luxuries, the republic begins its downward spiral towards despotism.

Chapter 2 (“Diderot”) examines the encyclopedist’s plea for freedom, equality, and justice in the articles that he penned for the great *Encyclopedia*: “Political Authority” (1751), “City” (1753), “Citizen” (1753), “Natural Law” (1755), and “Intolerance” (1765); we will also review the *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville* (1772), the *Observations on the Nakaz* (1774), and Diderot’s contributions to Raynal’s *History of Two Indias* (1770–1780). Notably, Diderot staunchly defended the abolition of slavery and free and universal public education.

Chapter 3 (“Rousseau”) will examine the rich legacy that the political theorist has bequeathed to us—his anthropological study of man and his scheme to rebuild society from the bottom up to restore the freedom that natural man lost when he left the wild to join civilization. We will study three of his treatises, the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1754), the article entitled, “Political Economy” (1755), which appeared in volume 5 of the *Encyclopedia*, and the *Social Contract* (1762).

Chapter 4 (“Voltaire”) will address the satirist’s defense of free trade and capitalism and his opinion that the passions are useful in that they are the engines that drive humans to progress, learn, explore, work, and strive to do better. We will review several articles from the *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764): “Chain of Events,” “Equality,” “States, Governments: Which Is the Best?” “On Free Will,” “Freedom of Thought,” and “Luxury.”

Chapter 5 (“Condorcet”) will address the contributions to freedom in revolutionary France that the Parisian legislator made. An outspoken defender of civil rights for women, blacks, and the poor, of constitutionalism, and free public education for all, Condorcet published several landmark treatises on equality. We will study *Reflections on Black Slavery* (1781), *On the Admission of Women to the Right of Citizenship* (1790), and *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795). Tragically,

because he remained a moderate in the French legislature, Condorcet was viewed as a traitor by the radical revolutionary faction and his involvement in the cause of liberty cost him his life.

Chapter 6 (“Race”) is a reprint of a chapter from *Evolutionism in Eighteenth-Century French Thought*. It provides an overview of the abolitionist movement in France; traces the genealogy of the concept of race (including contributions made by Bernier, Buffon, Diderot, and Linnaeus); differentiates between the views held by the polygenecists or those who believed that the multiplicity of races arises from different ancestral pairs (a view held by Voltaire) and those held by the monogenecists or those who believed that all humankind has a common ancestral pair (promulgated by Buffon, Diderot, and Maupertuis). The chapter also includes material on Maupertuis’ *Physical Venus* (1745), in which the author points out that the theory of epigenesis explains the diverse physical characteristics that exist among different races around the world; Maupertuis’ condemnation of racism in *Physical Venus*; the Black Code concerning laws governing slaves in the French West Indies; the outcry of Montesquieu, Voltaire, Jaucourt, Rousseau, Diderot, and Condorcet against slavery; and Diderot’s use of race as a foil for European vices.

What Critics Have Written

To date there exists a substantial body of in-depth criticism on how individual *philosophes* used the theme of freedom as propaganda against the state and Church, i.e., how they presented the parliamentary government of England and the free confederated cantons of Switzerland as desirable alternatives to the tyrannical rule of absolutism. There are also numerous anthologies of selected writings of the French *philosophes* in French and English. However, there are not too many overviews that treat Montesquieu, Diderot, Rousseau, Voltaire, and Condorcet as a group and compare and contrast their views so that readers can grasp their similarities and points of contention. The *philosophes* were free thinkers and theorists who saw the roots of liberty in natural law, who posited that virtue is the foundation of the republic, and whose ideals and premises inspired the American Revolution, the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, the French Revolution, and the various French constitutions. However, they differed

widely as to their particular views on the nature of man, the passions, and capitalism and commerce. Voltaire thought that the passions are natural and useful; Rousseau deemed that they are not natural, but evils that threaten society. There are many more differences among them: Voltaire was a monarchist; Rousseau was a republican; Diderot was not concerned about forms of government, but rather he was more concerned about the functions of institutions. They all opposed slavery and held that all races are entitled to freedom under natural law. However, Voltaire thought that different races originated from different ancestral pairs; Diderot, basing his work on Maupertuis and epigenesis, recognized that it is scientifically feasible to explain the origin of all of humanity from a single ancestral pair. We think that this work will provide a useful overview of the spirit of freedom during the French Enlightenment by incorporating politics, natural law, literary style, and popular themes of the time

