



**Etienne-Gabriel Morelly**, was a somewhat obscure writer from Vitry-le-François France. He published from 1743 to 1755 on many subjects and became famous for attacking private property.

**Background:**

The mysterious “Mr. Morelly” is the author of several pedagogical and political treatises, but is most famous for his two utopian works, the *Basiliade* (1753) and the *Code de la nature* (1755). It is plausible that “Mr. Morelly” is “Étienne-Gabriel Morelly,” presumably born in Paris, whose family lived in Vitry-le-François in 1721. By 1743 Morelly seems to have returned to Paris. Despite extensive biographical investigations, his works remain the major source of information about his identity and ideas.

Morelly is often identified as an obscure tutor about which almost nothing is known except that he lived in a small town in northwestern France, Vitry-le-François. Recent research, however, points to the possibility that Morelly never actually existed but was, rather, a pseudonym. No records of his birth or death exist and no record exists of anyone mentioning that they had met such a man in the eighteenth century. Some have proposed that [François-Vincent Toussaint](#) was the true author of the works attributed to Morelly while others believe that [Denis Diderot](#) was the true author. .

**Written Work:**

Two pedagogical works, *Essai sur l’esprit humain* and *Essai sur le coeur humain*, appear in 1743 and 1745 respectfully. These works, which outline the stages of learning and personality development from sensory perception, through memory or judgment, to practical experience in the world, reveal Morelly’s optimistic view of human nature. Equally, they reveal the influence of sensualist ideas upon Morelly. Another minor work, *Le Prince les délices des coeurs* (1751), is composed

of a dialogue between a fictional prince, his courtiers and his confidant. Although still portraying human nature as essentially positive, the political thought in the dialogue and the depiction of the ideal monarch is heavily influenced by Machiavelli. Morelly's later work, *Lettres de Louis XIV* (1755) implies a criticism of Louis XV, using a collection of fictional correspondence to uphold and idealize Louis XIV's statesmanship.

Morelly's two utopian works, the *Naufrage des îles flottantes, ou Basiliade du célèbre Pilpai* (1753) and the *Code de la nature, ou le véritable esprit de ses lois, de tout temps négligé ou méconnu* (1755) display the optimism apparent in his previous works. The *Basiliade* is an "heroic" or epic prose poem influenced by the Enlightenment fascination with the Orient and the New World. It depicts a golden-age, pastoral society founded upon and governed by the love of its inhabitants for each other. Morelly contrasts the natural harmony of the utopian society with an allegorical representation (and condemnation) of the European nations. Morelly's *Code*, at first attributed to [Diderot, Denis](#), was written, in part, as a defense of some of the ideas presented in the *Basiliade*. An analytical treatise with utopian elements, it codifies Morelly's view of the natural basis of social and communal ties, including the sharing of property.

The *Code* reflects Morelly's more realistic approach to society; it includes a legislative program to return the State to government according to the natural solidarity and affection of humanity.

Both of Morelly's major works were published in several editions in the eighteenth-century. The *Basiliade* was translated into English in 1761, and the two utopian treatises were discussed by German and Swiss Enlightenment thinkers, including Zimmermann, Wieland, [Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim](#), [Bodmer, Johann Jakob](#) and [Baumgarten, Alexander Gottlieb](#). Although they enjoyed a moderate popularity in the mid eighteenth-century, the two works were later embraced by communist and socialist theorists. In 1789, a simplified version of Morelly's ideas was adapted by [Babeuf, François Noël "Gracchus"](#), who used natural law as the basis for the community of goods and work in his revolutionary utopianism. From the mid nineteenth-century onwards, Morelly was classified as one of the canonical writers in the European utopian tradition.

Morelly's utopian *The Code of Nature* (*Code de la nature*, 1755). Considered to be an early example of utopian socialist thought, its inspiration is often drawn from religious ideas, and has much in common with [Rousseau's](#) early works. Based on the principle that man is by nature not wicked but well disposed to his fellows, it argues for an egalitarian society with common ownership of property, and culminates in a detailed plan for the establishment of the perfect state. Morelly also wrote a Utopian prose epic, *Nauffrage des îles flottantes ou la Basiliade* (1753).

According to *The Code of Nature*, "...where no property exists, none of its pernicious consequences could exist..." As he believed that almost all social and moral ills were a consequence of private property, it is not surprising that his proposed constitution eliminates most private property. Because of this latter characteristic of his utopia, Morelly is often seen as a significant forerunner of later [socialist](#) and [communist](#) thinkers. [Charles Fourier](#), [Pierre-Joseph Proudhon](#), [Louis Blanc](#), [Friedrich Engels](#), and [Karl Marx](#) all discussed Morelly's ideas in their own writing.

### **Morelly's Philosophical Position**

As did the later writer Proudhon, Morelly did not call for the elimination of *all* private property. Among the "sacred and fundamental laws" he proposed was "Nothing in society will belong to anyone, either as a personal possession or as capital goods, except the things for which the person has immediate use, for either his needs, his pleasures, or his daily work." He was opposed, however, to the ownership of property beyond what an individual needed and, especially, to private property used to employ others.

How, then, would workers gain access to tools and equipment beyond personal possession if their job required it? According to Morelly, "...all these durable products will be gathered together in public stores in order to be distributed to all the citizens, daily or at some other specified interval ..."

He also proposed banning of trade between individuals: "In accordance with the sacred laws, nothing will be sold or exchanged between citizens. Someone who needs, for example greens, vegetables or fruits, will go to the public square, which is where these items will have been brought by the man who cultivate them, and take what he needs for one day only."

***Further reading:***

D. Droixhe, “ ‘Voici un livre qu’on dit imprimé à Liège’: Le *Code de la nature* de **Morelly**,” *Revue d’histoire littéraire de la France* 96 (1996): 943-65.