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# Mind over matter: An investigation of Enlightenment moral philosophy

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Mind Over Matter:  
An Investigation of Enlightenment Moral Philosophy

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A Project Presented to  
the Faculty of the Undergraduate  
College of Arts and Letters  
James Madison University

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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

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by Robin Nichole Turner

May 2013

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Accepted by the faculty of the Department of History, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts.

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*Dedicated to Pamela Owen and Minerva Murray*

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## Introduction

In Letter 32 of *Letters from a Peruvian Woman*, the French novelist Françoise de Graffigny depicted the novel's Incan heroine, Zilia, recounting to her fiancé Aza her movement in and out of the private spaces of elite Parisians. Zilia observed that women “give and receive tributes of mutual praise for beauty of face and figure, for excellence of taste and choice of adornments, and never for qualities of soul.”<sup>1</sup> As numerous historians have shown, by the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, Paris had emerged as a capital of early modern consumption—from powder and makeup, finely tailored dresses, ornate furnishings, and street lighting. Graffigny's Zilia would have had endless opportunities to interact with those whose morality, she asserted, faced corruption from materialism and consumerism.<sup>2</sup> Zilia insisted that, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century France she encountered, “censure is the dominant trait of the French, just as inconsistency is their national trait.”<sup>3</sup> She noted gossip and backstabbing in the houses that she entered, but she believed “example and custom are the tyrants ruling their behavior.”<sup>4</sup> Reminiscing on her Peruvian origins, she pitied the French existence, announcing “Fortunate is the nation having only nature for its guide,

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<sup>1</sup> Francois de Graffigny, *Letters from a Peruvian Woman* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1993), 137.

<sup>2</sup> Several historians have focused on the stirrings of consumerism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and its impact on Enlightenment thought. To learn more about marketing and consumption in relation to the Enlightenment, explore: Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Jennifer Michelle Jones, *Sexing la Mode: Gender Fashion and Commercial Culture in Old Regime France* (New York: Berg, 2004); Catherine Lanoë, *La Poudre et le Fard: Une Histoire des Cosmétiques de la Renaissance aux Lumières* (France: Editions Champ Valon, 2008); Morag Martin, *Selling Beauty: Cosmetics, Commerce, and French Society, 1750-1830* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2009); and Kathryn Norberg, *Rich and Poor in Grenoble, 1600-1814* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> Graffigny, *Letters from a Peruvian*, 138.

<sup>4</sup> Graffigny, *Letters from a Peruvian*, 138.

truth for its principle, virtue as the driving force.”<sup>5</sup> Graffigny believed that a coherent moral philosophy rooted in nature guarded Zilia from the corruptive effect of material culture. Graffigny is just one example of a *philosophe* who in the 18<sup>th</sup> century began to develop a moral philosophy for the purpose of protection against the debilitating effects of luxury and materialism; She reflects a widespread concern that the emergent consumer economy was affecting morality, a concern that contributed to the development of an anti-materialist moral philosophy.

The social and economic context for 18<sup>th</sup> century moral philosophy was one of intense intense and rapid change. By the first half of the eighteenth-century, France, like the rest of Europe, was beginning to see the effects of a burgeoning consumerism and increased access to commodities. Various types of inessential material goods—such as decorative household furnishings and fashion accessories previously limited to kings and the aristocracy—reached wider parts of the populace.<sup>6</sup>

In a series of articles concerned with the growth of consumption in eighteenth-century France, historian Michael Kwass has argued that the increased consumption of goods coincided with a gradual shift in the meanings of these goods from being representations of status and position to objects embodying the taste of the consumer, with taste being linked to Enlightenment values, such as public propriety, self-expression, and authenticity. In the early part of the century, however, the shift was incomplete so that, initially, a wider range of

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<sup>5</sup> Graffigny, *Letters from a Peruvian*, 139.

<sup>6</sup> For further detail on the emerging consumer movement, examine: Daniel Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998); Daniel Roche, *People of Paris*, trans. Marie Evans (Berkeley: University of California, 1987); Jan de Vries, *Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and Clare Crowston, *Fabricating Women: The Seamstresses of Old Regime France, 1675–1791* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

consumers sought new objects not for their utility but because they thought it reflected the exclusivity of the elites, which was then accompanied by consumer preference and the development of taste. The steady imitation of the nobility by the commoners contributed to a rising ambiguity between social positions, which in itself coincided with new social and political philosophies of the Enlightenment.<sup>7</sup>

This change in socioeconomic norms, however, was not the only effect of consumerism. There was also an intellectual shift. As the emergent consumer culture inspired social changes in terms of the visual landscape through the proliferation of commodities, it also generated debates of a political and economic nature that took place among *philosophes* in eighteenth-century literary salons and were made available in published texts. In the same way that luxury goods and other commodities lost their exclusivity, philosophic knowledge began to reach more people as well. For example, from 1751 until 1772, the *philosophes* Denis Diderot and Jean d’Alembert compiled large quantities of information on a wide-range of topics from various sources to create the *Encyclopédie*, which stood apart from previous encyclopedias because of the vast amount of information contained within the original twenty-eight volume set.<sup>8</sup> This was an extensive undertaking that provided the educated public with a source of broad

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<sup>7</sup> For more information regarding consumerism and commodities changing significance in France, see: Michael Kwass, “Big Hair: A Wig History of Consumption in Eighteenth-Century France,” *The American Historical Review* 111 (June 2006): 631-59; Michael Kwass, “Consumption and the World of Ideas: Consumer Revolution and the Moral Economy of the Marquis de Mirabeau,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 37 (Winter 2004): 187-214; Michael Kwass “Ordering the World of Goods: Consumer Revolution and the Classification of Objects in Eighteenth-Century France,” *Representations* 82 (Spring, 2003): 87-117.

<sup>8</sup> This number refers to the volumes originally released by these authors between 1751 and 1772. From 1775-1780, seven more volumes were compiled, which combined with the original 28 total out to the 35 volumes mentioned in David Bell’s “Culture and Religion” [see footnote below].



knowledge, and it reflected the increasing access to wealth and material goods that consumerism fostered.<sup>9</sup>

In the eighteenth century, the ability to read also expanded; the *Encyclopédie* bespeaks this greater accessibility. Beginning in the latter half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, literacy rates had begun to improve—especially in towns—and, thus, preceded the Enlightenment debate surrounding the relationship between morality and consumption by only a few years. The increase in literacy also prompted a “transformation of cultural communication” as access to information grew through printed materials, such as books and newspapers, entered the public sphere.<sup>10</sup> Historian James B. Collins argues that in addition to the new reading populace, knowledge spread even farther as people “who could not read listened to others who could.”<sup>11</sup>

In summary, from the start of the eighteenth century, enhanced consumption of goods by a wider range of people of different social status fueled a social and economic movement across Europe. This upheaval sparked several philosophical theories, including many new moral philosophies. The publishing of these ideas in various literary formats meant that a wider audience was exposed to these philosophies, which now could engage society at multiple levels.<sup>12</sup>

This thesis explores the eighteenth-century morality-consumption debate through a textual reading of three novels by Montesquieu, de Graffigny, and Rousseau. Generally

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<sup>9</sup> David A. Bell, “Culture and Religion,” in *Old Regime France 1648-1788*, ed. William Doyle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 94-96.

<sup>10</sup> Antoine Lilti, “The Kingdom of Politesse: Salons and the Republic of Letters in Eighteenth-Century Paris,” *Republics of Letters: A Journal for the Study of Knowledge, Politics, and the Arts* 1, no. 1 (May 2009), <http://rofl.stanford.edu/node/38> (accessed March 15, 2013), 11.

<sup>11</sup> James B. Collins, *From Tribes to Nation: The Making of France 500-1799* (Canada: Thomson Learning, Inc., 2002), 427.

<sup>12</sup> Collins, *From Tribes*, 426- 427.

speaking, fictional depictions of moral philosophy were more conducive to a reading public than non-fiction essays. As historian David Bell said, novels “were not aiming to persuade a small, scholarly, and princely elite through abstract reasoning, but rather to reach out and grab hearts and minds on a large scale.”<sup>13</sup> By pulling on the heartstrings of the populace and stirring their minds through a story, *The Persian Letters*, *Letters from a Peruvian Woman*, and *Émile*, represent the unique shift undergoing moral philosophy at this time; they raised concerns about the luxury-morality question *and* the more public arena that was emerging. No longer limited to small, restricted intellectual circles, the moral philosophers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century had to engage the larger audience brought forth by the new urban commercial culture. To do this, these philosophers made use of the novel and its entertainment capabilities as they attempted to understand how luxury influenced morality and explain in what ways morality could be preserved despite the negative effects of consumerism.

In 1720, Montesquieu addressed the morality-consumption issue in *The Persian Letters*. In his initial foray into the philosophical discussion, Montesquieu attempted to understand the importance of morality in relation to a world of luxury and abundant material consumption. The first chapter of this thesis examines various letters from this epistolary novel paying particular attention to those which addressed the impact of a material culture on morality. In the letters concerned with the Troglodyte civilization, for example, Montesquieu described the social and political consequences of this impact, including how the loss of morality can destroy a society. He also asked if morality could survive in a consumer environment and suggested that an institution was needed to keep

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<sup>13</sup> David Bell, “Culture and Religion,” in *Old Regime France 1638-1788*, ed. William Doyle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2001), 97.

morality alive amongst the population. Montesquieu's moral philosophy, as expressed in this piece, contradicts Mandeville, who proclaimed that morality was not always advisable for man since it did not ensure happiness.

In the wake of Montesquieu's queries on morality and consumption, Madame de Graffigny, in 1747, also employed the epistolary novel as a means of presenting her moral philosophy in her amusingly titled *Letters from a Peruvian Woman*, which stylistically mimicked Montesquieu's approach and also utilized natives to emphasize the decay of natural morality in contemporary consumerist civilization. The second chapter explains Graffigny's view of how morality could survive in a luxury culture. For Graffigny, the answer lay within the individual, whom she believed should decide her own moral institution. The individual follows her natural inclinations toward morality and virtue and, by doing so, preserves morality by refusing to be corrupted by society regardless of any temptation or social pressure.

The third chapter explores Rousseau's philosophical novel, *Émile*, which, like Graffigny's novel, looked toward the individual as the hope for morality's continued existence. His ideas both rebuked consumerism and unadulterated self-interest and additionally created a guideline for achieving morality for the purpose of upholding society as a whole. Unlike Graffigny, Rousseau was not interested in making the individual happy necessarily but rather looked for a solution to the declining morality he observed in luxury cultures. Like Voltaire, he perceived the public good to outweigh that of the individual. In this way, Rousseau produced another interpretation of Montesquieu's call for an institution to save morality and advocated a good education as the institution that could save morality from disappearing in society.

While the Enlightenment's morality-consumerism discussion was quite prolific, Montesquieu, Graffigny, and Rousseau constitute a common thread in the debate, sharing two

major themes in their philosophies. Their first commonality lies in their reaction to consumerism's influence in society, regarding it suspiciously and then adopting slight anti-consumerist attitudes. The second major theme between them is their desire to preserve virtue and morality, celebrating virtue over self-interest when other philosophers, like Mandeville, Voltaire, and Adam Smith, were arguing that self-interest could be more beneficial than an adherence to morality and virtue. Sharing these two main themes, the authors all hinted at the moral corruption of society through consumerism in their texts, which centered morality around the most natural and least corrupt members of society possible: foreigners—or, simply, natives—and children. These texts, *The Persian Letters*, *Letters from a Peruvian Woman*, and *Émile*, demonstrate their author's distinctive Enlightenment moral philosophies, which gave praise to morality alongside admonitions about the dangers of consumerism.

**Morality through Persian Eyes:  
*Montesquieu's Theories on Consumption and Morality***

Prior to the Regency of Philippe d'Orléans in 1715, the ideas expounded in the Enlightenment would not have circulated so easily. Until his death in 1715, Louis XIV governed France with the firm hand of an absolute monarch; those who crossed him ended up in prisons like the Bastille. Consequently, French intellectuals did not broadcast new and potentially controversial ideas very often. The Regency changed that. From 1715 to 1723, Philippe d'Orléans acted as regent for the child-king, Louis XV. Under his control, there was opportunity for the expansion of new ideas because d'Orléans encouraged both innovation and literature. Historian James Breck Perkins characterized this period as having “more promise for literature under the regent, when writers were caned, than under Louis XIV, when they were pensioned.”<sup>1</sup> Although hardly a liberal atmosphere, the regent's comparative leniency opened up conversation amongst intellectuals.<sup>2</sup>

One of the first pieces to appear under this new system was Montesquieu's *The Persian Letters*, which he composed and published during the Regency. The novel was a satiric parlay into social and moral philosophy for readers and met with a surprising popularity that having “been prodigiously admired, show[ed] that the regency was the beginning of an era of freer thought in France.”<sup>3</sup> Through 161 letters, the novel chronicled the travel experiences of two Persians, who had fled their homeland for an unspecified reason, as they sought refuge in Paris. While the older traveler Uzbek assessed French society with a critical eye, his younger companion, Rica, communicated his experiences with more awe and excitement as Parisian

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<sup>1</sup> James Breck Perkins, *France Under the Regency: With a Review of the Administration of Louis XIV* (Michigan: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1920), 554.

<sup>2</sup> Perkins, *France Under the Regency*, 1-7 and 552-557.

<sup>3</sup> Perkins, *France Under the Regency*, 556.

society won him over. The contrast between the two Persian travelers' descriptions conveyed the divergent thought concerning increased consumption even as their letters described the economic and social scenes of Montesquieu's Paris around 1720.