For criticism of Montesquieu and freedom see Louis Althusser, *Politics and History: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Marx*;¹⁹ David W. Carrithers and Patrick Coleman, *Montesquieu and the Spirit of Modernity*;²⁰ C. P. Courtney, "Montesquieu and Natural Law";²¹ Jean-Patrice Courtois, "Le Physique et le moral dans la théorie du climat chez Montesquieu";²² Madeleine Dobie, *Foreign Bodies: Gender, Language, and Culture in French Orientalism*;²³ Christopher S. Jones, "Politicizing Travel and Climatizing Philosophy: Watsuji, Montesquieu and the European Tour";²⁴ Rebecca E. Kingston, "Montesquieu on Religion and on the Question of Toleration";²⁵ Robert J. Loy, *Montesquieu*;²⁶ David W. Carrithers, Michael A. Mosher, and Paul A. Rahe, ed., *Montesquieu's Science of Politics: Essays on The Spirit of Laws*;²⁷ James W. Pennebaker, et al., "Stereotypes of Emotional Expressiveness of Northerners and Southerners: A Cross-Cultural Test of Montesquieu's Hypotheses";²⁸ Sylvie Romanowski, "Review of Randolph Paul Runyon, *The Art of the Persian Letters: Unlocking Montesquieu's 'Secret Chain'*";²⁹ Randolph Paul Runyon, *The Art of the Persian Letters: Unlocking Montesquieu's 'Secret Chain'*;³⁰ Robert Shackleton, *Montesquieu: A Critical Biography*;³¹ Judith N. Shklar, "Virtue in a Bad Climate; Good Men and Good Citizens in Montesquieu's *L'Esprit des lois*";³² Mark H. Waddicor, *Montesquieu and the Philosophy of Natural Law*;³³ Michael Zuckert, *Natural Law, Natural Rights and Classical Liberalism: On Montesquieu's Critique of Hobbes in Natural Law and Modern Moral Philosophy*.³⁴

For criticism of Diderot and freedom we recommend: Yves Benot, *Diderot: De l'athéisme à l'anticolonialisme*,³⁵ Jacques Chouillet, "La politique de Diderot entre la société démocratique et l'état hiérarchisé: Antimonies et résolution",³⁶ Robert Loyalty Cru, *Diderot as a Disciple of English Thought*,³⁷ Gianluigi Goggi, "Les fragments politiques de 1772",³⁸ Dena Goodman, "The Structure of Political Argument in Diderot's *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville*",³⁹ René Hubert, *Rousseau et l'Encyclopédie; Essai sur la formation des idées politiques de Rousseau*,⁴⁰ René Hubert, *Les sciences sociales dans l'Encyclopédie*,⁴¹ Luzian Okon, *Nature et civilisation dans le Supplément au voyage de Bougainville de Denis Diderot*,⁴² Jacques Proust, "La contribution de Diderot à l'Encyclopédie et les théories du droit naturel",⁴³ Anthony Strugnell, *Diderot's Politics: A Study of the Evolution of Diderot's Political Thought after the Encyclopédie*,⁴⁴ Leland Thielemann, "Diderot and Hobbes",⁴⁵ Arthur Wilson, "The Development and Scope of Diderot's Political Thought",⁴⁶ Robert Wokler, "The Influence of Diderot on the Political Theory of Rousseau."⁴⁷

