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Usbek to his friend Ibben in Smyrna

The laws are ferocious in Europe against people who kill themselves. They are made to die, so to speak, a second time : they are dragged ignobly through the streets, they are stigmatized, and their property is confiscated.

It seems to me, Ibben, that these laws are quite unjust. When I am overwhelmed with grief, with misery, with scorn, why do they want to prevent me from putting an end to my sufferings, and cruelly deprive me of a remedy which is in my hands ?

Why do they want me to work for a society which I consent no longer to be part of ; that I keep despite myself a convention that was made without me ? Society is based on a mutual advantage ; but when it becomes onerous to me, who prevents me from renouncing it ? [1] Life has been given to me as a favor ; I can therefore give it back when it no longer is one : the cause ceases, the effect must also cease.

Does the prince want me to be his subject when I do not receive the advantages of subjection ? Can my fellow citizens require this evil division of their utility and my despair ? Does God, unlike all benefactors, mean to condemn me to receiving benefits that crush me ?

I am obliged to follow the laws when I live under the laws ; but when I no longer do, can they still bind me ? [2]

But, they will say, you disturb the order of Providence. [3] God has united your soul with your body, and you separate them ; you therefore are opposing his designs, and resisting him.

What does that mean ? Am I disturbing the order of Providence when I change the modifications of matter, and make a square of a ball which the first laws of movement, which is to say the laws of creation and conservation, had made round ? Doubtless not : I merely make use of a right that has been given me, and in that sense I may trouble all of nature all I wish without anyone being able to say that I am opposing Providence.

When my soul is separated from my body, will there be less order and less arrangement on earth ? Do you believe that that new combination is less perfect and less dependent on the general laws ; that the world has lost something thereby, and that the works of God are less grand, or rather less immense ?

Do you believe that when my body has become a stalk of grain, a worm, or grass, it is changed into a work of nature less worthy of her, and that my soul detached from everything terrestrial about it is become less sublime ?

All these ideas, my dear Ibben, have no other source than our arrogance ; we do not sense our pettiness, and despite all we want to be counted in creation, figure in it, and be an important object in it. We imagine that the disappearance of a being as perfect as us would degrade all of nature, and we do not conceive that one man more or less in the world - nay, all men together, a hundred million earths like ours, [4] are but a subtle, inchoate atom that God perceives only because of the immensity of his knowledge. [5]

Letter 74

Paris this 15th day of the moon of Saphar 1715

[Supplementary Letter III of the 1758 edition would be placed here](#)

[1] Usbek's argument rests on a sort of social or conventional contract and in so doing employs certain of the same terms used by opponents of the right to suicide. Suicide raises radically the question of solidarity but also that of human freedom, not to mention civic duty : it is a subject to which many of the century's thinkers, notably Rousseau, would return.

[2] St. Paul had written, addressing men of the law, that "the law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth" (Romans 7:1).

[3] The argument is explained in the *Encyclopédie* : "Man, by destroying himself, takes from the world a work that was meant for the manifestation of divine perfections" (article "Suicide", vol. XV, p. 639.)

[4] Echo of Fontenelle's *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* ('Conversations on the plurality of worlds', 1686). In truth it does not quite speak of "millions" ("I see thousands of them from here", says the marquise), but that possibility is nevertheless suggested in the title of the fifth evening : "That the fixed stars are so many suns, each of which illuminates a world".

[5] The letter ends on a Pascalian note, the dialectic of the infinitely large and infinitely small.