Through their commentary, Montesquieu explained his moral philosophy in addition to outlining the widely renowned political theories he later elucidated in *Spirit of the Laws*. In letter 10 of the novel, Montesquieu opened up the moral discussion when Mirza, a friend of Uzbek reported, "We have here many disputations; which turn commonly on morality...whether the happiness of mankind consists in pleasure and sensual gratifications, or in the exercise of virtue?"<sup>4</sup> Mizra's observation was significant for two reasons: first, it verified that there was an ongoing morality discussion in the beginning of eighteenth century and, second, it noted that luxury had already become an element of the discussion as well. As the novel progresses, Montesquieu's opinions and aims become clear; namely, his novel illustrated his concern that consumerism had a negative effect on morality, thereby endangering society's stability, and expressed the need for a balance between morality and consumption to protect society from moral decay.

Although Montesquieu was in the forefront of the morality-consumerism debate, he was neither the first nor the last to draw a direct correlation between consumption and morality. According to historian Daniel Roche, the rise in the importance of material items sparked different viewpoints on consumerism and, more specifically, luxury's relationship with morality. Roche finds that, originally, the question of luxury had been condemned by the Church and by other philosophers, but at the start of the 18<sup>th</sup> century,

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<sup>4</sup> Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, trans. C. J. Betts (New York: Penguin Group, 2004), 18.

wholly negative attitudes toward luxury shifted and luxury and consumption found supportive voices. These included Mandeville in his work, *Fable of the Bees*, and that of the economic philosopher Richard Cantillon, who offered the assessment that “luxury was essential to growth;” yet, by 1730, the tide had turned again, and a few philosophers gradually began addressing the faults of a luxury culture.<sup>5</sup> Montesquieu’s 1721 critical look at luxury and morality in *The Persian Letters* figures into this second wave of philosophic thought on the matter. This second shift likely stemmed from a further growth in consumption of material goods that produced “unprecedented levels in both quantity and quality.”<sup>6</sup> Confronted with an economy and society vastly different from previous eras, the intellectuals of the day unsurprisingly reevaluated earlier conclusions.

The rise in fashion during this period, which had a significant effect on a sizeable position of the society, is indicative. Roche has shown, in *France and the Enlightenment*, that fashion nourished the growth in clothing purchases, reflecting a rise in consumerism. Roche observes that fashion often drew criticism from various segments of society because of its tendency to contribute to consumption by non-elites. Prior to the upsurge in consumerism and wealth, the aristocracy and royalty were the members of society who typically indulged in luxury. Clothing functioned as a telltale symbol of a person’s wealth and station in society. As consumption spread, however, a growing number of commoners obtained the wealth to purchase fashionable luxury items. In time, the differences between the aristocracy and the wealthy elite were slight, creating a social hierarchy that was “at once fixed and mobile.”<sup>7</sup> The divisions

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), 565.

<sup>6</sup> Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, 569.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Roche, *A History of Everyday Things: The Birth of Consumption in France, 1600-1800*, trans. Brian Pearce (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 194.

between nobility and non-aristocrats further eroded as sumptuary laws regulating certain modes of fashion to the elite grew ever more neglected and commoners purchased luxury items in imitation of the rich. While Roche does not go into detail about this revolutionary change in old customs, the change is important when studying the morality debate since it both changed the habits of everyday man and presented a challenge to the established order, leaving room for the moral philosophers to proffer new suggestions on how society should best operate.

Roche also notes that the rising importance of fashion was remarkable for its ability to penetrate all areas of society, including the countryside. While most of the visible change occurred in the cities, the villages showed growing signs of fashion's influence through fashion production and, arguably to a lesser extent, through fashion consumption as well. The countryside, for instance, felt the demand for cloth as manufactures gradually became more focused on producing textiles quickly to increase profit. Consequently, the fashion industry "relied on both home workers, mainly women, and professionals, including dealers who provided raw materials and then bought the finished goods for resale" to meet the demand. Women in the country and those in the city often worked as seamstresses at home, but their work moved from family clothing to sewing for the public sector. The countryside also exhibited fashion's influence as more country residents bought additional clothing; that is, while they had previously had clothing for everyday use, they now also bought special clothing so that they were "dressed according to the occasion," which was a common practice in cities since different modes of dress applied to various situations.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, 554.



The spread of fashion not only affected the purchasing and work habits of the French but shaped their behavior as well. Roche remarked that fashion “induced people to adopt new styles of behavior along with the new styles in clothing” causing a “theatricalization of appearance” to appear, particularly in big cities such as Paris.<sup>9</sup> As fashion continued to influence the appearance and attitude of people, intellectuals began to focus on the topic. The more proto-industry grew, the more attention was devoted to the subject. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the subject of consumption and luxury had become a moral issue. Philosophers questioned whether fashion and consumption could so easily change the character of people and, if so, was the change for the better or was it a detriment for society.<sup>10</sup> Charles-Louis de Secondat, or Montesquieu, (1689-1755) experienced the rise of consumption and luxury firsthand. Reaching adulthood at the same time that the earliest contributions to the morality-consumption debates began appearing, Montesquieu first positioned himself as a significant interlocutor in the debate, when he composed *The Persian Letters* in 1721.<sup>11</sup> Given the epistolary novel’s satiric examination of French society and government under the Regency, Montesquieu originally published the text anonymously in Holland because he feared censorship and the government’s disapproval. In his attempt to give a sincere assessment of France socially and politically without causing immediate censorship of his work, Montesquieu took the further precaution of presenting his ideas through the eyes of outsiders.<sup>12</sup> The literary style allowed Montesquieu to comment on some more permanent facets of life that were developing in France. These comments included the issue of luxury that was increasing throughout Europe, especially in France’s rich city center, Paris. They also included

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<sup>9</sup> Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, 555.

<sup>10</sup> Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, 561-607.

<sup>11</sup> The version of the novel used here is: Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, trans. C. J. Betts (New York: Penguin Group, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> For more detail regarding the novel’s risk of censorship due to its detailed criticism of the Regency, look at: Jacques Solé, “Montesquieu et la Régence,” in *La Régence* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1970), 125-130.

other questions of morality that ranged from vanity and honor, to the political structure, to the State's administrative institutions, and even questioned whether there was a place for the Church to act in the new society that seemed to be constantly unraveling around people.

While the novel is significant for its influence on the morality debate in general, also incorporated contemporaneous events, which helped to illustrate the profound influence of increased material goods consumption on society. Having lived through the end of Louis XIV's reign and writing in the period of Louis XV's regency, Montesquieu used his novel to reflect some of the "political, moral, and economic confusion" that characterized the period, such as the extensive religious tone of Louis XIV's final years on the throne and its impact on the subsequent rule of his grandson and his struggles to keep France economically prosperous.<sup>13</sup> Through his two Persian travelers, Montesquieu recounted high profile events taking place in France, including the banking crisis instigated by the schemes of John Law in 1720. This last incident had a grave impact on the economy and became an embarrassment for the French government. Although John Law was a Scottish economist, his efforts to reduce France's national debt by switching from gold currency to paper backfired when paired with gross over-speculation in Law's trading monopoly, the Mississippi Company. In a short time, inflation crippled the French economy and the speculation bubble burst in the trading company, leaving France with no national bank, no faith in paper currency, and a countless assortment of bitter people.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Loy, *Montesquieu* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1968), 46.

<sup>14</sup> Julian Swann, "Politics: Louis XV," *Old Regime France*, ed. William Doyle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 199-200; Collins, *From Tribes to Nation*, 454-455.

The John Law Affair would have had an impact on a wide range of social actors who, by necessity, would be driven to reflect on the links between the increased circulation of money and of goods, posing questions about the issue of morality within economics and politics. In her dissertation, “A Fool and His Money: Culture and Financial Choice during the John Law Affair of 1720,” historian Melinda Rice describes how Law’s social impact suggested that the failed economic enterprise had created a dire situation which brought morality questions to the fore. Rice provides examples from *The Persian Letters*, which helped highlight Montesquieu’s successful recognition of Law’s effect on society and the morality debate. In Letter 32 Montesquieu evoked the Affair when he described how a Frenchman cried out, “The villain! I thought he was a friend of mine, and lent him all my money: and he paid it back! The wickedness of it!”<sup>15</sup> Rice explains that Montesquieu was referring to the fact that, as the Bank of France sank under Law’s plan, money was so devalued that even “merchants refused to accept banknotes.”<sup>16</sup> There is more going on here, however. Arguably Montesquieu was also laying down an overview of society in which money had become so important that its handling had become a part of good conduct. Montesquieu’s intertwining of current events within the philosophic ideas presented in his epistolary novel showed that Montesquieu’s reflections on luxury and morality were not simply internal reflections; rather, they were developed as a result of his experience and impressions of the world that surrounded him. This factor positions Montesquieu on a timeline with subsequent philosophers who shared similar concerns but experienced them in different political, social, and economic contexts. Appearing in 1720,

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<sup>15</sup> Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, 236.

<sup>16</sup> Melinda Carolyn Rice, “A Fool and His Money: Culture and Financial Choice during the John Law Affair of 1720,” *Dissertation Abstracts International* 68, no. 4 (2007), 1.

Montesquieu rested on the cusp of a new era of moral philosophy where luxury and politics had become familiar components to the morality discussion

Rice is not particularly concerned with Montesquieu's moral assessment of the within his novel. The closest she comes to addressing this issue is when she alludes to Albert Hirschman, whose monograph *The Passions and the Interests* explored Europe's transformation "from a world in which greed was condemned to one in which self-interest was an unqualified good."<sup>17</sup> This allusion to Hirschman, however, does hint at the change in moral philosophy that was happening in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which diverged from previous interpretations, like morality as it was presented through religion, which had previously stated that greed was undeniably a vice. Rice then contextualizes this new trend in the Enlightenment when she mentions that "Montesquieu and Mandeville, asserted that the most powerful passion of all was a person's self-interest" from which "all of society would benefit."<sup>18</sup> She explores Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees* as an argument for vice as a virtue and "pride and vanity" as positive influences because "human nature was universal... people act in their own self-interest."<sup>19</sup> She does not, however, analyze what Montesquieu hoped to accomplish philosophically by recording the John Law crisis. The fact is that doing so allowed him to nestle his initial contributions to the morality-consumption debate in the epistolary novel.

Historian Michael Kwass, in a study on commercialism in eighteenth-century France, does consider Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* as a philosophic contribution to an ongoing critical dialogue concerned with morality and consumption. He confirms that

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<sup>17</sup> Rice, "A Fool and His Money," 6.

<sup>18</sup> Rice, "A Fool and His Money," 6.

<sup>19</sup> Rice, "A Fool and His Money," 15.

the moral debate was linked to the surrounding changes in the economic climate. Kwass, explores *The Persian Letters* as a resource that reveals the way in which particular intellectuals, intellectuals, whom he refers to as proponents of “the pro-consumption progressivist position,” position,” perceived morality.<sup>20</sup> In his view, *The Persian Letters* revealed Montesquieu’s conflicting arguments that “luxury consumption produced social benefits; and the classical republican position that luxury corrupted civic virtue and undermined political stability.”<sup>21</sup> Kwass maintains that the inconsistency remains unresolved until Montesquieu’s *Spirit of the Laws* in which the *philosophe* clarifies that “different modes of consumption befitted different kinds of polities.”<sup>22</sup> Kwass then explains Montesquieu’s meaning that societies based on virtue, like a republic or “small egalitarian communities,” faced corruption and the deterioration of the virtuous society while others, such as “large hierarchical modern monarchies functioned according to the principle of honor,” needed a certain degree of luxury consumption in order for the elite to spend money and, thus, cause society in general to prosper from the spreading of their wealth.<sup>23</sup> Through such analysis, Kwass’s reading of Montesquieu’s two famous works helps establish Montesquieu’s interconnection between politics and culture, specifically in the realm of economic transformation during Montesquieu’s era and the ensuing debate about morality’s place in the financial world.

Arguably, however, Montesquieu’s novel was a complex work in which his moral philosophy expanded beyond the topic of luxury alone and included questions of honor, religion, laws both natural and societal, and government’s role in preserving morality as best fits the

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<sup>20</sup> Michael Kwass, “Consumption and the World of Ideas: Consumer Revolution and the Moral Economy of the Marquis de Mirabeau,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 37 (Winter 2004), 200.

<sup>21</sup> Kwass, “Consumption and the World of Ideas,” 200.

<sup>22</sup> Kwass, “Consumption and the World of Ideas,” 200.

<sup>23</sup> Kwass, “Consumption and the World of Ideas,” 200.

progress of a civilization. Political scientist Corey Robin examines the idea of despotic fear, which he sees as a focal point of the novel. Robin proposes that Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* refutes the idea that despotic fear is inherently a negative influence on society and instead suggests that such fear may be a positive characteristic in certain societies. Robin, thus, argues that despotic fear, as presented, "works most effectively when it is wielded by multiple political actors and elites, each inspired by different considerations and motivations and even conflicting interests." According to Robin, Montesquieu's argument reflects "in brilliant detail the intricate social universe of the Versailles court, with all its hierarchy and flattery, its conniving ambition, and its penchant for absolute submission."<sup>24</sup> Robin justifies these claims by examining Usbek, who is the despotic character of the novel, yet he "stands for everything that... is opposed to despotic practice. He is wise, learned lawful and moral" and leads to the harem's "obsession with morality and lawfulness."<sup>25</sup> Although despotic and an undeniable source of fear, Usbek used fear to "work hard at propagating the virtues of the harem," which lent credence to the theory that despotic fear could achieve morality in some cases.<sup>26</sup> From despotic fear to morality, therefore, Robin's concept of fear within the novel, while rather unique, is important because it introduces readers to Montesquieu's complex moral philosophy and government structure.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Corey Robin, "Reflections on Fear: Montesquieu in Retrieval," *The American Political Science Review* 94, no. 2 (June 2000), 349.

