



## UNIVERSALITAS & PERVASIVITAS

*il costituirsi e diffondersi della S.J. e suoi echi (1540 - 1773)*  
di A. Pisani

Schede autori Sotto attacco

### Jean Le Rond d'Alembert

The French mathematician and encyclopedist Jean Le Rond d'Alembert was the illegitimate son of Madame de Tencin and the artillery general Destouches-Canon. He was abandoned by his mother on the steps of the baptistry of Saint-Jean-Le-Rond in Paris, from which he received his name. Shortly afterward his father returned from the provinces, claimed the child, and placed him with Madame Rousseau, a glazier's wife, with whom d'Alembert remained until a severe illness in 1765 forced him to seek new quarters. Through the Destouches family, Jean Le Rond was placed in the exclusive **Jansenist** Collège de Mazarin and given the name of d'Arembert, which he later changed to d'Alembert, no doubt for phonetic reasons. At the college an effort was made to win him over to the Jansenist cause, and he went so far as to write a commentary on St. Paul. The intense Jesuit-Jansenist controversy served only to disgust him with both sides, however, and he left the college with the degree of bachelor of arts and a profound distrust of, and aversion to, metaphysical disputes.



During the early 1750s d'Alembert engaged actively in the polemics of the time, particularly in the defense of the *Encyclopédie* and the party it represented. Many of the articles he wrote for that publication, as well as his preface to Volume III (1753), were aimed at the enemies of the *Encyclopédie*, notably the Jesuits, who were among the first to attack it for its antireligious and republican orientation. In addition, he took part in the controversy over French versus Italian music, which was inflamed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's attack on French music in *Lettre sur la musique française* (1753). D'Alembert had already published his *Éléments de musique* (1752), based on Jean-Philippe Rameau's theories on harmonics, and in 1754 he published anonymously his *Réflexions sur la musique en général et la musique française en particulier*.

D'Alembert's chief preoccupation at this period, however, was with philosophy and literature. His *Mélanges de littérature et de philosophie* appeared in 1753 in two volumes (expanded to four volumes in 1759, with a fifth volume added in 1767), and it is here that his skepticism concerning metaphysical problems is delineated. Proceeding on the premise that certainty in this field cannot be reached through reason alone, he considered the arguments for and against the existence of God and cautiously concluded in the affirmative, on the grounds that intelligence cannot be the product of brute matter. Like Newton, d'Alembert viewed the universe as a clock, which necessarily implies a clockmaker, but his final attitude is that expressed by Montaigne's "Que sais-je?" Humankind's uncertainty before this enigmatic universe is the basis of d'Alembert's plea for religious tolerance. He maintained his skeptical deism as an official, public position throughout his life, but there is evidence for believing that in the late 1760s, under the influence of Diderot (whose *Rêve de d'Alembert* appeared in 1769), d'Alembert was converted to Diderot's materialism. In private correspondence with intimate friends, d'Alembert revealed his commitment to an atheistic interpretation of the universe. He accepted intelligence as simply the result of a complex



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development of matter and not as evidence for a divine intelligence.

Aside from the publication of a polemical brochure, *Histoire de la destruction des Jésuites*, in 1765 (with two additional *Lettres* on the subject in 1767), d'Alembert spent the last two decades of his life in furthering the cause of the philosophes in the Académie Française by writing his *Éloges*, which were read in the Académie (and published in 1779), and by fostering the election of candidates of his own choice. Mademoiselle de Lespinasse's salon, where d'Alembert presided, became, in the words of Frédéric Masson, the "obligatory antechamber of the Académie." In this period he became influential with young aspiring men of letters, whom he recruited for his party and whose careers he fostered. The most notable of his disciples was the Marquis de Condorcet. After years of ill health, d'Alembert died of a bladder ailment and was buried as an unbeliever in a common, unmarked grave.

**Cfr.:** Alembert, Jean Le Rond D' (1717–1783) from *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Copyright © 2001-2006 by Macmillan Reference USA, an imprint of the Gale Group. All rights reserved.

<http://www.bookrags.com/research/alembert-jean-le-rond-d-17171783-eoph/>

**Vedi anche:** [profilo biografico di Jean Le Rond d'Alembert nel sito dell'Enciclopedia Treccani.](#)