

**THE OPEN COURT SERIES OF  
CLASSICS OF SCIENCE AND  
PHILOSOPHY, NO. 4. DIDEROT'S  
EARLY PHILOSOPHICAL WORKS**

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The Open Court Series of Classics of Science and Philosophy, No. 4. Diderot's Early Philosophical Works by Denis Diderot & Margaret Jourdain

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**DENIS DIDEROT & MARGARET JOURDAIN**

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*Frontispiece.*

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DIDEROT'S EARLY  
PHILOSOPHICAL WORKS

TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY  
MARGARET JOURDAIN

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# DIDEROT'S EARLY PHILOSOPHICAL WORKS

## INTRODUCTION

### DIDEROT

A COMPLETE survey of the life and works of Diderot—whom Voltaire called Pantophile—is not attempted here, for the list of the topics he handled would be a very long one, including as it does various departments of art and science and speculation. The *Letter on the Blind* (the most interesting of his early works), however, shows him in two lights—as a free-thinker and as one of the long succession of thinkers who prepared the way for the theory of evolution. The agitation caused by Diderot and his circle about the theory of transformism, it has been said, must have largely contributed to awaken the attention of Erasmus Darwin in England and Lamarck in France to the necessity of throwing more positive light on that great issue. Transformism only needed the partial scientific confirmation which Lamarck and Geoffroy St Hilaire gave it in the first two decades of the nineteenth century to pass from the realm of systematic philosophy into that of

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scientific controversy. Lamarck, who was for some time the *protégé* of Buffon, and in 1785 became a contributor to the *Methodic Encyclopædia*<sup>1</sup> (edited by Naigeon and other friends of Diderot), eventually founded transformism when he subjected it to definite laws.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the *Letter on the Blind*, and indeed throughout Diderot's work, is apparent his indebtedness to English thought; then, and in later life, he was the most English of Frenchmen—the man who could write to Catherine II, in 1775 that “it is obvious to all who have eyes in their head, that if it had not been for the English, reason and philosophy would be still in the most pitiable and rudimentary condition in France.” In Brunetière's words, “There is no trace of anything but England in the work of the man who has often been described as the most German of Frenchmen.”<sup>3</sup>

Denis Diderot was born at Langres on October 5th, 1713. He was educated by the Jesuits, and threw himself into the Bohemian life of a bookseller's hack in Paris. His early writings were mere hackwork—a translation of Stanyan's *History of Greece* (1743), for which he earned 100 crowns, and a translation (with two collaborators) of James's *Dictionary of Medicine* (1746-48). The rendering of Shaftesbury's *Inquiry concerning Virtue and Merit* (1745) has some notes of his own. Besides his volume of stories, *The Indiscreet Jewels* (1748), he wrote the

<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopédie Méthodique*.

<sup>2</sup> R. L. Cru, *Diderot and English Thought*, New York, 1913.

<sup>3</sup> F. Brunetière, *Manuel de l'histoire de la littérature française*, 1898, p. 321.