

Holbach, Paul Henri Thiry, Baron d' (1723–89)

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Holbach was a philosopher and prominent social figure of the French Enlightenment, who contributed to the Enlightenment through his translations of German scientific works and English works on religion and politics, his entries in Denis Diderot's encyclopedia, and his philosophical writings, which show the influence of Hobbes and Locke. Holbach's coterie, the circle of intellectuals, artists, and politicians that he hosted and sponsored included Diderot, Friedrich-Melchior Grimm, Charles-Georges Le Roy, Jean-François Marmontel, Guillaume-Thomas-François Raynal, Jean-François de Saint-Lambert, André Morellet, and Jaques-André Nageon. Prominent guests included Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, Edward Gibbon, Horace Walpole, Joseph Priestley, Cesare Beccaria, Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger, Benjamin Franklin, Claude-Adrien Helvétius, David Hume, Adam Smith, and Laurence Sterne.

In his metaphysics, Holbach is a determinist, a materialist, and an atheist. In his ethics, he is a utilitarian who equates moral behavior with the enlightened pursuit of self-interest. These philosophical views inform his contractarian political theory. The development of society, as he presents it, has two stages. It may be usefully compared to Locke's theory. First, individuals seeking their own welfare recognize that safety, security, and other benefits may be gained by cooperation with one another. Individuals in society never break this initial contract, on Holbach's account. The second stage of contract is sometimes broken. It is a contract, not between individuals in society, but between society and a sovereign power. Holbach typically presents this sovereign as a king limited by a body of elected representatives.

Holbach develops a theory of right revolution, for which his political theory is best known, from his understanding of the second stage of the social contract. Holbach's determinism and materialism, however, lead to ambiguities in his accounts of moral concepts, including that of just revolution. The account of revolution in Holbach may be read descriptively. Because it is human nature to pursue one's own welfare, revolution may be expected in any case where individuals perceive their interests to be jeopardized. Just as individual morality is enlightened self-interest, morality in politics will be a function of enlightenment. Thus, whenever a sovereign really does fail to secure the general welfare – primarily safety and property, together with those freedoms that are essential to the pursuit of a good life, including freedom of speech and religion – then revolution is just. Of course, uneducated citizens may perceive threats to their welfare when there are none. It is wise for a sovereign, then, in addition to securing the welfare of the citizens, to emphasize education. Holbach emphasizes this gulf between the perception of injustice in citizens guided by passion, which leads to damaging revolutions, and a just "ethocracy," in which well-educated citizens pursue the good cooperatively and peacefully.

SEE ALSO: Diderot, Denis (1713–84); Enlightenment, The; French Revolution; Hobbes, Thomas (1588–1679); Locke, John (1632–1704); Social Contract

Further Reading

- Holbach, P. H. T., Baron d'. (1773) *La politique naturelle*. London.
- Holbach, P. H. T., Baron d'. (1773) *Système social*. London.
- Holbach, P. H. T., Baron d'. (1776) *La morale universelle*. Amsterdam.
- Holbach, P. H. T., Baron d'. (1776) *Ethocratie*. Amsterdam.
- Kors, A. (1976) *D'Holbach's Coterie*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.