<sup>25</sup> Robin, "Reflections on Fear," 351.

<sup>26</sup> Robin, "Reflections on Fear," 355.

<sup>27</sup> Other articles tackling the novel's issues as discussed here include David Kettler, "Montesquieu on Love: Notes on the *Persian Letters*," *The American Political Science Review* 58, no. 3 (September 1964): 658-661; and Sharon Krause, "The Spirit of Separate Powers in Montesquieu," *The Review of Politics* 62, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 231-265.

Other interest in this aspect of the *philosophe*'s work includes political theorist E.H. Price, who examines Montesquieu's theories concerning institutions, laws, and government's ability to sustain morality in order to promote a stable society. Observing the delicate nature of politics where morality and progress were concerned, Price's piece, "Voltaire and Montesquieu's Three Principles of Government," draws attention to some of these delicate matters. Price ascertains that republics operate under a system of virtue that functions as a correcting element in society, while monarchies often revolve around honor and self-interest and, therefore, must prevent moral decay through laws. While these two articles focus more on Montesquieu's government ideas found in *Spirit of the Laws*, one should consider the knowledge contained within them when reading *The Persian Letters* because this early novel bears the outline of Montesquieu's complex theory and even provides demonstrations of potential governments, all of which highlights the diversity of Montesquieu's moral philosophy. More importantly, the articles bring forward the point that Montesquieu saw a need for morality everywhere in society, including politics. Since the economic and political structures of republics and monarchies can differ significantly, Montesquieu's philosophy included a notation that mentioned the different status of morality in these two systems. Here, of course, one can catch a glimpse of Montesquieu's rising need for what can vaguely be described as an institution—potentially public, governmental, religious, or private—to guarantee moral behavior in any society.

Montesquieu had a significant impact on several areas of Enlightenment thought, but his influence on moral thought often falls in the shadow of his work concerning government. Nevertheless, as these works collectively suggest moral philosophy was a significant component of Montesquieu's thinking, intertwined with his fledging ideas about government in his earliest philosophic works. The following analysis further clarifies this by showing that, in *The Persian*

*Letters*, Montesquieu was considering morality and its existence in his world as he began to formulate ideas about successful government. Montesquieu spoke through his Persian letter writers to address significant aspects of French life, including his stance on luxury and types of governments that conform to the needs of those luxury-driven cultures.

In the novel, Montesquieu created various sequences of letters written on the same subject to develop a more complete discussion about morality as a particular subject. The letters concerned with the Troglodytes are of particular interest. This sequence first appeared when Usbek's friend, Mirza, wrote a letter to Usbek sharing the frequent subject of many conversations, which "was whether men are made happy by pleasure, and the satisfaction of the senses, or by the practice of virtue," and requested for Usbek to clarify his belief that "men were born to be virtuous" because "justice...is as proper to them as existence."<sup>28</sup> Usbek responded with a detailed discussion given through several sequential letters, spanning from Letter 11 to Letter 14, within which Usbek recounted the moral tale of the Troglodytes, whose civilization first destroyed itself through vice and was reborn as a virtuous society.

Initially, Usbek described the Troglodytes as "more like animals than men...wicked and ferocious" because they lacked "principles of equity or justice."<sup>29</sup> Immediately, readers see that Montesquieu was describing societies that lacked morality negatively and, perhaps, was even suggesting that such civilizations were in danger of extinction, just like the Troglodytes who "perished because of their wickedness, and fell victim to their own injustice," except for the two men and their immediate family who

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<sup>28</sup> Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, 53.

<sup>29</sup> Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, 53.



“were humane” and “loved virtue.”<sup>30</sup> From them, Montesquieu demonstrated the necessity of morals in society. According to the Troglodyte allegory, without morals, the immoral persons and their society would disintegrate and vanish, like the first set of Troglodytes. Meanwhile, those two Troglodytes, who understood “that the individual’s self-interest is always to be found in the common interest,” demonstrated that virtue was not “a wearisome exercise” because “justice to others is charity to ourselves” and suggested that an adherence to morality keeps a society stable.<sup>31</sup> As a matter of fact, this “rebirth of virtue” was the only phenomenon that secured the continuation of Troglodytes in a new society.<sup>32</sup>

At this point, Montesquieu had just revealed the foundation of his moral philosophy: morality is natural in man, albeit somewhat subject to change as man adapts to his environment. This said, readers can see in the new generations of Troglodytes more elucidations on Montesquieu’s basic understanding of morality. First, while morality exists as an inherent sense of right and wrong, man also harbors a natural benevolence toward other men as witnessed in the two Troglodytes who survived the downfall of their civilization because their natural inclinations endured the immoral society in which they lived. Secondly, humans understand that this benevolence is best because, when assisting one another as those two virtuous Troglodytes did, people are working toward the common good, which is good for all considering that uncontrolled, selfish behavior, like that found in the original Troglodyte society, leads to a chaotic society that will likely collapse. Finally, at such basic levels of human operation and interaction, morality is so natural that it is achieved easily and rewards moral people with pleasure, like a just and thriving civilization around them. From this position, therefore, one

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<sup>30</sup> Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, 56.

<sup>31</sup> Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, 57.

<sup>32</sup> Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, 58.

follows that morality is essential in a society for its preservation; yet, Montesquieu added that this simple concept of obeying morality is not one that can be easily maintained.

In fact, Montesquieu admitted that in a changing society citizens may find it adhere to moral considerations in all their actions, which coincides with the fact that philosophers were increasingly observing the introduction of luxury and popular consumerism and noting its effects on morality and society in general. Montesquieu, therefore, mentioned the steady growth of Troglodyte society both in population and in economy. At length, the Troglodytes tried to appoint a king to reign over the population and keep society functioning along moral boundaries so that they do not repeat the fate of the wicked Troglodytes who self-destructed before them. The potential king lamented the transformation and remarked to the Troglodytes, “You would prefer to be subject to a king, and obey his laws, which would be less rigid than your own” because “virtue has begun to be a burden” in the society that has formed, which entices people’s desires to change as well until they want to “satisfy your ambitions, accumulate wealth, and live idly in degrading luxury.”<sup>33</sup>

This observation sets in motion an ongoing morality debate revolved around luxury while simultaneously establishing Montesquieu’s opinion that different societies require separate systems in order to safeguard morality. For the early generations of virtuous Troglodytes, therefore, morality guided their every movement through personal inclination, which helped their physiocracy prosper.<sup>34</sup> This prosperity, however, led to luxury and individualist, self-interested thinking, which forced the later generations of the

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<sup>33</sup> Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, 60.

<sup>34</sup> In this context, physiocracy refers to the rather restricted and regulated agricultural economy of the second society of Troglodytes.

Troglodyte civilization to adopt a king to guide them so that they would no longer have to restrict and discipline themselves from their less virtuous ideas. In Montesquieu's philosophy, philosophy, when a society changes, the moral structure must change as well. This conclusion helps explain another point of Montesquieu's philosophy as well. While a shallower understanding of Montesquieu may suggest that the Frenchman understood vice—or, to be more specific, self-interest—to be a negative drive, a closer examination offers a slight contradiction. According to Montesquieu's Troglodyte parable, self-interest is not inherently bad and is encouraged in some situations because it leads to innovation and growth. Indeed, self-interest only becomes a culpable vice when left unchecked, which is why the Troglodytes knew they needed a king before they could loosen their moral fiber—a lesson they had learned from their forefathers, who had carelessly dived into personal drives toward luxury and power once before without having the forethought to fortify their nations with any form of precaution—a neglect which caused their nation to fall. For the French of Montesquieu's era, these ideas carried many implications. To begin with, Montesquieu was not blatantly rejecting the possibility that self-interest and consumption could promote growth; so, perhaps rising consumerism was a good phenomenon as Mandeville suggested. Of course, Montesquieu was never that simple. While he did not reject self-interest specifically, he did indicate its potential for danger and advised that society look to a leader, or institution, to guard against the complete erosion of virtue and its benefits. This advice challenged the French to listen to their monarch and the State's laws or deal with the consequences of unregulated vice in their society.

In accord with this opinion of vice, the letters then moved away from the allegorical tale of the Troglodytes and slowly mentioned the luxurious ways of the French. The various letters of Rica and Usbek describing Parisian life were tools to show how the motivation of luxury can

be either moral or immoral. Before describing France's luxury in detail, Montesquieu wrote a passage in which Usbek questions the purity and impurity of things. The contemplation coincided with the luxury debate in which some intellectuals felt luxury and vice were positive, such as Mandeville, Voltaire, and J. F. Melon who declared that luxury was relative, since "luxury creates work... encourages emulation and discourages laziness and idleness" while others found them immoral and the ruin of civilization.<sup>35</sup> The significance of Letter 17 lies in Usbek's conclusion that while "senses alone can judge whether things are pure or impure... objects do not affect all men in the same way" and, therefore, "the evidence of the senses cannot be used as a standard here."<sup>36</sup> By affirming that morality is not always clear-cut, the letter lent credence to Montesquieu's idea that consumption can be positive even if the idea of luxury is a controversial topic.

Keeping that in mind, one must recall the Troglodytes while analyzing some subsequent descriptions of France presented in other letters outside the sequence in which Montesquieu illustrated that luxury and progress do not always bring about morality naturally. For example, Montesquieu hinted that modesty was tied to morality, while vanity thrived in luxurious environments. In Letter 144, therefore, Montesquieu recounted a slip in morality for two Frenchmen who were so desperate to look witty to other people that they staged conversations with each other. An earlier letter by Rica also supported this prevailing trend in France when Rica mistook members in the audience for actors in the play he had gone to see because the members of the audience were as fake as the actors. Although the immorality displayed in these circumstances seems almost harmless, the purpose of describing them rests in the fact that they demonstrated ailing

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<sup>35</sup> Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, 566.

<sup>36</sup> Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, 63.

morality in a society where people openly pursued luxury. The mention of the theatre suggested that people had become actors playing an expected part in society, though they themselves knew the role was only a fake. Montesquieu, therefore, was implying that parts of society—those devoted to consumption for presentation's sake—no longer believed in morality. If that was true, then Montesquieu's contemporaries had reached the point of the first Troglodyte society and the next step was deterioration. To his credit, Montesquieu's observation in 1721 was not a mere passing remark. Superficiality and everyday performance continued to be a topic of concern, appearing again in Madame du Graffigny's 1747 novel *Letters from a Peruvian Woman* in which Graffigny's Incan narrator, Zilia, criticized this superficiality and the theatre whose representation of vice in plays seemed to inspire more vice in society. Another criticism followed in 1750 with Rousseau's *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, which charged that the arts were a corruptor of human morality. Clearly, Montesquieu's observation was a pertinent one for his contemporaries and reflected the serious effect they believed consumerism was having on morality.

This theme occurs elsewhere as well and, through other examples, incorporates some additional details about luxurious societies and morality. In Letter 26, Usbek wrote to his youngest wife, Roxana, that European women tended to spend too much time and effort trying to alter their appearance, adorning themselves in jewels to match their painted faces, and, thereby, lost their virtue through their little deceptions. Usbek's judgment implied that, even though morality was natural, society could influence it to the point that it began to disappear within an individual, which was the Persian's reasoning when he confined his wives in the seraglio. Whether or not Usbek's explanation for locking up his wives was justified enough here, his letter did suggest an overarching theme of the novel, which was Montesquieu's belief that societies

need structure—the less driven by morality a society is, the more necessary a sound government and law system is needed to maintain order and secure a society’s continuing progress.

This idea is reinforced in other encounters in France as well. When Usbek came across a certain Don Juan-like character, the ladies’ man appalled Usbek, who regarded this man as proof that “faithlessness, treachery, abduction, perfidy, and injustice earn respect” in France even though he fractured families, both between fathers and daughters and between husband and wife.<sup>37</sup> He also criticized heroes and their search for glory because “the destiny of heroes is to come to grief conquering lands” where they slay people and subjugate a population, which is morally wrong since morality cites affection for other men.<sup>38</sup> These depictions addressed some of the moral failings of luxury culture, which can cause a little bit of social disorder; yet, the concentration on these shortcomings only reiterated the point that certain societies need different governments. Luxury societies are examples of those that need government interference to stop some of the immoral desires surfacing to the possible detriment of the individuals involved and, perhaps, even society at large, like the heroes who wasted expenses and energy conquering other people and territories simply for the glory only to lose those places or abandon them in the future in favor of something else.

At the same time, the novel noted some of the perceived positive aspects of luxury that Montesquieu’s contemporary intellectuals asserted overpowered some of its ill-effects. For one thing, while women were quite involved in their appearance, their vanity had positive effects for those around them. As this argument went, those women

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<sup>37</sup> Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, 108.

<sup>38</sup> Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, 219.

and other consumers were paying others to help them achieve their top form, which trickled down society creating a situation “of universal industry and ingenuity” that could stop a nation from becoming “so weak that any other power, however small, would be able to conquer it.”<sup>39</sup> This argument, commonly associated with Voltaire and J. F. Melon, declared that, for this reason, luxury is necessary in an advanced society because, if the rich do not spend their money on luxury, then the money will not spread throughout society and benefit everyone. Oddly enough, while intellectuals opposed to the progressivist philosophers mentioned in Kwass’s work often deemed luxury to be immoral, Montesquieu presented the counterargument to his own, which said that luxury was something that could accomplish the same service carried out through morality; that is, luxury supports the common good in the end even though it typically materializes through the endeavors of self-interested motives.