For criticism of Rousseau and freedom we recommend Louis Althusser, *Politics and History: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Marx*,⁴⁸ C. Bertram, *Rousseau and the Social Contract*,⁴⁹ Carol Blum, *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue: The Language of Politics in the French Revolution*,⁵⁰ Maurice Cranston, *Jean-Jacques: The Early Life and Works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1712 – 1754*,⁵¹ Maurice Cranston, *The Noble Savage: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1754–1762*,⁵² Maurice Cranston, *The Solitary Self: Jean-Jacques Rousseau in Exile and Adversity*,⁵³ N.J.H. Dent, *Rousseau Dictionary*,⁵⁴ N.J. H. Dent, *Rousseau: Introduction to His Psychological, Social, and Political Theory*,⁵⁵ Stephen Ellenburg, *Rousseau's Political Philosophy: An Interpretation from Within*,⁵⁶ M. Evans, "Freedom in Modern Society: Rousseau's Challenge",⁵⁷ David Gauthier, *The Sentiment of Existence*,⁵⁸ Jean Guéhenno, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*,⁵⁹ René Hubert, *Rousseau et l'Encyclopédie; Essai sur la formation des idées politiques de Rousseau*,⁶⁰ Ramon M. Lemos, *Rousseau's Political Philosophy: An Exposition and Interpretation*,⁶¹ Roger D. Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau*,⁶² Mira Morgenstern, *Rousseau and the Politics of Ambiguity: Self, Culture, and Society*,⁶³ Timothy O'Hagan, *Rousseau*,⁶⁴ Patrick Riley, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*,⁶⁵ Judith N. Shklar, *Men and Citizens: A Study of Rousseau's Social Theory*,⁶⁶ Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*,⁶⁷

Mary Seidman Trouille, *Sexual Politics in the Enlightenment: Women Writers Read Rousseau*,⁶⁸

For criticism of Voltaire and freedom see Albert Bachman, *Censorship in France from 1715 to 1750: Voltaire's Opposition*,⁶⁹ Jean Baubérot and Claude-Jean Lenoir, ed., *La Tolérance ou la liberté? Leçons de Voltaire et de Condorcet*,⁷⁰ Peter Gay, *Voltaire's Politics: The Poet as Realist*,⁷¹ John Morley, *Voltaire*,⁷² Derek Parker, *Voltaire: The Universal Man*,⁷³ Justin S. Niati, *Voltaire confronte les journalistes: la tolérance et la liberté de la presse à l'épreuve*,⁷⁴ Roger Pearson, *Voltaire Almighty: A Life in Pursuit of Freedom*,⁷⁵

For criticism of Condorcet and freedom see Franck Alengry, *Condorcet: guide de la Révolution française, théoricien du droit constitutionnel, et précurseur de la science sociale*,⁷⁶ Elisabeth Badinter and Robert Badinter, *Condorcet (1743–1794): un intellectuel en politique*,⁷⁷ Keith Michael Baker, *Condorcet: From Natural Philosophy to Social Mathematics*,⁷⁸ Jean Baubérot and Claude-Jean Lenoir, ed., *La Tolérance ou la liberté? Leçons de Voltaire et de Condorcet*,⁷⁹ Léon Cahen, *Condorcet et la révolution française*,⁸⁰ Edward Goodell, *The Noble Philosopher: Condorcet and the Enlightenment*,⁸¹ Jean-Luc Romet, et al, *Liberté, égalité: Condorcet*,⁸² Emma Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment*,⁸³ Jacob Salwyn Schapiro, *Condorcet and the Rise of Liberalism*,⁸⁴ David Williams, *Condorcet and Modernity*,⁸⁵ David Williams, "Condorcet and Natural Rights",⁸⁶ David Williams, "Condorcet and the Politics of Black Servitude."⁸⁷

In addition, an excellent comprehensive overview on the political theorists of the Enlightenment is that of Mark Goldie and Robert Wokler, eds., *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought*.⁸⁸ We also recommend Keith Michael Baker, ed., *French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*,⁸⁹ Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century*,⁹⁰ T.C.W. Blanning, *The Eighteenth Century: Europe 1688–1815*,⁹¹ *French Liberalism and Education in the Eighteenth Century: The Writings of La Chalotais, Turgot, Diderot, and Condorcet on National Education*,⁹² Jack Fruchtman, Jr., *Atlantic Cousins: Benjamin Franklin and His Visionary Friends*,⁹³ Martin Kingsley, *French Liberal Thought in the Eighteenth Century: A Study of Political Ideas from Bayle to Condorcet*,⁹⁴ Massimo Salvadori, comp., *European Liberalism*,⁹⁵ Edward Seeber, *Anti-Slavery*

Opinion in France during the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century,⁹⁶
Robert Louis Stein, *The French Slave Trade in the Eighteenth Century: An Old Regime Business*.⁹⁷

