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H612 – Rule

Voltaire in England

The three years (1726-29) which Voltaire spent in England resulted in one of the most influential books of the Enlightenment: the *Lettres philosophiques*, published in 1734. By favorably comparing English institutions and customs with French ones (though not always sparing the English from criticism), this series of 25 essays argued for many of the tenets that would become centerpieces of the Enlightenment, such as religious toleration, the efficacy of reason, and the importance of science and the scientific method.

Voltaire's early years set the stage for his later emergence as a dissatisfied critic of convention and artifice. Born François-Marie Arouet, he believed himself to be the illegitimate son of an officer named Rochebrune. His mother died when he was seven, and he had no love for his father and brother. Like Descartes, Arouet received a Jesuit education, and, again like Descartes, Arouet went on to show the error of the Jesuitical claim to be able to fulfill Proverbs 22:6 ("Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.") in their schools.

As a young man, Arouet was drawn toward the free-thinkers. His godfather, the Abbé de Châteauneuf, was a freethinker and epicurean, and, after college and a short stay at the French embassy in The Hague, Arouet spent a great deal of time at the Temple, the center of free thought in Paris. Arouet's penchant for witty epigrams made him the toast of Parisian society, but it also got him the unwanted notice of the Duc d'Orléans, who had the sharp-tongued 23-year-old thrown in the Bastille for a year in 1717. The

following year, after the success of his tragedy *Oedipe*, Arouet took the name “Voltaire”.

Voltaire’s second trip to the Bastille was the catalyst for his voyage to England, a nation which already interested him because of his association with Viscount Bolingbroke. In 1726, he quarrelled with the Chevalier de Rohan, who, not deigning to deal with Voltaire himself, sent some thugs to beat him and take him to prison. Somehow, Voltaire then made his way to Calais, and from there to England.

While in England, Voltaire met and corresponded with the cream of English society, from Swift to Congreve to Walpole. He gained his life-long proficiency in the language and a grudging respect for the plays of Shakespeare. He saw a perfect symbol of the divide between French and English society: the glorious state funeral given to Isaac Newton, a man who, by French standards, was only a scientist. And he gathered the impressions that he later set down in his *Lettres philosophiques*.

Voltaire’s life up to age 35 has many of the elements that might lead someone to feel alienated from and critical of the society around him: illegitimate birth, emotional distance from family, run-ins with social superiors (and associated prison terms), and experience in a different, preferred society. By the time he had reached middle age, Voltaire had both developed an intellectual critique of French society and experienced an impressive alternative that could be used as a model to reform it.

In his rationalist criticism of French society, Voltaire was joined by a group of writers and scientists who called themselves “philosophes” (lovers of knowledge). Philosophes denied all appeals to authority, whether that authority be religious dogma or historical belief. In *Lettres philosophiques*,

Voltaire used irony to express his contempt for those who would appeal to authority in the face of all evidence:

“When [English clerics] hear that in France young men notorious for their debauches and appointed to bishoprics through the intrigues of women, make love in public, find fun in composing tender love-songs, give long an exquisite suppers every night, and then go straight to pray for the light of the Holy Ghost and brazenly call themselves the successors of the Apostles, they thank God they are Protestants. But, of course, they are wicked heretics fit to be burned with all the devils, as Master François Rabelais says, and that is why I don’t get mixed up in their affairs.” – Letter 5, On the Anglican Religion

Rather than authority, philosophes appealed to science and rational argument to determine truth. Because these two bases are both by their nature progressive – each is structured so that new truths build on old truths (a process that takes place even when part of the old truth is disproved) – philosophes were confident that a system built on these bases would itself be ever-progressing.

This concept of a scientific, rational system for humanity was transferred from philosophy to religion by proponents of Deism, who asserted that God created a “clockwork” universe which He set in motion at the beginning of time and did not interfere with afterwards. Therefore, Deists rejected the possibility of revelation, because this would be holy interference, and believed that men had to use reason and reason alone to know whatever they needed about the truths of the universe.

Voltaire himself is probably the best person to explain Deism:

“The theist [Deist] does not know how god punishes, how he encourages, how he forgives, for he is not rash enough to flatter himself that he knows how god acts, but he knows that god does act and that he is just.” – ¶ 2 of Voltaire’s definition of a “Théiste”, from the class handout

“[The soul] is a clock that has been given us to keep right, but the maker has not told us what the spring of this clock is made of.” – Letter 13, On Mr. Locke

The optimism of the philosophe and the rationalism of the Deist – the “smile of reason” – contrasted boldly with the resignation and belief in human preordination of Calvinism – the frown of damnation. Voltaire chose to take issue with Blaise Pascal, who was a Jansenist (a Calvin-influenced sect within Catholicism) as well as one of the most brilliant French writers of the era of Louis XIV. Voltaire admitted Pascal’s brilliance while savaging the stupidity of his religious ideas as expressed in his *Pensées*; he explains this apparent discrepancy of pointing out that the *Pensées* were unfinished notes of Pascal, and that had Pascal lived to finish them, he would have corrected them.