In addition to the argument in support of the luxury debate, Montesquieu also mentioned the arts, which luxury-centered cultures often produce. Montesquieu’s novel included the praise this particular feature of society can attract under the argument that artists “are never idle, and of all the vices idleness is the one which does most to diminish a man.”<sup>40</sup> This contention also incorporated the attack on idleness witnessed in the fluctuating consumer society. Voltaire, for example, theorized that idleness was a source of immorality and was no friend of men wishing to find happiness. This was an interesting way to address the artists because the philosophic view that art was a virtuous enterprise would not remain consistent throughout the century; Rousseau, for example, believed that the arts promoted the degeneration of men’s morality. By mentioning idleness, however, those in favor of the arts pulled together a solid argument that drew upon the moral theory that idleness is a source of danger because it destroys men and civilizations. The

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<sup>39</sup> Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, 195.

<sup>40</sup> Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, 194.

inclusion of these counterarguments supported Montesquieu's overall point that consumption's influence in society depended on the society. Although Montesquieu undoubtedly saw the danger of consumer culture corrupting society, he incorporated other intellectuals' argument to show that, perhaps, consumer culture did generate some positive consequences; the society just had to be able to handle the consequences.

In conjunction with his inclusion of the luxury debate within *The Persian Letters*, Montesquieu then looked for ways to protect people and their morality. Usbek demonstrated one possible solution—that of despotic fear—in his control over the harem, which is to govern with an iron grip to maintain morality. Unfortunately, his method failed in the end because of his long absence and difficulty in communication, suggesting that an absent dictator is not the wisest way in which one can sustain morality.

In an additional argument regarding the harem's fate, the harem itself can be said to be an immoral environment, indicating that morality cannot exist when the leader of a group lives immorally himself. For the French in 1721, this point would have resonated well under the Regency. The regent's womanizing and vices stood in sharp contrast to the previous reign of Louis XIV, who had become increasingly interested in religion and morality toward the end of his life. In fact, the regent's various lovers were described as “debauched and shameless women supped and lived together with smiling indifference, as insensible as the inhabitants of a seraglio.”<sup>41</sup> Immediately, Uzbek's own seraglio comes to mind, and the connection makes a serious claim; if Uzbek's harem descended into immorality and chaos because Uzbek's immorality bred immorality in his subjects, then the regent's immorality—and Louis XV's immoral escapades later—threatened to

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<sup>41</sup> Perkins, *France Under the Regency*, 580.



generate immorality in his own subjects. According to a testimony historian James Perkins referenced, that is exactly what happened: “‘There is little news from Versailles,’ writes a contemporary, “except that the gambling is appalling, that everyone is making love, that Cardinal Dubois is growing in credit, and that the quarrels of two harlots have occupied the court more than the Congress of Cambray.’”<sup>42</sup> In comparison, Montesquieu’s subtle remark seems to warn against a leader’s corruption. If vices were going to increase alongside consumption, then Montesquieu concluded that people needed to have a moral leader; otherwise, consumption, superficiality, and self-interest would wreak havoc on society.

Although wary of immoral leaders, Montesquieu still proposed that leaders had the potential to protect morality in consumer cultures. Looking beyond despotic leaders who did more harm than good in Montesquieu’s opinion, Usbek gave readers another option as he thought about France and its governmental solutions to the morality problem. This appeared when Usbek was again shocked by the French custom of dueling in which “the laws of honor” that guide men in luxurious societies, such as France, required a man to duel in order to save his honor while also necessitating that other men operate as support to the two duelers; yet, the foreign Usbek pointed out that “this method of deciding was not very well thought out” since only the better skilled shot won whether or not his claim was the better one.<sup>43</sup> Montesquieu wielded Usbek’s outsider perspective perfectly here because he simultaneously brought up a troublesome element in French and European society, noted the way in which honor rules society, showed how people can err in their actions when they try to follow something besides morality, and highlighted yet another reason why people in such societies need laws. Indeed, dueling was such a problem, that European governments had to disallow the custom, including

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<sup>42</sup> Perkins, *France Under the Regency*, 581.

<sup>43</sup> Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, 172.

France where dueling had been penalized under Cardinal Richelieu and Louis XIV.<sup>44</sup> In noting this problem, Montesquieu offered his French readers, and other societies in which dueling occurred, a personal and very prominent example of the ways in which progressive civilizations can injure themselves when morality is ignored and laws do not protect against that loss. Of course, the French monarchy did try to discontinue dueling and protect its citizens, which shows the government actively operating as a guiding system in an effective way.

To summarize, this chapter has shown that Montesquieu's moral philosophy offered an explanation as to why a monarchy is an effective source of government for France. First, an answer was played out through the Troglodytes. While the Troglodytes functioned via moral sentiments, they had no problems and no need for a monarchy, but the advancement of their civilization brought with it a demand for a monarchy. This change reflected a new Troglodyte society similar to that in France where luxury was a facet of prosperous lives. The monarchy was essential in these societies because, like the women with make-up, the king encouraged spending to ornament his life and stature, which further increased wealth throughout the kingdom. Moreover, the king set an example to others that spending was desirable. Finally, the presence of a king allowed people to relax from their strict guidance to morality and placed pressure upon the king alone to determine what was just and acceptable to maintain a measure of morality in his kingdom; thus, a king's people might have given up their freedom in one sense, but they gained it in another because they no longer had to regulate their own actions to coincide with morality.

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<sup>44</sup> Michael S. Kimmel, *Absolutism and its Discontents: State and Society in Seventeenth-century France and England* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1988), 64-66.

*The Persian Letters* was only a gateway to Montesquieu's ideas. From this early work, the *philosophe* inserted his philosophy on what defined morality, how morality fit into the luxury focused world that was developing in Europe, and the way in which people could insure immorality would not destroy this new society. As the luxury-morality debate continued, other *philosophes* picked up the debate as outlined by Montesquieu, particularly his call for an institution to preserve morality, and added their own opinions about morality and about what safety measures were needed to support a luxury culture.

## **Morality through the Eyes of an Incan: *A Study of Morality in the Enlightenment***

Under Louis XIV, the French monarchy embarked on a quest to achieve glory and prestige for France and its king. To accomplish this, Louis XIV became a significant patron of the arts and used art along with intellectuals' sway to manipulate public opinion and emphasize the monarchy's glory. At the end of his reign, Louis XIV adopted a more rigid standard for morality, attacking immorality in various forms. By the reign of Louis XV, however, the State governed under a different policy, and there was a relaxation of morals that coincided with rising consumption in French society. This situation fueled new philosophic ideas that enhanced the luxury-morality debate. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the *philosophes* emerged from amongst the French elite. Debates abounded about various philosophical issues; discourses on morality were one among many. The expanded philosophical dialogue begot some innovative ideas concerning reason and human nature. One work, Madame de Graffigny's *Letters from a Peruvian Woman*, was a particularly revolutionary offspring from this period. In the novel, Graffigny dared to adopt a new social philosophy regarding morality to add to the intellectual debate that swept through Europe during the mid-1700s.<sup>1</sup>

Published in 1747, *Letters from a Peruvian Woman* shocked readers with its philosophical and practical implications. Madame de Graffigny's epistolary novel revolves

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on Louis XIV's aid to intellectuals, see: Philip F. Riley, *A Lust for Virtue: Louis XIV's Attack on Sin in Seventeenth-Century France* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001). To learn more about Enlightenment thought, look at: Susan Binkley, *The Concept of the Individual in Eighteenth-Century French Thought from the Enlightenment to the French Revolution* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2007); Paul Hazard, *European Thought in the Eighteenth Century: From Montesquieu to Lessing* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1965); John J. Conley, *The Suspicion of Virtue: Women Philosophers in Neoclassical France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); Tina Chen, "Reason and Femininity in the Age of the Enlightenment" (PhD diss., University of California, 2007); Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, Trans. by Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Boston: Beacon Press, 1951); Heidi Bostic, *The Fiction of Enlightenment: Women of Reason in the French Eighteenth Century* (Newark, Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 2010).

around a South American princess named Zilia. When Spanish conquistadors catch her, Zilia leaves her homeland and begins writing to her Incan fiancé, Aza, about her adventures in France after French sailors save her from the Spaniards. The remainder of the book concerns Zilia's experiences with French culture and her attempts to understand it. At the end of the story, Zilia is well settled to French social customs and chooses to have a life of introspection and reason. Through Zilia's letters, readers are able to see Graffigny's insider knowledge of contemporary French society from an outsider's point of view, which makes for a satirical story touching on several aspects of French life, particularly those concerning and experienced by women. In addition to this unique perspective, both modern day readers and those of Graffigny's era can also find Zilia valuable for her critical analysis of what morality should be and what it actually was in France at the time Graffigny was writing.

For the contemporary perspective of French society, Graffigny had first-hand experiences that encouraged her views about morality. As such, to best understand the novel, one must know a little about Graffigny's early life. In his book *Françoise de Graffigny*, literary specialist English Showalter provides a social context for Graffigny that suggests how everyday life shaped Graffigny's take on morality. Born in 1695, Madame de Graffigny's maiden name was Françoise d'Issembourg d'Hamponcourt. Her family belonged to the *petite noblesse*, which is significant since her title afforded her the possibility of contemplating profound questions even though the low noble position did not protect her from having to struggle with unfortunate problems, such as financial shortages. Before her seventeenth year, she was married off to François Huguet, who likewise was of low noble rank. According to Showalter, her marriage was unsavory given her husband's sensitivity to alcohol, his incompetency with financial matters, and the beatings he gave his wife, which were severe enough for him to have been

arrested for it once. Their eventual separation was soon followed by her husband's death. From there, Madame de Graffigny embarked on a very different life, joining her friends in a new world centered on philosophy instead of abuse; nevertheless, her past retained an important hold on her beliefs. Showalter contends that Graffigny's fascination with the Incas and her subsequent use of Zilia as a moral guide was a result of "the ills she had suffered – poverty, loneliness, betrayal."<sup>2</sup> The abusive marriage and the problems she faced because of her husband's gambling addiction provides essential insight into the logic of her Incan tale and, most significantly, the moral statement contained within her letters, which advocates friendship, nonmaterialistic sentiments, loyalty, and truthfulness.<sup>3</sup>

Although the heroine of her book is an Incan princess, the philosophical arguments of the novel surely belong to the French author. Graffigny herself was linked to the French salon scenes and was likewise connected to many renowned *philosophes* of her time, including Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, Helvétius, and several other famous intellectuals. Although women were often neglected in intellectual discussions, Graffigny and some of her contemporary female sisters managed to engage in philosophical conversations with these men. Indeed, her time spent at Cirey, which was the home of Madame du Chatelet and her lover Voltaire, not only spurred Graffigny toward philosophical discussions but also encouraged her to formulate and express her individual ideas about debated topics.<sup>4</sup>

During her residence at Cirey, Graffigny found her inspiration in Madame du Chatelet. In *Lives of the Most Eminent Library and Scientific Men of France*, the future course of Madame de Graffigny's life begins to make sense as this source exposes intimate details of Graffigny's

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<sup>2</sup> English Showalter, *Françoise de Graffigny: Her Life and Works* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2004), 143.

<sup>3</sup>Showalter, *Françoise de Graffigny*, 7-20.

<sup>4</sup> Showalter, *Françoise de Graffigny*, 255-261.

time at Cirey with Voltaire, Madame du Chatelet, and their friends. According to the book, at Cirey, Graffigny's two hosts entertained many guests who enjoyed the intellectual stimulation the gathered party provided. Surrounded by wit and the devoted work ethic of Voltaire and Madame du Chatelet, Graffigny noted that she felt inferior to her hostess. More importantly, however, when writing about Chatelet's dissertation, Graffigny praised her hostess and asked for forgiveness from Voltaire before saying that Chatelet's piece was "far superior to his" and exclaiming, "What a woman!"<sup>5</sup> This exclamation attests that at Cirey, Madame de Graffigny not only found a home abundant in intellectual discussion, but she also found a woman whose mind she could admire more than that of Voltaire! From here, Graffigny's later argument about feminine intellectual capacity being equal to males becomes far less surprising. This belief in turn gave Graffigny the confidence to argue with the men, who often respected women more for their beauty than for their intellect. All the same, through the intellectual dialogue surrounding her, the works of reason that she read, and the inspiring personage of Madame du Chatelet, Madame de Graffigny went on to form her own opinions about reason and, more importantly for this work, morality. Her ideas can be found in her works and, although she mainly wrote plays and is well known for her profuse letter writing, Graffigny incorporated much of these ideas, especially her concept of morality, in her sole novel *Letters from a Peruvian Woman*.<sup>6</sup>

The philosophy of Madame de Graffigny is prominent in *Letters from a Peruvian Woman*, which has caused many people to study the Graffigny's only novel to uncover her philosophy. According to Tina Chen, *Letters from a Peruvian Woman* criticizes the Enlightenment for its subjectivity and exclusiveness. Chen argues that the struggle for the

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<sup>5</sup> *Lives of the Most Eminent Literary and Scientific Men of France* (London: Printed For Longman, Orme, Brown, Green, & Longmans, Paternoster-row; and John Taylor, 1839), 30.

<sup>6</sup> Showalter, *Françoise de Graffigny*, 40-46.

novel's heroine, Zilia, to learn and assimilate into French culture highlighted failures of the Enlightenment because "what seems to be neutral, objective, and universal can be in fact culturally- and gender-based."<sup>7</sup> Chen points out Zilia's refusal to convert religiously and her later decision to not wed the French naval captain, Déterville, as signs of Madame de Graffigny's own philosophical leanings toward independence and reason. After reading Chen's argument, people today can easily grasp Graffigny's indignation at the sexism of her contemporaries, who believed that women were incapable of reason and thus needed to rely on men, the supposedly superior gender.