This study paints a mosaic of various French free thinkers who proclaimed man and woman's right to freedom, equality, and justice under the law; the notion that natural law should be the basis for the laws of men; the idea that virtue is the basis of democracy; the absolute requisite for free and universal public education and the belief that the dissemination of knowledge will permit more citizens to participate in the progress of the arts and sciences and that thus, the standard of living will be improved among all strata of society; the imperative of abolishing slavery because it is contrary to natural law; the rights of women to full citizenship under the law; the argument that if men's laws are based on the fact that men have reason and are therefore superior to the animals, then the same holds true for women; the right of all citizens to enjoy freedom of thought, speech, press, assembly, religion; the need to have three separate branches of government that function independently of each other; and what is most striking, the *philosophes'* prescient caveat that when private interest replaces virtue as the foundation of the republic, the end of democracy has come and a more despotic form of government will surely replace it.

Chapter One

Montesquieu

*I have lived in slavery, and yet always retained my freedom: I have remodeled your laws upon those of nature; and my mind has always maintained its independence.*¹

Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, Letter 161 (1721)

The *Persian Letters* (1721) inaugurated the age of the French Enlightenment, an era in which the *philosophes* would promote all kinds of freedom—of thought, speech, press, religion, political, for women, for slaves—and the awareness that all human beings share common bonds, no matter what their gender, race, religion, or national origin.

Rococo Style

This epistolary novel is written in rococo style, a technique that originated in Paris during the early 18th century. Rococo was characterized by an abundance of curving and asymmetrical design: walls and ceilings were decorated with curves and countercurves based on the letters “C” and “S.” The style was exemplified by playfulness and its asymmetrical motifs and curves were taken from things found in nature: rocks, seashells, flowers, vines, and leaves. Rococo was typified by lightness, daintiness, grace, elegance, and an explosion of swirls. Its motifs were used in painting, interior architecture and design, sculpture, furniture, porcelain, and landscape gardening design. Famous rococo painters included François Boucher, Jean Honoré Fragonard, and Antoine Watteau.

Montesquieu’s style of writing is typically rococo: thought and topics follow circuitous routes throughout the novel that force the reader, just like someone looking at a painting, to gaze around the canvas in order to absorb

all of the action. As we proceed from letter to letter, we meander around different topics, following the twists and turns that take us to various themes. Sometimes we go roundabout and find ourselves on the same topic, but at a different locale, for example, in Paris, rather than Persia. Hence, our eye follows the winding paths of current events that never permit us to return to our point of origin. Like busy rococo architecture that forces our eyes to wander, fixate upon certain objects, and then move on, this novel, comprised of 161 letters to a variety of characters, addresses a wide panoply of issues. The subject matter includes freedom for women, the atrocities of slavery, a scathing criticism of King Louis XIV (for destroying the value of currency by allowing too much credit and printing too much money), a criticism of the Catholic Church (for its religious intolerance, persecution of religious minorities, and taking a position against Quesnel, who argued, among other things, that women should be allowed to read the Bible). Moreover, Montesquieu was warning the magistrates of Paris to take a stance against the absolute rule of ecclesiastical authorities: he saw their interference in ecclesiastical courts as the best way to protect religious freedom and religious tolerance. Let us focus on just a few letters that capture the essence of Montesquieu's liberalism in this early work of 1721; he would return to the theme of freedom in 1748 in *The Spirit of Laws*.

The Secret Chain

In 1754 Montesquieu wrote a preface for a new edition of the *Persian Letters* entitled, "Some Reflection on the Persian Letters" [*Quelques réflexions sur les Lettres persanes*]. In this preface he reveals that there is a secret chain that connects all of the themes. He recognizes that a novel comprised of letters allows the author to digress and engage in a style in which themes spin off into swirls, and in which swirls compound swirls (typically rococo). He declares, "...in the epistolary form, where accident selects the characters, and the subjects dealt with are independent of any design or preconceived plan, the author is enabled to mingle philosophy, politics, and morality with a romance, and to connect the whole by a secret and in some sense unknown chain."² The original French indicates a "secret chain" [*une chaîne secrete*]. Here the author teases the reader as he invites him to guess what that secret chain might be. The reader cannot help but take up the author's challenge.