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of each man are not



**ASSIGN
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tMarquis de Sade and the EnlightenmentWe are no guiltier in following the primitive impulses that govern us than is the Nile for her flood or the sea for her waves” – La MettrieThe eighteenth century embraced a secularized France in which the idea of utility, and not of salvation, were the principles by which one lived. Nature and reason in many ways replaced God. What this change left however, was a vacuum for the motive of morality in society. What would compel men to behave if not an omnipresent and all-powering God? The utilitarian idea that the greatest pleasure for the greatest good was able to reconcile the concept of a society questioning her religion but still looking to affirm her old values and moral codes. Many enlightened thinkers like Montesquieu argued for an emphasis on social, over individual welfare, and presented it as a solution left open by this vacuum.

This concept eventually evolved to a redefinition of morality in general. Prior, morality and social laws were frigid and prone to the dictums of the Church. Now, they were accountable to general society, and not the individual’s demands. Voltaire writes, “ Virtue and vice, moral good and evil, is then in any country what is useful or harmful to societyVirtue is the habit of doing those things which please men, and vice the habit of doing those things which displease men.” Consequentially, virtue and vice were not set in stone decrees, but rather arbitrary notions assigned to the whims of society.

This idea left no universal law of good and evil. The right of the individual to pursue pleasure and his notions of right and wrong were secondary to his obligation to society. Voltaire explains, “ To be good only for oneself is to be good for nothing.” Rousseau also argued that the ambition of the individual’s particular desire be curbed to that of general societies.

He writes, “ The vices and virtues of each man are not relative to him alone. Their greatest relation is with society, and what they are in regard to the general order constitutes their essence and their character.” Helvitius deemed that society could determine what was moral and immoral according to what suited it best, “ he whose strongest passion is so much in conformity with the general interest, that he is almost always necessarily determined to be virtuous.” The idea that moral codes were subject to judgment of society indicated its fickleness and changing nature. If morality was obliged and subject to society, then it was also a social construct. These distinctions were essential. The idea of utility, of welfare and happiness, was the new code that directed enlightened thought. Yet, the concept of happiness as a fundamental priority in one’s life inevitably led to the idea of hedonism.

If the individual pursuit of happiness were what was to motivate one’s life, then the concepts of virtue and morality would become secondary since they often conflicted. Hence, the idea that one should seek happiness in kin to society rather than for oneself was vital in ceasing the moral anarchy that would otherwise follow. Lester Crocker explains, “ To those whom morals and virtue were themselves vital, as distinguished from the goal of happiness, it seemed the sole possibility of preserving those values against the corrosion of nihilism.” D’Holbarch and Helvitius offered explanations that would be able to deter this line of thinking. They argued that it was only out of self-interest that people would be motivated to act in conformity with society, “ We love virtue only for what selfish good it can bring us.” This concept of enlightened self-interest reconciled the idea of utility and nature, acting in one’s own self-interests, and therefore the greater good of society. The

concept of enlightened self-interest, of selfless selfishness, was bound, however, to be attacked. Rousseau articulates his disagreement, “ What is useful to the public is scarcely ever introduced except by force, since private interests are always almost opposed to it.

“ Rousseau argued, quite convincingly, that the individual desires of man usually conflicted with that of society, yet, one was still obliged to subordinate oneself to society and live a moral life. In Emile Rousseau explains,