Like Chen, Heidi Bostic also claims that Françoise de Graffigny used Zilia to ignite a debate on women and reason. In Bostic's monograph *The Fiction of Enlightenment*, she discusses Graffigny's novel as a feminist text since it denounced gender-biased customs and notions. Bostic stresses Zilia's foreignness both as a foreigner to Europe and as an outsider to the male dominated forum in which the heroine finds herself. Although Zilia learns French and engages in intellectual society, society bars her from freedom by expecting her to marry simply because she is a woman. Although Bostic makes no mention of it in her text, Chen reports Turgot's criticism of Graffigny's heroine with whom he was disappointed for not renouncing her Peruvian past and then refusing marriage as well. Graffigny's response to Turgot's critique brought forth an additional chapter in the book in which the pitiful educational system for women comes to light. Turgot, in fact, demonstrates Graffigny's greatest qualm with the popular philosophy of the time. By critiquing Zilia for failing to assimilate, Turgot's subjective reason ignored any value Zilia could have brought to French society either as a foreigner or as a woman. Noting this incident described in Chen's work, Bostic's stance on the text as a call for gender-

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<sup>7</sup> Tina Chen, "Reason and Femininity in the Age of the Enlightenment" (PhD diss., University of California, 2007), 103.



equality becomes stronger. There is no doubt that Graffigny wanted her fellow *philosophes* to respect women not simply as symbols of beauty and temptation but rather as fellow human beings with the ability to think and reason as much as the male sex.

Other scholars have focused on different points of Graffigny's novel. To Martin Calder, a professor of the French language and literature at the University of Bristol, the importance of Graffigny's work lies in its critique of European society. Although similar to Chen's argument about the inclusiveness of European philosophy, Calder goes further and asserts that Graffigny was hinting at European idealism. Calder's assertion is particularly fascinating when paired with Bostic and Chen. When Calder points out how Zilia idealized Peruvian society and ignored some of its more barbaric characteristics, readers can connect her idealistic omissions to similar omissions within European society, notably the unfair treatment of women in comparison to men. From Calder's thesis, Graffigny's novel becomes even more interesting with its complex philosophical suggestions.

One of the most important philosophical questions that Graffigny brought up was the idea of virtue. In *Letters of a Peruvian Woman*, readers are confronted with the question of whether progress and society really help people to obtain virtue or if it only makes them lose their morality. Zilia's constant attempts to understand her new environment include several moments of judgment in which she finds society corrupt, which is absolutely contrary to her native environment. Graffigny, thus, offers her readers the progress-morality discussion that was cycling through the intellectual community in the mid-1700s. Along with Graffigny, several other well-known *philosophes* of the era partook in this debate about morality. Rousseau, Voltaire, Mandeville, Diderot, and Helvétius are just a few examples of intellectuals who were

engaged in the topic. Aligned with the contemporary minds of her time, readers can better comprehend what Graffigny's idea of virtue is as it is presented in her novel.

The first words that the isolated Incan princess Zilia writes are "Aza, my dear Aza!"<sup>8</sup> From these opening words, Zilia encapsulates her emotional feeling throughout the novel and, metaphorically, Madame de Graffigny's anticipated moral philosophy. Removed from her homeland and ripped away from her ordained love Aza, Zilia continues to uphold her connection to him and remains loyal to the relationship that is destined to exist between them. Her loyalty, which repeatedly crops up throughout the novel, is a substantial portion of Graffigny's understanding of what morality actually is.

In *Letters from a Peruvian Woman*, loyalty is always regarded as an admirable trait. Zilia is the most vociferous proponent of loyalty since she finds betrayal to be unthinkable, especially in regard to her own actions; therefore, she retains a commitment to Aza throughout her journey across the Atlantic and her ensuing experiences in France despite Déterville's endeavors to win her affection. Her devotion is all the more poignant and inspiring after she discovers Aza's infidelity. Upon finding out, Zilia laments, "All is lost for me... it is good faith betrayed and love scorned that rend my soul. Aza is unfaithful!"<sup>9</sup> The astounding part, however, comes in another letter to Déterville in which Zilia speaks about the "Cruel Aza" and asserts, "The betrayal of my trust does not undo my oaths... I will remain true to myself and not be unfaithful."<sup>10</sup> Her faithfulness here is almost beyond comprehension as no one would fault her for moving on and finding someone else after Aza replaced her with a Spanish woman.

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<sup>8</sup> Françoise de Graffigny, *Letters from a Peruvian Woman* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1993), 17.

<sup>9</sup> Graffigny, *Letters*, 164.

<sup>10</sup> Graffigny, *Leaves*, 172.

All opinions considered, her devotion actually serves to make her stand out as a morally sound character. By deciding to hold fast to her commitment, Zilia rises above simple human pettiness and epitomizes how a truly moral person should act. Although hurt, Zilia is true to her ideology, which dictates that morality involves unadulterated loyalty. Graffigny, thus, reveals part of her moral philosophy in this scene. Just as with Zilia, the author advocates putting aside one's more fleeting and petty feelings and instead adopting and sticking to more profound and everlasting emotions because, according to her, morality is not about pleasing others around oneself or about getting back at someone. By contrast, in fact, she believes that morality involves remaining loyal to oneself and also to the commitments that one has made to others even when those very same commitments have been broken by the other person.

This conviction establishes another aspect of morality for the readers to ponder. From Zilia's decision, readers can infer that morality is related to the individual, not to the rest of society. Indeed, society seems to want her to be with Déterville since everyone close to her eventually grows angry at her fidelity to Aza. Although the distressed Zilia concludes that in France "to be virtuous one must be faithless" since she encounters antagonism for not being kind and loving Déterville as he does her, she rejects their expectations and customs and declares in a letter to Aza, "I would betray all notions of virtue were I to cease loving you."<sup>11</sup> Noting this fact that Zilia feels she cannot transfer her love to Déterville, or anyone else, after having already loved Aza, her choice to remain single is no longer shocking.

In reality, she has previously made a similar choice by refusing to yield to pressure about changing her religion and denouncing her old god. The Incan princess repeatedly selects independence of mind over convention. Her resolution to keep her god, not to compromise

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<sup>11</sup> Graffigny, *Leaves*, 95.

herself by falling in love with Déterville, and, therefore, not betray her earlier commitment to Aza even after he forfeits his virtue by being disloyal to her affirms her independence while also maintaining her virtue. Through Zilia's independent will, Graffigny suggests that morality is personal. To keep one's morality, one must sometimes reject the demands of society because the purpose of morality is to be true to oneself and uphold one's own values, just like Zilia does over and over again.

In addition to loyalty, Zilia's statements and actions slowly divulge other components of Graffigny's notion of morality. One of the major questions of the novel touches on this trend. Zilia, who comes from a land considered to be savage and unreasoned by progressive Europeans, puts forward an observation of French society that is untainted by any knowledge of Europe—or, more accurately, anything beyond the Incan empire. As regards her naïveté, some readers contend that Graffigny chose such an unusual point of view so that her novel—and, thus, her philosophical opinions—would rely on “the ancient wisdom of natural law—with its emphasis on virtue—,” which would come from a person originating from somewhere that boasted “a simpler and purer way of life.”<sup>12</sup> Employing a Peruvian native as an agent for critical assessment of French society only stimulated the contemporaneous debate flourishing in Europe of whether or not nature held the key to morality.

Adding to the discussion, Zilia herself makes several remarks about French society that touch upon the issue of nature in comparison to Europe's progressive society for the solution to the morality question buzzing through the intellectual circles. Zilia, as a native, operates as an advocate for nature and tradition and, thereby, a critic toward progress and superfluous lives. She even directly compares the differing customs of the French and the Incan in the way they convey

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<sup>12</sup> Sinda Vanderpool, “De Graffigny's *Les Lettres D'une Péruvienne*,” *Explicator* 64, no2 (Winter 2006): 76; Robin Howells, “The Peruvienne and Pathos,” *French Studies* LV, no 4 (2001): 454.

virtue in each civilization. After seeing French plays, the appalled Zilia notes that while both the Incan and the French portray nonliving characters, the Incans apparently “evoke the memory of only the wisest and most virtuous” whereas the French “celebrate only those who were insane or evil... personages [who] shout and flail about like madmen.”<sup>13</sup> Then, Zilia wonders if “an entire people [i.e. the French] of such humane outward appearance takes pleasure in the depiction of misfortunes and crimes that degraded and burdened their fellows” or if the French simply had to use “the horror of vice to lead one to virtue.”<sup>14</sup> Either possibility considered, she concludes that neither answer is admirable since the Incans admire virtue because it is virtuous and good. Her deduction of the French after measuring them up to the Incans represents Graffigny’s emphasis that progress and culture does not always ensure that a society has achieved morality, or even admiration for it for that matter.

Indeed, Zilia’s conclusion is that tradition trumps progress because tradition upholds and teaches people to emulate virtuous actions while progress ruins virtue in people by tainting them with unvirtuous scenes and distractions, like superficial impulses nurtured by materialistic fancies. The same idea of corruption appears in Montesquieu’s allegory of the Troglodytes, whose virtue was corrupted twice only in the presence of a consumer economy, and Rousseau’s *Émile* when Rousseau stressed natural traditions in the rearing of children, including a prescription for childrearing to occur away from cities where consumption and vices abound, in addition to arguing that children imitate vices more easily than their educators can teach virtue.

In a similar vein to her censure of progress, Zilia assails the culture of luxury that dominates the West for its damaging influence on virtue. After observing the movements of the elite around her, Zilia comes to judge that a façade of superficiality engrosses the people and

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<sup>13</sup> Graffigny, *Letters*, 76.

<sup>14</sup> Graffigny, *Letters*, 76.

hinders them from truly being virtuous. Painted faces and affectation both bothered Zilia since they allowed the French to lie and appear better than they were; meanwhile, she thinks the French should spend their time seeking to be virtuous instead of trying to fake it. She even says that were “the shows of zeal and attentiveness with which they dress up the least social duties here natural, these peoples would have to have more goodness and humanity in their heart than do ours.”<sup>15</sup> The observation is quite stimulating. Graffigny has just suggested that the French only appear to have sentiments of virtue but are merely faking it and, in the process of pretending, they divert energy that could be exerted toward being virtuous. She even insinuates that if their energy was harnessed toward achieving admirable traits, then the French would be so virtuous that even the traditional and more in tune with nature Incans could not compare to them.

After noticing how the French put on airs and feign being virtuous, Zilia blames the cult of luxury surrounding them because, with their attention engrossed in materialist concerns and practices, people end up only trying to “reconcile their apparent splendor with their actual misery.”<sup>16</sup> The result of this social characteristic is a penchant for pretense and dishonesty that offends Zilia’s moral senses. She accuses that “their unbridle taste for the superfluous has corrupted their reason, their hearts, and their spirit.”<sup>17</sup> While the women lie about their appearance with the help of makeup, men and women alike avoid sincerity through routine social mannerisms, all of which appalls Zilia who relies on honesty both as a tactic for understanding the French and also as a qualification for virtue. As the Incan princess assaults the culture of luxury and superficiality around her, she also bewails another prevalent custom for its dishonesty and forfeiture of virtue.

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<sup>15</sup> Graffigny, *Letters*, 75.

<sup>16</sup> Graffigny, *Letters*, 86.

<sup>17</sup> Graffigny, *Letters*, 123.

In another letter to Aza, she states, “The great pretense among the French is to appear lavishly wealthy,” and then refers back to her native people, who “permit certain decorations to each station in life... [that] characterize birth and riches.”<sup>18</sup> In this way, her comparison clarifies her problem with French culture. She does not protest decorations and luxury but rather finds fault in the deceptive way the French use it. Her reasoning leads her to determine that the French are pitiable because “they sacrifice their tranquility and their honor” for a superficial world by “distinguishing themselves through frivolous opulence.”<sup>19</sup> Zilia’s verdict on the matter discloses another point of Madame de Graffigny: wealth and status does not make someone virtuous. With these words, Graffigny advises people to focus less on appearing beyond their means—thereby living a dishonest life—and follow a different path, one of honesty and virtue, which will bestow one with more admiration than the fleeting jealousy produced by ostentatious displays of real, or pretend, wealth.

In relation to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, her claim that progress and luxury held hidden dangers, such as the destruction of morality, was part of a critical debate. In contrast to Graffigny, several intellectuals of that era were advocating consumption and even luxury because it promoted progress. Shortly before *Letters from a Peruvian Woman*, in fact, Voltaire released arguments supporting luxury with his 1736 philosophical work “Le Mondain” followed by the 1737 “Défense du Mondain, ou L’apologie du Luxe and “Observations sur MM. Jean Lass, Melon et Dutot” in 1738. In these pieces and other works throughout the period, including contributions to the *Encyclopédie*, Voltaire praised luxury for its ability to stop human stagnation by encouraging people to follow self-interest to ease their own life and, in the process, progress society forward as the human condition improved for everyone. Voltaire also maintained that “luxury reduces

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<sup>18</sup> Graffigny, *Letters*, 123-124.

<sup>19</sup> Graffigny, *Letters*, 124.

inequality by inducing the rich to spend and the poor to work, while enriching the state and rendering it more powerful.”<sup>20</sup> Fundamentally, Voltaire and like-minded intellectuals, such as Mandeville and Adam Smith, were accepting the changes generated from the rise in consumption and praised them as progressive and good. Graffigny, however, did not see progress as inherently good, especially when luxury was involved as well. Montesquieu seemed to share this point of view and declared. “for one man to live in luxury, a hundred others must work without respite.”<sup>21</sup>

In an effort to offset consumption’s vices, Zilia’s statements contain clues to help readers decode yet another portion of Graffigny’s moral philosophy, which is her belief that religion is a useful guide to leading a virtuous life. Zilia often refers to her Sun god of the Incan empire, but her point of view becomes relevant to moral philosophy when she describes the religious observances that the French practice. She first introduces her thoughts about the foreign religion she encounters in France about half-way through the novel when she recounts a conversation she shared with a monk. Explaining her impressions while learning about this exotic religion from the monk, Zilia records her feelings about the virtues presented for worshipers in the bible and praises that “those virtues are drawn from natural law and are truly as pure as our own.”<sup>22</sup> After providing this account of her opinions, however, she goes on to admit how she struggles to “perceive the relation supposed to exist between that religion and this nation’s manners and customs,” then criticizes the “striking inconsistency” of the French in this matter.<sup>23</sup> At this point, readers comprehend her point: religion offers people examples of virtue to uphold and imitate in their quest to be moral, yet the French incorporate their superficial social practices into religious

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<sup>20</sup> John Shovlin, *The Political Economy of Virtue: Luxury, Patriotism and the Origins of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 23.