One of Voltaire’s major objections to Pascal is that Pascal frequently resorted to shoddy “arguments” to prove what Voltaire considers obvious and self-evident: the truth of Christianity.

“The Christian religion will remain no less true even if these ingenious conclusions were not drawn from it, which serve no purpose but to shine intellectually. Christianity only teaches simplicity, humanity and charity. To attempt to reduce it to metaphysics is to turn it into a fount of errors.” – §1

“The Christian religion is so true that it has no need of dubious proofs.” – §15

The most famous “argument” is Pascal’s Wager (which Voltaire discusses in §5), but several of these arguments are dissected (specifically §15, 17, 18)

Perhaps this impatience with Pascal’s “arguments” holds the key to why Voltaire “recoiled in horror” from the *Pensées*. Voltaire spent most of

his life and much of his fortune combating religious intolerance and persecution. One response to Pascal's speciousness seems to indicate where Voltaire finds the source of this intolerance and persecution:

"This article is more a piece of satire than a Christian reflection. It is clearly the Jesuits who are the target here. But in reality has any Jesuit ever said that Jesus Christ *came to exempt us from loving God?* The dispute about the love of God is a pure dispute of words, like most other scientific quarrels which have given rise to such bitter hatreds and horrible miseries." – §14

Voltaire certainly found little of worth in Pascal's frequent descriptions of "the blindness and wretchedness of man" (§6). "On the contrary," Voltaire writes:

"all men are made, like the animals and plants, to grow, live a certain time, reproduce and die. . .only a moment's thought will make you admit that of all the animals man is the most perfect, the happiest, and the longest lived. So that instead of being astonished and self-pitying about the unhappiness and the brevity of life, we should be astonished and thankful for our happiness and its duration." – §28.

Tied in with this objection against what Voltaire saw as the denigration of man is Voltaire's disagreement with Pascal over the nature of man. Pascal considered us all "born unjust, for each of us is out for himself. That is against all order." In the spirit of Deism, Voltaire replied:

"That is perfectly in order. . .It is love of self that encourages love of others, it is through our mutual needs that we are useful to the human race. . .It is quite true that God might have created beings solely concerned with the good of others. . .But God has ordained things differently. Let us not condemn the instinct He has given us, and let us put it to the use He commands." – §11

Voltaire's response is Deist reasoning at work: God has made a perfect creation that He does not need to interfere with, so the correct thing for men to do is not to fight against or demean our God-given instincts, but to figure out how those instincts were meant to aid our well-being.

(Voltaire also defended the new reasoning in §48: "Our reasoning boils down to giving in to our emotions in matters of taste, not in matters of science.")

Some of Voltaire's responses to Pascal are unconvincing because Voltaire either will attack a phrase of Pascal's that has been removed from any informative context or will misunderstand what Pascal wrote and then attack the misunderstanding.

A good example of the former is §16, for self-evident reasons.

A good example of the latter is §23, where Pascal clearly states that man despairs during those moments when he sees nothing but himself. Voltaire then asks what good a man who only sees himself is, as if Pascal meant that this self-absorption were a permanent condition. Voltaire won the joke, but lost the point.

The 24 *Lettres* that precede the critique of Pascal were meant by Voltaire to describe what he saw as the relevant features of English society, government, and thought. A quick numbering of chapters can provide a rough guide of Voltaire's ideas about what was relevant: seven of the 24 letters concern religion, another seven concern science and scientists, six concern literature and the arts, two concern government, and one apiece was written about commerce and the academies.

Voltaire greatly admired the relative tolerance England had for dissident religious groups, such as the Quakers and the Unitarians. Voltaire's observation on the effects of this tolerance is oft-quoted:

“If there were only one religion in England there would be danger of despotism, if there were two they would cut each other’s throats, but there are thirty, and they live in peace and happiness.” – Letter 6, On the Presbyterians

In the Quakers, Voltaire saw an instructive contrast to the rigid rules of both French society and of Catholicism:

“He kept his hat on while receiving me and moved towards me without even the slightest bow, but there was more politeness in the frank, kindly expression on his face than there is in the custom of placing one leg behind the other and holding in one’s hand what is meant for covering one’s head.” – Letter 1, On the Quakers

“I began to question my [Quaker] friend. I started with the question that good Catholics have more than once asked Huguenots: ‘My dear Sir, have you been baptized?’ ‘No,’ answered the Quaker ‘and neither have my fellow Friends.’ ‘What? Good God!’ I went on, ‘so you are not Christians?’ ‘My son,’ he gently expostulated, ‘do not swear. We are Christians and try to be good Christians, but we do not think Christianity consists in throwing cold water on somebody’s head, with a pinch of salt.’ “ – Letter 1, On the Quakers

