

📖 Topic Page: [Diderot, Denis \(1713 - 1784\)](#)

Definition: **Diderot, Denis** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

French philosopher and writer. He was chief editor of the *Encyclopédie* (1751-72), an influential publication of the Enlightenment. A friend of Rousseau, he was imprisoned briefly (1749) for irreligious writings. He broadened the scope of the *Encyclopédie* and with d'Alembert recruited contributors, such as Voltaire. As a philosopher, Diderot progressed from Christianity through deism to atheism. His books *On the Interpretation of Nature* (1754) and *D'Alembert's Dream* (1769) reveal his scientific materialism. *Jacques the Fatalist* (1796) and *Rameau's Nephew* illustrate his determinism. He wrote plays, and art and literary criticism.

Summary Article: **Diderot, Denis**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

(dĕnĕ' dĕdĕrō'), 1713–84, French encyclopedist, philosopher of materialism, and critic of art and literature, b. Langres. He was also a novelist, satirist, and dramatist. Diderot was enormously influential in shaping the rationalistic spirit of the 18th cent. Educated by the Jesuits, he rejected a career in law to pursue his own studies and writing. In 1745 he became editor of the *Encyclopédie*, enlisting nearly all the important French writers of the Enlightenment; they produced the most remarkable compendium up to that time. The best known of his plays is *Le Père de famille* (1758), which became the prototype of the “bourgeois drama.”

Other highly distinctive works by Diderot include *La Religieuse* [the nun] (1796), a psychological novel; *Jacques le fataliste* (1796), a rambling novel in the manner of Sterne; and *Le Neveu de Rameau* [Rameau's nephew], a brilliant satire in dialogue. His philosophical writings include his *Pensées philosophiques* (1746) and *Lettre sur les aveugles* [letter on the blind] (1749), which contains the most complete statement of his materialism. Through his *Salons*, articles published in newspapers from 1759, he pioneered in modern art criticism. Diderot's vast correspondence forms a brilliant picture of the period. His later years, until he came to enjoy the patronage of Catherine II of Russia, were filled with financial difficulties. His influence was great, both on his immediate successors, Holbach and Helvétius, and on the writers and thinkers of France, Germany, and England.

See his *Selected Writings*, tr. by Coltman, D. and ed. by Crocker, L. G. (1966);

Diderot on Art, ed. and tr. by Goodman, J. (Vol. I, 1995);

biographies by A. M. Wilson (1972) and P. N. Furbank (1992);

studies by G. Bremner (1983) and J. H. Mason (1984).

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York, NY: Columbia University Press. Retrieved from
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