

# The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the  
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Editor: DR. PAUL CARUS,  
Assistant Editor: T. J. McCORMACK.

Associates: { E. C. HEGELER.  
MARY CARUS.

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VOL. XIII. (NO. 2)

FEBRUARY, 1899.

NO. 513

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VOLTAIRE.

(1694-1778.)

From an engraving in the possession of Jean Baptiste de Poilley.

*Frontispiece to the Open Court for February, 1899.*

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## VOLTAIRE.

(1694-1778.)

BY PROF. L. LÉVY-BRUHL.

WE must not turn to Voltaire for an original conception of the universe that connects the whole of reality with a first principle, or for a constant concern for the metaphysical problems upon which both science and action depend. It is a well-known fact that Voltaire was not akin to such men as Plato, Descartes, and Spinoza. These lived only to seek disinterestedly after truth. If they influenced the world it was from afar, and through a slow diffusion of their principles—a result all the deeper and more durable coming as it did from a greater height. Voltaire wished for immediate effects. He was not above the world: he was, on the contrary, what the Germans call a *Weltkind*. He loved wealth, success, honors: he was eager for literary fame. He lived in the midst of controversy, and was never weary of it. He was full of craft and cunning, and curious regarding the most trifling as well as the most important objects.

In spite of all, his contemporaries, and the greatest among them, Kant for instance, did not think they ought to deny Voltaire the name of philosopher. Let us not be more exacting than they. Let us acknowledge, as they did, that the philosophy of Voltaire, though not strictly reduced to a system, is nevertheless diffused through his work, and is the very soul of it. It is expressed in his novels, in his historical works, and even in his tragedies, as well as in his essays and in the philosophical dictionary. It is indeed characterised rather by wide range than by depth. Voltaire was addressing the public at large. He preaches and rails indefatigably: his satires are sermons, and his sermons, satires. He makes use, in a thousand different shapes, of the process familiar to all great

journalists, of whom he was the first: namely, repetition. He is thus led to an extreme simplification of his philosophy, and reduces it to a small number of propositions, which require no effort to be understood. But, just as we make an effort in order to grasp clearly the meaning of some abstruse metaphysician, in spite of his obscurity, so should we endeavor to bring out Voltaire's philosophical thought, in spite of the excessive zeal for clearness by which it is often distorted.

Is this philosophy, as has been said, an engine of war against the Church and the Roman Catholic dogmas? No doubt it is that, but not that alone. It aims not only to destroy, but also to build up. As Voltaire was much better fit for the former task than for the latter, he was infinitely more successful in it. But this is no reason either for suspecting his sincerity when he seeks to be constructive, or for dismissing without a word an effort, the trace of which has not yet disappeared. Voltaire's religious philosophy, for instance, is even in our days that of many people who do not acknowledge or sometimes even suspect that it is so.

The philosophy of Voltaire varied, but less than might have been expected in the course of so long a life from such a mobile nature as his, so keenly alive to every new impulsion of the spirit of the age. Thus, in his *Traité de Métaphysique* (1734) he admits free-will, and later on, in the *Philosophe Ignorant* (1766) he confesses that Collins had converted him to determinism. He changed his opinion also on the question of the eternity of the world. His semi-pessimism became more bitter as he grew older. But on the main points of his doctrine, on God, the soul, morals, the essential principle of religion, Voltaire was always consistent with himself. He saw most of the Encyclopædists follow after Diderot and go even much farther; in spite of their urgent entreaties, and at the risk of seeming a conservative and almost a reactionist, he refused to swerve from his theories. In a man so careful of his popularity as Voltaire was, this is a sure proof of his attachment to a body, if not a system, of philosophical ideas.

Introduced when still a mere youth to the society of the *Temple*, Voltaire was initiated into the philosophy of the "libertines," and was thus in direct connexion with the anti-religious movement in the seventeenth century. He was well acquainted with Fontenelle and Bayle, not quite so well with Malebranche, and but slightly with Descartes, though he often mentions him. He seems to see in Descartes only the author of the hypothesis of vortices and plenum: one wonders whether he ever read the *Discours de la Méthode* and



the *Méditations*. He certainly did not enter deeply into them. It was in England that Voltaire became fond of philosophy. Locke and Newton were his masters in the art of thinking. On his return to France, full of what he had learned, he undertook the introduction of Newton's physics and Locke's empiricism. The zeal and talent of such a disciple contributed in no small degree to make them known and admired. It is true he did not present to his readers the entire works of either Locke or Newton; he rather "adapted" them, according to his own taste and to the supposed taste of the public. The success was considerable, and one cannot tell whether the *Lettres Anglaises* did more for the European fame of Locke and Newton, or for the reputation of him who expounded their doctrines so skilfully.

After having contributed, more than any other man, to spread in France the discoveries of Newton, Voltaire ceased to concern himself with astronomy and physics. But he never ceased to seek in Newton's physics a help for his demonstration of the existence of God.