<sup>21</sup> Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, trans. C. J. Betts (New York: Penguin Group, 2004), 195.

<sup>22</sup> Graffigny, *Letters*, 89.

<sup>23</sup> Graffigny, *Letters*, 90.



practices and blatantly ignore the opportunity afforded to them. Essentially, the French observed the rituals instead of actually practicing and believing in the morals that religion advocated.

Moreover, this assessment of French culture and religion links back to Zilia's earlier criticism about the damaging effects of superficiality. After expressing her respect for the bible's promotion of morality, Zilia later mentions her regret that "religious principles... are learned but superficially and by rote."<sup>24</sup> Even though she does not dwell on the matter, her message remains obvious: superficiality limits people from being truly moral. Indeed, the trivial affairs and insincere actions of society's members all facilitate the formation of shallow beings. When the people trick one another, lie, and fail to provide sincere reverence for profound matters, then they embark on a path where morality escapes them and even religion cannot succeed in reengaging their attention and veneration.<sup>25</sup>

While much of Graffigny's moral philosophy contains the aforementioned topic, there still remains a tremendously important argument lurking in the text of whether progress or tradition is more advisable for attaining virtue. Graffigny seems to argue for tradition instead of progress, a fact that comes across through the traditionally minded Zilia. Constantly throughout her letters, Zilia contrasts her world to the new one presented to her, such as when she mentioned the Incans' use of decorations versus that of the French and the Incan way of remembering past heroes opposed to the unruly French representations of bygone people found in plays. Zilia also rejects progress and promotes tradition and a more natural way of life when she discusses the issue of materialism. Initially, Zilia admires how the French's "ancestors employed caution,

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<sup>24</sup>Graffigny, *Letters*, 143.

<sup>25</sup> The decline of religion's influence stemmed from the hypocrisy found with the Catholic Church. Most notable were the vices of the Church, which had a great share of the nation's wealth but was loathe to part with it, and the intolerance of it, including the persecution of Jesuits and Protestants like the French Huguenots. For a brief look at more information on the Church's decline, see: James Breck Perkins, *France Under the Regency: With a Review of the Administration of Louis XIV* (Michigan: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1920), 10-12.

valor, and skills” to be memorable.<sup>26</sup> Later, however, she scolds the French people around her for “insulting the memory of their ancestors, whose wise thrift contented itself with comfortable clothing and ornaments and furnishings” that were “appropriate” for their position and earnings.<sup>27</sup> Zilia hereby endorses the past because of its simplicity. Furthermore, she props up tradition even more through her admiration of the bible, in which she finds tradition along with a treasure-trove of moral guidelines. Through these lines of reasoning, Zilia winds up scolding the progressive society around her for straying from old traditions, resulting in the surrender of people’s morals.

In a broader sense, Graffigny’s preference for the traditional held a corresponding resonance for the French and even other Europeans as well. Many intellectuals were also looking fondly back at the past, often admiring a romanticized view of the peasants or calling for a return to nature in general to find happiness and morality as it exists naturally. Although their ideas were not always in concord, one constant sustained the link between their theories: their belief in nature and willingness to commit “une confiance inconditionnelle” to it because, in their opinion, nature “est partout, envahit tout.”<sup>28</sup> Functioning as the premise behind much philosophical thought in the mid-1700s, nature soon became connected to the question of morality. The products of such reasoning were often strikingly analogous to Graffigny’s own logic.

The Scottish philosopher David Hume, for example, shared many concurring thoughts with Madame de Graffigny about nature, reason, and morality.<sup>29</sup> In *A Treatise of Human Nature*,

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<sup>26</sup> Graffigny, *Letters*, 124.

<sup>27</sup> Graffigny, *Letters*, 126.

<sup>28</sup> Jean Ehrard, *L’idée de Nature en France dans la Première Moitié du XVIIIe Siècle* (Paris: SEVPEN, 1963), 421. “An unconditional trust”; “is everywhere, pervades everything.”

<sup>29</sup> Although David Hume was not a French philosopher, other Europeans engaged together in many of these discussions; therefore, ideas bridged country borders and interacted with each other. As for Hume, his ideas likely

Hume stated, "Nature, by an absolute and uncontrollable necessity has determin'd us to judge as well as to breathe and feel [*sic*]." <sup>30</sup> This quote established Hume's conviction that humans are capable of reason, though he credited nature to having made this possible. After this assertion, however, Hume denied reason's power over nature and indicated that man achieved happiness through natural instincts, not through actions derived solely from reason. Indeed, Hume rejected reason's supremacy over nature because he believed that reason could not be the guiding principle in a person's life. He argued that reason does not cause impulses— nor can it prevent them— but only finds connections between the stimulus and the stimulant. Hume supported his contention with an examination of objects of pain, or those of pleasure, and people's reaction to them. He asserted that, despite whether people felt aversion to something, or if they embraced it, the reaction stemmed from an internal impulse connected to how they felt but not how they reasoned. Having thus affirmed his initial discredit of reason, the Scottish philosopher then stated, "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them."<sup>31</sup> With this inference, Hume touched on Graffigny's point that morality was more individualistic and beyond the processes of reason. In a more concrete expression of this shared opinion, he concluded:

Since morals, therefore, have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows, that they cannot be derived from reason; and that because reason alone, as we have already proved, can never have any such influence. Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason.<sup>32</sup>

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reached France via this intellectual discussion. Hume, of course, was friends with Voltaire and Rousseau—both of whom had contact with Graffigny and her salon circles.

<sup>30</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise Of Human Nature*, Ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), 183.

<sup>31</sup> Hume, *A Treatise Of Human Nature*, 415.

<sup>32</sup> Hume, *A Treatise Of Human Nature*, 457.

Simply stated, morality is not based on reason. While Hume pronounced that reason was not a motivating factor, Graffigny sustained his theory through Zilia, who ignored the reasoning skills of the French and followed her heart—or, to be more specific, her impulses and feelings. The connection between Hume and Graffigny's ideas intertwined even more with Zilia's unwavering resolution throughout the novel. For instance, when others reason against her, bringing up all the kindness Déterville has shown her and telling her that she owes him extreme gratitude, which would best be expressed by loving him, she consistently mentions what *feels* correct to her, what makes her feel good about herself, and not what she *thinks* about morality questions. The similarity of Hume's argument and Zilia's idea of morality indicate a sincere relationship between Graffigny's ideas about nature and morality and those of other intellectuals around her.

Like Hume and Graffigny, the French *philosophe* Helvétius also doubted reason's relationship with morality. He followed the sensationist understanding of morality, like Hume, and concluded that reason did not guide morality because morality was something individualistic and purely natural. Helvétius added as well his interpretation that morality was a sort of self-love within a person, implying that individuals were moral because morality is pleasurable to people. Readers of Madame de Graffigny's novel will surely remember this "self-love" was also prevalent with Zilia. The isolated Incan was able to resist French reasoning because her *amour de soi* guided her to her decision to be true to herself without any advice from reason and thereby allotted her the opportunity to achieve personal happiness.

Although *Letters from a Peruvian Woman* laid out a moral philosophy that corresponded with the ideas of many of the *philosophes*, the novel conflicted with several others. One clear case of conflicting philosophies existed between Graffigny and Jean Jacques Rousseau, who opposed the idea that morality was natural and beyond reason. For instance, Rousseau

pronounced, “All have the same need of guidance. Individuals must be made to conform will to reason; the public must be taught to know what it wants”<sup>33</sup> This recommendation, which Rousseau produced in 1762 a decade after Graffigny’s final draft of the novel, was completely at odds with Zilia’s understanding of virtue and morality. While she followed her heart, Rousseau suggested that she follow the crowd—or, as he says, the “general will”—since she cannot know what she truly wants, or, more precisely, what was best for her and for society. With a final stroke, Rousseau confirmed his opposing view of morality, remarking his philosophy that “Virtue is nothing other than this conformity of the particular wills to the general will.”<sup>34</sup> Rousseau hereby rejected Graffigny’s implication that the individual determined what felt proper and moral. Moreover, Rousseau deviated from all three of the aforementioned intellectuals with his plan to shape people—and consequentially their morality—through reason. Nevertheless, this departure from these contemporaries further illustrates how broad the philosophy on morality stretched and proves that *Letters from a Peruvian Woman* was only a depiction of Madame de Graffigny’s personal philosophy and not a representation of a set understanding of the term.

In *Letters from a Peruvian Woman*, Graffigny explored the essence of morality and uncovers an understanding satisfactory for herself. The product of her work was a crisp idea of morality as a phenomenon that was personal, unrelated to society, tied more to inner feelings than to reason, sincere, and loyal. Compared to *philosophes* of her time, Graffigny’s conception of morality was entirely speculative. Although some agreed with her on certain aspects of her philosophy, such as Hume and Helvétius’s concordance pertaining to morality’s detachment from reason and dependence on an individual’s sensations, other *philosophes* disagreed, like

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<sup>33</sup> Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract, or The Principles of Political Rights*, Translated by Rose M. Harrington (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1893), 57.

<sup>34</sup> Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on Political Economy and the Social Contract*, trans. Christopher Betts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 14.

Rousseau and his preference for the collective will guiding morality via reason, thus, demonstrating the fact that the novel was a personal attestation of Graffigny's estimation of morality.

## **Morality through the Eyes of Children: *Rousseau's Education Plan for Morality***

In Letter 129 of Montesquieu's *The Persian Letters*, the Persian traveler, Uzbek, judged that "morality always makes better citizens than laws can make."<sup>1</sup> This quote granted power to morality, giving it a position of higher good over that achieved by man-made laws. After this 1721 promotion of morality, Rousseau, among others, incorporated this idea of morality's higher importance in the overall welfare of the state. Following the style of Montesquieu and Graffigny, Rousseau crafted a moral philosophy based on the practice of virtue over self-interest to combat the influence of luxury that had infiltrated the 1760s world.

It was in this continuous intellectual dialogue that the conversation moved from early 18th century philosophes, like that of Mandeville in his *Fable of the Bees*, who praised luxury for its progressive impact on society, to others, such as Rousseau in the 1760s, who criticized the new lifestyle for arousing depravity in the population. Montesquieu's earliest critiques as found in his 1721 novel, *The Persian Letters*, for instance, first began this pattern of moral concern as they presented the theory that luxury created a social system in which immorality reigned over the actions of men. According to Montesquieu, the absence of morality was a corrosion of the individual and, more significantly, society as a whole. To guard against this corrosion, Montesquieu suggested the need for a guiding institution to preserve morality in consumer societies before morality disappeared altogether, an act which would abandon man and doom him to deteriorate in his immoral environment. Forty years after Montesquieu indicated a need for moral preservation, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's book *Émile* offered a response to the proposed problem.

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<sup>1</sup> Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, trans. C. J. Betts (New York: Penguin Group, 2004) 272.

In this third fictional expression of philosophical fiction, Rousseau effectively proposed an interpretation of morality and its interaction with consumerism that notably differed from that of Montesquieu and Graffigny, though he, too, stressed the adherence to virtue and anti-consumerism. The difference partly rested in the extent to which Rousseau's social context differed from these two earlier philosophes. Born in Geneva in 1712, Jean-Jacques Rousseau did not enter the society of French intellectuals until his voyage to Lyon in 1740. In this French city, Rousseau tutored the children of Monsieur de Mably, who had two brothers both of whom were philosophes. Through this initial contact, Rousseau then moved to Paris in 1742 and delved deeper into the Enlightenment world around him; for example, Rousseau befriended Diderot, visiting him during his imprisonment in 1749 and contributing numerous articles on music to Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*. Then, in 1750, following the publication of his *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, Rousseau attracted the attention of the Republic of Letters—the intellectual community in France and the rest of Europe that promoted communication between European (and some American) philosophers and their ideas. Reportedly growing fatigued at the “artificial life of the salons,” Rousseau then relocated to Montmorency through the help of Madame d'Épinay, who provided him with temporary lodging there until 1757 when a dispute occurred between the two and resulted in his vacating the premises.<sup>2</sup> This quarrel was only one among many for Rousseau and preceded his eventual break with many philosophes, including his former friend Diderot. After this break from Paris, its philosophes, and its luxury-centered atmosphere,

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<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Dent, *Rousseau* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 13.



Rousseau relocated to Geneva once again in 1754 where he then produced a few of his major works, including *Émile*.<sup>3</sup>

Published in 1762, *Émile* reintroduced the idea that there was a need for morality in consumer societies and outlined a method in which one could preserve it. While Montesquieu saw a need for an institution or government to direct the population toward a sense of harmony between consumer culture's drive toward self-interest and the need to preserve the practice of virtue, Rousseau thought that the individual was the answer to keeping morality, thereby, helping society to continue and prosper. If educated properly, Rousseau reasoned that the individual could be shaped into the ideal citizen and save society from the instability caused by luxury and immorality.