Voltaire also approved of where the English placed the source of authority of their state religion:

“[The Whigs] prefer Bishops to derive their authority from Parliament rather than from the Apostles. Lord B----- says that this idea of divine right would only serve to make tyrants in capes and rochets, but that law makes citizens.” – Letter 5, On the Anglican Religion

But the great English contribution to the Enlightenment came not in religion, but in science. Voltaire praises Francis Bacon’s contribution to the

scientific method and John Locke's contribution to philosophy, but he saved his greatest praise for Isaac Newton:

"If true greatness consists in having received from heaven a powerful genius and in having used it to enlighten himself and others, a man such as Newton, the like of whom is scarcely to be found in ten centuries, is the truly great man." – Letter 12, On Chancellor Bacon

"A Frenchman arriving in London finds things very different, in natural science as in everything else. He has left the world full, he finds it empty. . .the very essence of things has totally changed." – Letter 14, On Descartes and Newton

"Examining the extreme porosity of bodies, each part having its pores and each part of these parts having its own, he shows that there is no certainty that there exists a single cubic inch of solid matter in the universe, so remote is our intelligence from conceiving what matter is!" – Letter 16, On the Optics of Newton

Bacon and Locke both made great contributions, but Newton changed the world, and Voltaire accordingly wrote four chapters (not to mention an entire book in 1738) to his accomplishments alone.

And not only did Newton change the world, but the English honored him with accolades appropriate to his stature: Newton was a scientist, not a noble or royal, but when he died he received a state funeral at Westminster Abbey, "buried like a king who had done well by his subjects."

Bacon is credited with not merely with foreseeing some of the scientific inventions that followed in the century after his death, but also with thinking out "the scaffolding by means of which modern scientific thought has been built."

Voltaire lauds Locke for being the first philosopher to examine epistemology empirically rather than speculatively; the first to use human reason rather than metaphysical rumination:

“So many thinkers having written the novel of the soul, a wise man has appeared who has modestly written its history. Locke has expounded human understanding to mankind as an excellent anatomist explains the mechanism of the human body. . .instead of defining at one fell swoop what we don’t know, he examines by degrees what we want to know. . .he consults especially his own experience, the consciousness of his own thought.” – Letter 13, On Mr. Locke

Perhaps the heaviest shots Voltaire fires against the French régime were launched in his observations of the English government, which were sprinkled throughout the book. Why did the Parlement of Paris have the *Lettres* burned?

Perhaps it was Voltaire’s views on equity in taxation:

“A man is by no means exempt from paying certain taxes here simply because he is noble or because he is a priest. . .everyone gives, not according to his rank (which is absurd) but according to his income. There is no arbitrary toll or capitation, but a real tax on landed property.” – Letter 9, On the Government

Or his commentary on honesty in government:

“[William Penn’s descendants] sold the government [of Pennsylvania] to the King for £12,000. The state of the King’s affairs only allowed him to hand over £1,000. A French reader will perhaps think that the Ministry paid the rest in promises and held permanently on to the government. Not at all; the Crown having failed to meet payment of the full sum by the stated time, the contract was declared null and void and the Penn family took back its rights.” – Letter 4, On the Quakers

One would guess that the Parlement wasn't pleased by Voltaire's opinion of French justice:

"You will hear nothing here about high, middle, or low justice, or of the right to hunt over the land of a citizen who has no right to fire a shot in his own field." – Letter 9, On the Government

And when a man has paid 70,000 livres to become Assistant Steward of the Royal Chamberpot, shouldn't he get the right to be able to suppress this?

"In France anyone is a Marquis who wants to be, and whoever arrives in Paris with money to spend and a name ending in *-ac* or *-ille* can say: 'a man like me, a man of my standing', and loftily despise the business man, and the business man so often hears people speak disparagingly of his profession that he is foolish enough to blush. Yet I wonder which is the more useful to a nation, a well-powdered nobleman who knows exactly at what minute the King gets up and goes to bed, and who gives himself grand airs while playing the part of a slave in some Minister's antechamber, or a business man who enriches his country, issues orders from his office to Surat or Cairo, and contributes to the well-being of the world. – Letter 10, On Commerce

These are all good choices, but my personal vote for what got the torches lit goes to Voltaire's observation about English singularity:

"The English nation is the only one on earth which has succeeded in controlling the power of kings by resisting them. . ." – Letter 8, On Parliament

Voltaire was already a potent voice against the tyrannical forces within French society before his English exile; three years of exposure to a country where the currents of the Enlightenment flowed more freely made him an even more formidable opponent of injustice.