In Voltaire's philosophy, the ontological proof has disappeared, since he does not admit innate ideas. There remain therefore the cosmological proof and the proof by means of final causes. For the former, it is precisely Newton's physics on which he relies for support. Newton in fact says: "There is a Being who has necessarily been self-existent from all eternity, and who is the origin of all other beings. This Being is infinite in duration, immensity, and power: for what can limit him?" But may not the material world be that very Being? You might suppose so, answers Voltaire, should you, as the Cartesians do, admit the plenum, and the infinity and eternity of the world. Nothing is so easy as to pass from this to materialism, that is, to a doctrine which makes matter the eternal substance, and knows no other God. (Thus, to Voltaire, the words materialist and atheist are almost always synonymous.) But the Newtonians, from the very fact of their admitting a vacuum, admit that matter has had a beginning, that motion needs a first cause, in short, a creating God. Still, when Voltaire later on came to think that the universe must be eternal as the very thought of God who caused it to exist, this argument lost some of its force, or at least ought to have been restated in a different form. If Voltaire did not think of it, it was probably because he was fully satisfied with another proof, concerning which he never changed his mind: i. e., the proof based on final causes.

No doubt he was the first to laugh at the abuse made of the

consideration of finality. "Noses were made to wear spectacles ; therefore we have spectacles. Legs were obviously instituted that they might be clad, and so we have knee-breeches ; stones, that they might be cut ; swine, that they might be eaten, and so on." But never did Voltaire find anything ridiculous in the thought that the whole of nature bears witness to Him who created it. "When I observe the order, the prodigious contrivances, the mechanical and geometrical laws which reign over the universe, the innumerable means and ends of all things, I am overcome with admiration and awe. Nothing can shake my faith in this axiom : 'Every piece of work implies a workman.'" This workman we have already met with : it is Fontenelle's "watchmaker." Voltaire uses almost exactly the same expressions as Fontenelle : "When we behold a fine machine, we say that there is a good machinist, and that he has an excellent understanding. The world is assuredly an admirable machine ; therefore there is in the world an admirable intelligence, wherever it may be. This argument is old, and is none the worse for it."

Voltaire thinks to give this argument a deeper basis by adding that "nature is art," which means that there is, properly speaking, no nature, since all existing things are the work of some great unknown Being who is both very powerful and very industrious. He thus carries to its utmost limits the clear notion of finality, which is borrowed directly from the analogy between the order in the universe and the productions of human art. But of what value is this analogy? German philosophy, on the contrary, likes to show that the idea of finality is an obscure one, because the way in which nature engenders and animates beings resembles in no wise the industry of man. Man makes use of materials and springs, and puts together pieces of various origins : he works from the outside, whereas nature works from the inside. Instead of explaining nature by means of art, we ought rather to interpret art by nature : for, if we do not understand the organising and restoring power of nature, neither can we explain the creating genius of the poet or the artist ; the finality of nature is not clear, as Voltaire thought it to be : it is mysterious. We cannot help supposing it to exist, says Kant ; but no more can we understand What it is.

Voltaire was not aware of these difficulties. His proof seemed to him flawless, and he steadily maintained to the last the existence of God, even against his friends. This is not only because God is needed for social ethics. From a purely theoretical point of view, when Voltaire weighs the reasons for or against atheism and the-

ism, he thinks the latter preferable to the former. "In the opinion that there is a God we meet with difficulties, but in the contrary opinion, there are absurdities." For instance, to come back to Newton, who plays so large a part in Voltaire's natural theology, the atheist, as we have said, is a materialist: he acknowledges the existence of infinite matter, of a plenum; he therefore stands in contradiction with Newton. Now Newton certainly has spoken the truth: atheism is therefore untenable. Voltaire's reasoning is perhaps over-simplified, on account of his constant endeavor to be clearly understood even by the most careless reader. But the leading idea is an interesting one: to give up such of our metaphysical ideas as are incompatible with well-grounded scientific truths. This is precisely what we do in the present century.

The idea of humanity is the basis of Voltaire's philosophy of history. As early as 1737, in his *Conseils à un Journaliste*, he expressed the wish that a universal history should really correspond to its title, and that in it the whole of mankind should be studied. It would be desirable for Orientalists to give us outlines of the Eastern books. The public would not then be so totally ignorant of the history of the larger part of the globe; the pompous name of universal history would not be bestowed upon a few collections of Egyptian fables, of the revolutions of a country called Greece, not larger than Champagne, and of those of the Roman nation which, vast and victorious as it was, never ruled over so many states as the people of Mahomet, and never conquered one-tenth of the world. Later on, in the preface to his *Essai sur les Mœurs*, he openly criticises Bossuet. Hê reproaches him with forgetting the universe in universal history, with mentioning only three or four nations, which have now disappeared from the earth, with sacrificing these three or four powerful nations to the insignificant Jewish people, which occupies three-fourths of the work, and lastly, with passing over Islam, India, and China without a word. Voltaire wished to secularise universal history, hitherto subordinate to theological dogma.