In order to demonstrate how this training could successfully happen, Rousseau's novel focused on the fictional pupil named *Émile* and his education. Since Rousseau was describing a solution to the problems caused by society, the novel is limited to the knowledge that man needs in order to live a moral life and to participate productively in society without acting solely for himself and his own satisfaction of pleasures. As the text progresses, readers comprehend that the education is meant to create a morally sound citizen. As historian Joseph R Reiser classifies it, Rousseau was describing a "human virtue... the most important virtue required of citizens."<sup>4</sup> Through his proposed techniques, Rousseau aimed to take the individual citizen that is *Émile* and shape him until he "steadfastly respects the rights of others, even at great cost to himself."<sup>5</sup> This characteristic in *Émile* is supposed to generate a useful citizen to help save man from the immoral dangers that Rousseau believed flourished in society.

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<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Dent, *Rousseau*, 8-15; David Edmonds and John Eidinow, "Simple Soul" in *Rousseau's Dog: Two Great Thinkers at War in the Age of Enlightenment* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 5-13.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph R. Reiser, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: A Friend of Virtue* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Reiser, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, 8.

Rousseau opened *Émile* with an assertion that man is naturally good. Rousseau's basic argument contended that "God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil," including man himself; therefore, since men are products of God, they are good in their natural state.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, Rousseau perceived an obstacle to this goodness. When men take control, Rousseau believed that they corrupted their nature by trying to discard it. The problem Rousseau sought to resolve, therefore, was the fact that man had removed himself from nature and would continue to do so. In man's attempt to leave nature, he created unnatural settings and customs; the first of which was society.

At this stage of his ideas, Rousseau mirrored some of ideas of philosophes before him, especially Madame de Graffigny whose portrayal of the Incan princess, Zilia, in Parisian society reflected how far away the French had moved from a natural state. Rousseau then, like Graffigny, belonged to the group of intellectuals who were wary of consumer culture and the so-called "progress" that Voltaire and J. F. Melon praised. Whereas Melon asserted that "luxury fostered certain social virtues," Rousseau rejected the claim that "politeness, worldly sociability, and enlightenment enlivened virtue" in a world where "natural sympathy for others was systematically corrupted and muted."<sup>7</sup> By rejecting the idea that progress in modern society was best, Rousseau signaled that *Émile* was going to offer his contemporaries advice on how to survive consumer culture; the first step was to learn that progress and consumption cultivated vice and instability. To demonstrate this anti-progress, anti-consumerism belief, Rousseau turned to cities as an explanation.

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<sup>6</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile*, trans. Barbara Foxley (London: Everyman's Library 1989), 5.

<sup>7</sup> John Shovlin, *The Political Economy of Virtue: Luxury, Patriotism. And the Origins of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 24.

He regarded cities in particular as unnatural since they cramped men together when he thought men were naturally supposed to be spread out across the land. Rousseau believed that “the more they [i.e. men] are massed together, the more corrupt they become. Disease and vice are the sure results of over-crowded cities.”<sup>8</sup> Adding further to his disapproval, cities were viewed as centers of commerce and contain the main displays of luxury cultures, such as shops, trading, parties and other leisurely social activities not found in rural areas. Consequently, luxury driven societies were merely an extension of previous steps away from nature and a further degradation of man’s natural moral state. In accordance with this logic, Rousseau plainly stated his opinion in *Émile* that “it is riches that corrupt men.”<sup>9</sup> With this elucidation of society’s troubles, Rousseau informed his audience of the immorality threatening society and prepared them to listen to his proposals for challenging the loss of morality in the wake of luxury culture.

In order to combat this emerging evil in man and his societies, Rousseau yielded to the power of education. Where education is concerned, Rousseau adopted the blank-slate perspective of John Locke and argued, “We are born capable of learning, but knowing nothing, perceiving nothing.”<sup>10</sup> Rousseau went on to assert the idea that “We are born sensitive...affected in various ways by our environment,” first learning to “seek or shun the things that cause” our sensations based on whether they arouse pleasure or pain before later learning to form judgments based on reason, though these judgments formed by reason are “hindered by our habits” and “are more or less warped by our prejudices.”<sup>11</sup> Consequently, man was first and foremost a self-involved being and only learned to look beyond himself as he grew older and had more experiences.

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<sup>8</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 26.

<sup>9</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 24.

<sup>10</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 28.

<sup>11</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 7.

What's more, given Rousseau's claim that "Reason alone teaches us to know good and evil," one must accept the ensuing logic that prior to "the age of reason we do good or ill without knowing it, and there is no morality in our actions."<sup>12</sup> This line of reasoning positions Rousseau's concept of morality as a feature of man that is not innate but is actually learnt through experiences and the arrival of reason; hence, Rousseau stressed early on the necessity of a good education as he positions education as the formulating element of a child's moral character.

That said, the absence of morality does not appear to make man evil in Rousseau's view, which successfully avoids the inconsistency of children having no morality but man being naturally good; instead, immorality is evil because man has reason and ignores it to pursue his desires for pleasure. This issue touches upon a deeper one in Rousseau's work, which is Rousseau's understanding that there are two tendencies of man: one led to the "study of eternal truths, to the love of justice, and of true morality... the other led him downwards to himself, made him the slave of his senses, of the passions which are their instruments, and thus opposed everything suggested to him by the former principle."<sup>13</sup> To avoid immorality and the second tendency of man, Rousseau argued that tutors had to begin teaching their children early on not to reject their morals in order to seek an increase in their pleasures.

With the idea that man is born without faults, Rousseau entertained the idea that immoral experiences degraded a man's innate moral capacity and generated a sound argument for education's necessity. Rousseau's argument, therefore, lay in the ability of a natural education to imbed a permanent moral constitution within a child since "We

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<sup>12</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 34.

<sup>13</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 241.

begin to learn when we begin to live.”<sup>14</sup> Rousseau’s chosen form of education dismissed the education a child can receive from studying the people and things around him because he believed the child’s impressionable observations were conducive to moral degradation because the child would witness the immoral habits of fellow men and follow them without knowing that the actions were immoral. To avoid this pitfall, therefore, Rousseau proposed a controlled education in nature in which the child was removed from corrupting influences and was able to experience life in an untainted atmosphere so that he may later stand firm against the corrupting influence of the luxurious society in which he would one day abide. Moreover, Rousseau acknowledged that education was necessary since man in his natural state must rely solely on himself but, when thrown into a community in which he must depend on others, man must go against this nature. Only a guided education can train a child to be independent enough to conquer the indulgences and immorality present in society and to be a good citizen who is linked to society and dependent on it to survive.

In context with Rousseau’s surroundings, this idea of imitation becomes more significant. Living at the same time as Montesquieu, Rousseau likely heard about the debauchery of the Regency and had to have witnessed the immorality that continued under Louis XV, whom his subjects referred to as Louis le bien aimé and loved so devotedly that they overlooked his immorality. If one recalls Montesquieu’s theory that immoral kings spread vice throughout their kingdom, then one sees a similarity to Rousseau’s idea of children’s innocent imitations of adults. The subject adopts the vices seen in his king; the child copies a vice of his father. While Montesquieu urged leaders to preserve their morality for the sake of their people, Rousseau seemed to take a different approach, advising tutors to prep children so that they could avoid the immorality they saw in society. The significance of this switch in ideas might have stemmed

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<sup>14</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 9.

from the difference in time in which the two authors wrote their novels. Montesquieu composed his when Louis XV was a child; Rousseau wrote his when Louis XV was an adult and lacked the promise of change. Rousseau's cynicism toward society, therefore, might have been a product of the increased debauchery since Montesquieu was writing when the immorality of the regent was just beginning to reappear in society.<sup>15</sup>

Before studying Rousseau's procedures with *Émile*, readers must note Rousseau's repeated advice that man is best left to nature, which includes the rearing of children. Rousseau warned that "when there is no confidence between relations, when the family society ceases to give savour to life, its place is soon usurped by vice."<sup>16</sup> For Rousseau, the idea stood that when people return to nature, morality would be restored; hence, parents should follow their natural inclinations and look after their children instead of pawning them off on nurses and other caretakers. Interestingly enough, Rousseau's argument paralleled that of Montesquieu in *The Persian Letters*. Within this text, Montesquieu expressed his belief that "they [legislators] have given fathers a great share of authority over their children. Nothing contributes more to the ease of the magistrates; nothing more prevents the courts of justice from being crowded; nothing more firmly establishes tranquility in a state."<sup>17</sup> Montesquieu's respect for parental guidance over their children represented another moment of connected philosophies as Rousseau's preference for nature elicited the same opinion Montesquieu suggested nearly forty years earlier.

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<sup>15</sup> James Breck Perkins, *France Under the Regency: With a Review of the Administration of Louis XIV* (Michigan: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1920), 7-9 and 577-595.

<sup>16</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 17.

<sup>17</sup> Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, 272.

Indeed, in *Émile*, Rousseau's principle of nature and morality repeatedly coincide throughout the text. Furthermore, Rousseau believed so thoroughly in this idea of returning to nature to find morality that he declared, "When mothers deign to nurse their own children, then will be a reform in morals."<sup>18</sup> This idea extended beyond nursing and carried on throughout the child's life. After his advice to mothers, Rousseau cautioned parents against hiring tutors as well because he believed that children would be better cared for under the loving eyes of their parents. According to Rousseau, in general, a tutor was not attached to a child and could often do more damage to the child than a parent if he was not careful in his instruction and encounters with someone else's child.<sup>19</sup>

If such a natural arrangement was not possible, however, then Rousseau formulated a guideline for tutors to follow. First, Rousseau stressed that the tutor remember that a child is "Wholly unmoral in his actions, he can do nothing morally wrong, and he deserves neither punishment nor reproof."<sup>20</sup> In this vein of not punishing children, Rousseau also advised that tutors refrain from preaching morality before a child is able to reason because, if morals and reason are presented to a child before he has reason himself, he will not understand anything that he is being told. For instance, Rousseau wrote that fables recounted to a child would result in him mimicking the villain of the story instead of the protagonist, thus causing the opposite effect than the one desired by the tutor.

As Rousseau stated in *Émile*, a poor education of this sort can cause a significant amount of damage in a child. In Rousseau's opinion, "a child ill taught is further from virtue than a child

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<sup>18</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 13.

<sup>19</sup> The issue of parenting via tutors instead of biological parents stemmed from the practice of wet-nursing and sending children away to be educated and reared, which was a common practice of the elite in 18<sup>th</sup> century France. Rousseau goes into more detail regarding this trend in *Émile* from page 12 to page 15.

<sup>20</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 56.

who learnt nothing at all.”<sup>21</sup> Rousseau then described poorly educated men as those “young men, [who] corrupted in early youth and addicted to women and debauchery, are inhuman and cruel.”<sup>22</sup> Rousseau requested several times that tutors avoid corrupting their pupils with bad education and stressed his rationale that, since children do not reason, tutors need not force lessons on a child; rather, they should let him live and play as suits his age. In fact, Rousseau proclaimed that the “only moral lesson which is suited for a child... is this; ‘Never hurt anybody.’”<sup>23</sup>

Outside of that lesson, the tutor is only responsible for ensuring that his child does not pick up vices since undesirable habits are foils to reason and “once habits are established any change is fraught with peril” while a “child will bear changes which a man cannot.”<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Rousseau admitted that while “there is no original sin in the human heart, the how and why of the entrance of every vice can be traced;” therefore, tutors must be careful to guard against vices developing in their pupil.<sup>25</sup> Children should not be exposed to vices, but tutors should show them morality and lead by example without forcing them to do good. For example, Rousseau mentioned giving charity himself and refusing to let his pupil *Émile* give any so that the child formed the belief that giving charity was an honor; therefore, when Rousseau gave money to a church, *Émile* was not allowed to drop it in because Rousseau wanted *Émile* to understand that giving away one’s own property was an honor. This restriction then inflamed in *Émile* a desire to be charitable and give himself. By doing this, Rousseau hoped to lead as an example so that he could keep the child busy doing good works, which followed his

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<sup>21</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 71.

<sup>22</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 181.

<sup>23</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 69.

<sup>24</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 15.

<sup>25</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 56.



principle that “by doing good we become good.”<sup>26</sup> By limiting children when they are too young to understand what doing good is, therefore, Rousseau contended that this enticed children to do good because they would not take it for granted as something meaningless that anyone can do. When he was old enough, therefore, *Émile* would want to work to help the poor via his labors in addition to any monetary charity he may give, which is both morally sound and another notable characteristic for a citizen since he would be helping others worse off than himself.

Furthermore, *Émile*'s charitable actions suggest an anti-materialistic attitude that stood in sharp contrast to the self-interested consumption of Rousseau's era. Rousseau advocated thinking of others instead of acquiring and hoarding wealth and material objects. The sentiment is reminiscent of Graffigny's anti-materialist position in *Letters from a Peruvian Woman* in which she suggested people discontinue ostentatious displays of real— or, more likely, feigned—wealth and do something virtuous to receive sincere admiration. By comparison, it becomes evident that both authors thought it more prudent to be virtuous than materialistic.

Rousseau's method of education came with more restrictions on tutors as well. First and foremost, they must appear morally sound to their pupils. Bad examples would show a child improper ways to achieve what he wants, but the child himself would not perceive the immorality of his actions as long as he was getting what he desired since he has no reason. Proper execution of Rousseau's education plan also required tutors to discard their vanity to a certain extent. Since tutors should not teach children pointless information, the pupil may seem to lack intelligence. By association, the tutor may appear to be an inept tutor when compared to another who teaches his child unimportant information. Since Rousseau warned against education beyond a child's reasoning, however, his advice told tutors not to push their pupils in a selfish attempt to have their skills as a tutor put on immediate display; instead, tutors should

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<sup>26</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 212.

ignore this selfish desire and let their work go unnoticed until the child emerges as a good student. In *Émile*, Rousseau argued that “the illusions of pride are the source of our greatest ills; but the contemplation of human suffering keeps the wise humble. He keeps to his proper place and makes no attempt to depart from it.”<sup>27</sup> Pride in a tutor, therefore, will only result in harming the child’s overall progression by confusing him from the start; likewise, a prideful tutor can teach a child to be prideful himself and can also make the child ungrateful. This last argument rests on the belief that gratitude is lost when a person boasts. Additionally, this conclusion on gratitude and boasting seems to be in accord with Rousseau’s advocacy for equality, which cannot exist in a situation in which a boastful person takes credit for someone else’s achievements and places that person in a lower position to himself. For this reason, tutors must be humble so that they may simultaneously avoid confusing the child with knowledge he does not understand whilst also serving as an example to the child of how a person should act when assisting others.

Although he stressed the need to limit pride, Rousseau urged tutors to always recall that the “only natural passion is self-love” and “selfishness is good in itself,” especially since it can encourage other worthy traits within children.<sup>28</sup> Rousseau told his readers that the “notion of justice springs not from what we owe to others, but from what is due to us,” which means a tutor should teach children their rights and not their duties because they will not understand duties like they can easily understand rights. Here, Rousseau demonstrated how he would teach *Émile* this lesson. First, he would plant a seed with the young boy and then help him cultivate the plant to show the child hard work and give him the sense of property and its importance to an individual when his

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<sup>27</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 409.

<sup>28</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 56.

labor is involved. Then, Rousseau said he would have the plant destroyed because the land was the property of a farmer. With the loss of the plant, Émile learns how losing property feels to him and that he has the right to have his plant after working on it, but he can now understand the farmer has a right to his land first. Afterwards, Émile can understand property, rights, and duties in a simple way. These are a few initial seedlings that will help Émile grow as a person, increase his understanding of what is right and wrong, and teach him how to be a good citizen in regard to his fellow citizens, including how to balance his rights and his duty as a citizen to maintain their rights in addition to his own. Overall, this example of the seed is the symbolic method of Rousseau. The child is not to be told what property is—just as he is not to be told what right and wrong is, what vices and virtues are; instead, his tutor shows him slowly. He plants a seed in the ground while the tutor plants one in the child. In the same way that the plant grows, so will the child.

Moreover, this section of the novel highlighted a few key points of Rousseau's philosophy in addition to the need to lead by example and, thereby, teach children morality slowly over time. The mission with the seed demonstrated Rousseau's belief that property was not only necessary for a society but also fit into his idea of morality. According to his moral understanding, therefore, good citizens should respect the property of others because they would like their own property respected in turn. This idea concurred with previous ideas, such as those of Adam Smith and David Hume, which maintained that morality involved a certain sympathy toward one's fellow man even if that sympathy stemmed from a natural selfishness. Given that Rousseau planned to teach Émile about his own property and make him lose it before introducing him to the idea of other people wanting to have their property respected, the correlation becomes clear. This approach provokes an understanding that Rousseau perceived

that morality stemmed from selfish feelings in combination with logic; that is, *Émile* would be moral because he felt pain once at the destruction of his plant and knew that if he wanted others to be moral and not destroy his plant, then he must not damage their property either. In a world where consumption and self-interest were affecting the lives of more people, Rousseau's words contradicted the increasingly ordinary habits of people, whom Mandeville and Voltaire, among others, had encouraged people to follow self-interest instead of simply being virtuous. Rousseau used *Émile* to stress the notion that people were entitled to their own property and, more importantly, to engrain the idea into his contemporaries that self-interest should not drive every action because then people would shortsightedly ruin their neighbors' interests only to have the favor returned, resulting in the suffering of all parties.

Alongside the need to understand his fellow man, Rousseau insisted that *Émile* regard everybody equally. Indeed, Rousseau compelled potential tutors to keep in mind that "in the natural order men are all equal and their common calling is that of manhood," and they should strive to impart this knowledge on to their students throughout their life.<sup>29</sup> In correlation to this equality, Rousseau desired to keep *Émile* away from the system of master and slave in order to keep a harmony in society since master-slave relationships are unnatural and breed immorality. Again, this element of Rousseau's moral philosophy followed the logic of selfishly sympathizing with others, refraining from doing to them what *Émile* would not want done to himself. On a grand scale, of course, this attitude takes on a wider significance because it creates equal citizens, forming a republic over monarchies and despots, which in turn creates a world in which morality would guide the people instead of the selfish desires left unchecked by reason.

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<sup>29</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 9.

In hopes of steering *Émile* away from such a relationship, Rousseau first stated that “Dependence on things, being non-moral, does no injury to liberty and begets no vices; dependence on men, being out of order gives rise to every kind of vice” and then proposed making *Émile* dependent on objects instead of his tutor.<sup>30</sup> If the child was made to believe he was dependent on things and not on a person, then there was no “question of obedience for him or tyranny for you” and instilled in the youth a yearning for independence and an “honour of self-help.”<sup>31</sup> In order to achieve this feat, tutors were not to give any orders, yet had to permit the child to see that “he is weak and you are strong” by making it a custom to “give willingly, [and] refuse unwillingly.”<sup>32</sup> Through these efforts, a tutor could “make him [his pupil] patient, equable, calm, and resigned... for it is in man’s nature to bear patiently with the nature of things, but not with the ill-will of another.”<sup>33</sup> When *Émile* is older, Rousseau hypothesized that he would be independent and would not know to submit to others nor to make them submit to him. This ignorance on *Émile*’s part is the trait of a good citizen in Rousseau’s ideal model because it creates a morally sound member of society who degrades neither himself nor others.

As a way to obtain his independence, Rousseau drew attention to the need for a strong body in his young *Émile*. Rousseau starts his argument by stating that “strength is the foundation of all virtue. Virtue is the heritage of a creature weak by nature but strong by will.”<sup>34</sup> Rousseau then took this figurative strength into a blatantly literal one when he explained that “the body must be strong enough to obey the mind” because weak bodies give way to “sensual passions”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 49.

<sup>31</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 49.

<sup>32</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 55.

<sup>33</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 55.

<sup>34</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 408.

<sup>35</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 21.

and drive a person to vices, meaning that “all wickedness comes from weakness.”<sup>36</sup> To fortify the *Émile* from vice, therefore, Rousseau said that the child must learn to be strong, like braving the weather despite inclement weather. Furthermore, Rousseau warned that “weakness, combined with love of power, produces nothing but folly and suffering.”<sup>37</sup> Here, he reminded his readers that master-slave relationships are never good and are based upon a system of dependence and unnaturalness that descends into immorality. If children are taught to be strong, however, Rousseau’s logic asserted that the child would gain his own independence and would not need to domineer over someone else in order to supplement his own physical and inner weakness.

Although strength is necessary in Rousseau’s plan, the philosopher confessed the necessity of hardship as well. For Rousseau, “too much bodily prosperity corrupts the morals. A man who knew nothing of suffering would be incapable of tenderness towards his fellow-creatures... he would be hard-hearted, unsocial, a very monster among men.”<sup>38</sup> This idea of suffering linking man to one another is expounded in other sections of the book. Instead of bonding over shared moments of happiness, Rousseau was adamant that “man’s weakness makes him sociable. Our common sufferings draw our hearts to our fellow-creatures;” simply put, “our common needs create a bond of interest [then] our common sufferings create a bond of affection.”<sup>39</sup> Rousseau suggested creating this bond to other men for children by letting the child know that others suffer just like him. In the case of the plant, for instance, *Émile* suffered the loss of his plant, but he also learnt that the farmer suffered the same way when little boys came along and dug up his garden.

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<sup>36</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 33.

<sup>37</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 52.

<sup>38</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 51.

<sup>39</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, 182.

Through mutual suffering, Émile learned to see beyond himself and to cope with other men. To be an ideal citizen, this lesson had to be learned; otherwise, Émile could not cooperate with others within society because he would fail to understand them or feel any affection or pity toward them.

If the child experienced education in this fashion, then Rousseau believed he would become an ideal citizen. By teaching Émile to be self-reliant, Rousseau sought to reinforce the natural state of man, who depends on none except himself. Rousseau also allowed the child to suffer so that Émile could learn what sorrow and loss are and use that suffering to understand the logic behind morality. Moreover, once he has experienced suffering, Émile would be able to see the link between other people and himself, which is simply a bond of suffering. This acknowledgement of man's universal state of suffering thereby creates sympathy in Émile and, with reason, serves as a solid foundation for morality within the child. From here, Émile could take his sense of independence and use it in society by taking his place there as a good citizen. There, Rousseau predicted that he would be strong but kind, willing to protect rights, give charity, shun immorality, and even willing to sacrifice himself in order to protect the rights of his fellow men and maintain harmony in society; basically, Émile would behoove society by observing virtue instead of acting purely through shortsighted drives of self-interest. According to Rousseau, that is the answer to Montesquieu's problem: provide a good education that will instill within children a moral philosophy that promotes sympathy, the use of reason to combat harmful selfishness, equality, and independence in order to create a good citizen who will propel society forward instead of dragging it down with selfish, thoughtless acts.

## Conclusion

During the eighteenth century, Europe underwent a revolution of unknown purport as the unfamiliar world of consumption started to develop. Unfolding alongside consumerism, Europe also surged forward with Enlightenment ideas and intellectual discussions. Caught in the middle of dual movements—the early modern consumer revolution and the Enlightenment—the intellectuals of the 18<sup>th</sup> century had to confront a novel issue: how were people supposed to maintain their morality? According to some philosophical theorists of the time, people had to adopt some form of protection in order to combat the amoral—and, sometimes, simply immoral—effects of increased consumption of accessories, decorative household goods, and luxury products.

As this paper has shown, the increase in consumption of non-essentials by a larger portion of society had a profound impact on moral philosophy throughout the 1700s. Scholars of eighteenth-century France have shown how the culture of appearances and the expanded consumption spread beyond the formerly exclusive world of the elites and the intellectuals. First, increased consumption encouraged commodity growth as wealthy non-aristocrats and, eventually, the other ranks in society sought to mimic the commodity fetishism of the nobility. This imitation became a type of commodity invasion contributing to the abandonment of sumptuary laws that had straightforwardly separated the nobility from the rest of society. Suddenly, the world was different; products of varying qualities were presented as options. A wealthy merchant could pass for a noble aristocrat. A commoner owned similar commodities and followed the same fashion trends as aristocrats. On a commercial level, the aristocracy was no longer a distinct, impenetrable segment.



Following this commercial infiltration, continued consumer expansion sparked additional encroachments into historically exclusive worlds. As James Collins asserted, the population was becoming more literate. With increased consumption driving the publication of written works, the literacy rate was improving; philosophers now had a larger audience to reach. Instead of private intellectual debates, philosophers could address anyone who could read and, through this increased readership's conversation, even the illiterate could hear and discuss the ideas. The intellectuals had the potential to reach anyone, which was increasingly ideal since the moral philosophers had begun to focus on the rising consumerism and its effect on people's interactions and the consequential course of their morality.

The conclusion of this moral discussion fell on the need to protect people from consumerism. Montesquieu served as the first example of this discussion. Being one of the first to address the negative effects of material culture on people's morality, Montesquieu presented his argument through a stranger's eyes, masking his criticism of increased consumption behind the foreign perspectives of Usbek and Rica. Through his examination of Parisian society, he found that rampant consumption posed threats to morality and suggested the need for an institution of the administrative state protect people from consumerism. Although rather vague, Montesquieu was the instigator of the search to find a solution to protect morality in the rising consumer environment.

This search found one solution in the 1740s in Madame de Graffigny's *Letters from a Peruvian Woman*. In her novel, Graffigny explored the world of luxury and morality through the foreigner Zilia. Graffigny used Zilia's insights and actions to describe Graffigny's idea of morality and censure the faults of increased consumption, particularly the adverse society associated with luxury. Additionally, Zilia's refusal to conform to French expectations clinched

Graffigny's moral argument, indicating that morality must be protected in the early modern consumer society through one's own actions.

Coming at the end of this decades-long discussion, Rousseau produced his own views on the morality-consumer debate in his novel *Émile*. Through the exploration of *Émile* in this paper, Rousseau's argument took shape as a condemnation of consumption for consumption's sake and noted its corruptible influence. According to Rousseau's philosophy, morality and the good qualities of man needed to be protected from the temptations and vices of materialism. His solution was simple: people needed to be educated. Education and reason were the keys to forming and sustaining an upright and moral citizen. Unlike Graffigny and Montesquieu, Rousseau's conclusion relied on reason more than the innate goodness of man. In his view, man was neither good nor evil until either reason or the ill-effects of consumerist society influenced him.

Living amidst the simultaneous influences of emerging consumerism and the Enlightenment, the three philosophers focused on in this discussion provide an ideal foray into the world around them. Stretched throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, each philosopher inserted a new element to the morality-consumerism debate. All three adopted a cautionary attitude toward the increased consumption pattern, looking beyond positive results, such as increased literacy, to focus on the corrosive aspects. Each advocated the need to protect morality in order to preserve society, and Graffigny and Rousseau actually formulated two theoretical models as potential solutions. The significance of their endeavors is vast and this paper only focuses on a few. First, they serve as historical insights into contemporary reactions to consumerism's original debut into the modern world and indicate the concerns about how access to new forms and varieties of material culture affected people, specifically their moral well-being. Second, they tied together

the phenomenon of increased consumption and the Enlightenment by concentrating their moral philosophies specifically on consumption-cultures. Finally, this paper finds that their work is also noteworthy for advancing the field of moral philosophy, adopting new ideas in reaction to each other and their contemporaneous surroundings.

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