But his own conception of universal history remains practically incomplete, since what he knows of the history of the New World is next to nothing. And above all, he lacks a central principle that would enable him to understand this universal history in its unity. He can but repeat that "man has always been what he is." He implicitly believes in this uniformity of the species, which prevents him from understanding the little he knows of remote antiquity. Some of the religious rites of the Babylonians are offensive to our idea of morality. Voltaire does not hesitate to assume that

historians lied in relating them. The men that he sees everywhere are perfectly similar to those around him, though disguised, some as Greeks or Romans, others as Chinese, Persians, Turks, or Hindoos. He sees everywhere the public credulous and deluded, and the world going on its usual way, at once tragic and ludicrous. His romances are the exact counterpart of the *Essai sur les Mœurs. Candide, Zadig la Princesse de Babylone*, complete the idea of humanity given in Voltaire's historical works. He does not derive his knowledge of mankind from history: on the contrary, he transfers to history the humanity that he already knows, from observations of his contemporaries.

He does not however deny progress; but he has a most peculiar notion of it. The idea of slow and gradual evolution, of successive stages that must needs be travelled in order to reach a certain point, does not appear in his works. Progress, with him, does not consist in a law of development. It began less than a century ago, with the awakening of natural philosophy, and above all, with the enfranchisement of reason. No doubt antiquity possessed great thinkers, but it was nevertheless a prey to superstition. "There is not a single ancient philosopher who now serves to instruct young people among enlightened nations." As for the Middle Ages he despatches them in short order. "Imagine the Samoyeds and the Ostiaks having read Aristotle and Avicenna: this is what we were." Ignorance, misery, and theology: the whole of the Middle Ages was in these three plagues, and Voltaire cannot tell which of the three is the worst. According to him, scholasticism, the wars of religion, the plagues, famines, and *autos-da-fe*, are all intimately related; and we are hardly yet rid of them. Witches had been condemned to the stake in Germany as late as the seventeenth century. There were still in France trials like that of Calas and La Barre. Therefore, when Voltaire speaks of the Middle Ages, it is never in the tone of the historian: passion always intervenes. He is little acquainted with this period, but what he knows of it is sufficient to make him loathe and despise it. Nor does he study it, being persuaded beforehand that such study would only confirm him in his feeling.

Is it surprising that Voltaire, being thus disposed, misapprehended the art of the Middle Ages, and was unaware of the grandeur of the age of Saint Louis, and of the prosperity of France before the Hundred Years' War, etc.? We must however also acknowledge, it seems, that his prejudice did not prevent him from giving a picture, which is often accurate, of the general history of

Europe since Charlemagne. And though the *Essai sur les Mœurs* may not be adequate to the idea of a philosophy of history, the very conception of the work was an original one, and many of the views expressed in it by Voltaire were fruitful for the historians who came after him.

This is not the proper place to speak of Voltaire as an economist, a criminalist and commentator of Beccaria, a writer on the theory of taste, and lastly, as the author of the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*, applying to the most varied subjects his eager curiosity. Though it is difficult to draw the line between his philosophy, properly so called, and the rest of his works, we must here content ourselves with stating his philosophical ideas, in so far as they may be grouped into a system. Now, from all that we have said it appears that his principle is empiricism tempered by the idea of universality. Voltaire thinks, as Locke does, that nothing is given us beyond and independent of experience. But at the same time he is, perhaps unconsciously, faithful to the Cartesian tradition, and maintains that nothing is theoretically true or practically just, unless it be universally accepted by reason. The union of these two elements is effected in the idea of *humanity*, which is both an empirical and a universal one. From this point of view, Voltaire's philosophy, in spite of its gaps and inconsistencies—which, by the bye, are less serious than they are often said to be—offers a real unity. Science, morals, history, religion, politics, are all subjected by him to a criticism, which is sometimes hasty and partial, but which proceeds from an unchanging principle: to oppose to the products of historical evolution, varying according to places and times, and often irrational and absurd, the standard of what is purely human and universally accepted by reason.

Thus, over against the positive religions, he sets up natural religion, which contains nothing but the human ideal of morality. The real name of Voltaire's God is: Justice. It is a noble name. We may venture to believe that the great German philosophers of the end of the eighteenth century, influenced, like everybody else, by Voltaire's prestige, retained something of his thought on this point. No doubt the influence of Rousseau told still more strongly upon them; no doubt they went more deeply into the ideas of experience, reason, justice, and truth, which Voltaire did not sufficiently analyse. But though he was too little of a philosopher to build a system as they did, he succeeded in spreading critical and humanitarian ideas all over Europe, and even in gaining for them a temporary ascendancy.