
The Legacy of Voltaire

Part I

This is the first part of the article on Voltaire in the two-volume Encyclopedia of Unbelief, which will be published later this year by Prometheus Books. It is printed here with the permission of the author and of Dr. Gordon Stein, the editor-in-chief of the Encyclopedia of Unbelief. In addition to writing the article on Voltaire and contributing several other articles, Professor Edwards has also written the Preface to the Encyclopedia of Unbelief.

Paul Edwards

Voltaire (1694-1778) was born Francois-Marie Arouet in Paris to a prosperous notary. He was sent to the Jesuit school of Louis le Grand, where he received an excellent classical education. He was extremely precocious, and at the age of twelve he wrote polished verses that delighted his teachers. To the chagrin of his family, he abandoned the study of law for literary pursuits, in which he was spectacularly successful almost from the start.

In 1718 his first tragedy, *Oedipe*, was performed with great success, and his plays dominated the French stage for the rest of the eighteenth century. His epic poem, *La Henriade*, which appeared in 1723, celebrated Henri IV, the last liberal French king. Although the poem was banned because of its undisguised hostility to Christianity, *La Henriade* had a vast circulation and was hailed by critics as the greatest epic in the French language. Voltaire's unorthodox opinions did not prevent his being a favorite at the court. The queen was said to have wept over his plays, and she gave him an allowance of 1,500 livres from her purse. This relatively serene period came to an end when a young nobleman, the Chevalier de Rohan, stung by some of Voltaire's derisive remarks, had him beaten up. Voltaire not only failed to obtain justice but, because of the influence of the well-connected Rohan family, ended up in the Bastille. The episode left an indelible impression on his mind and made him an unrelenting enemy of judicial arbitrariness and cruelty.

He was released from the Bastille only after promising to go to England, where he spent more than two years (1726-1729). He mastered the language and diligently studied the works of the English philosophers, scientists, and social reformers. On returning to France he wrote the *Lettres philosophiques*, which appeared first in London in 1733 in

English translation as *Letters Concerning the English Nation*, and a year later in Paris. This slim volume was aptly described by Voltaire's biographer, Gustave Lanson, as the first bomb hurled against the *ancien régime* and became the inspiration of liberal reformers throughout the European continent for the rest of the century. Voltaire was in England when an exceptionally liberal government was in power, and he therefore tended to exaggerate the prevailing degree of freedom and toleration. In the *Lettres*, he praised English institutions and, by implication, condemned conditions in France—the wealth, intolerance, and immense power of the church, the despotism of the king, and the privileges of the aristocracy. He recommended equal status for merchants and nobles, a fair distribution of taxes, and toleration for all religions. England, he wrote, is a land of sects and “an Englishman, like a free man, goes to heaven by whatever route he chooses.”

The *Lettres* also contain an exposition and defense of the empiricism of Locke and the methods and achievements of Newton, accompanied by satires of the theories of Aristotle and Descartes. The French edition contained an additional “letter” on Pascal, whose gloomy fideism is vigorously opposed. Pascal's notorious “wager,” as well as his appeal to the heart, were anathema to Voltaire, who thought that our opinions in all fields should be based on evidence. “The interest I have in believing a thing,” Voltaire wrote, “is not a proof of the existence of that thing.” As if to confirm his strictures, the authorities at once moved to suppress the *Lettres*. The publisher was sent to the Bastille, Voltaire had to flee from Paris, and the courts condemned the book to be “torn and burned in the Palace courtyard . . . by the common executioner, as being scandalous, contrary to religion, good morals, and the respect due to the ruling powers.”

Most of the fifteen years following the publication of the *Lettres* was spent by Voltaire in the company of his learned mistress, Madame du Châtelet, at Cirey in Lorraine. This was one of the most peaceful periods of his life. In 1734 he wrote the *Traité de métaphysique*, which is the most systematic and closely argued of his philosophical works. It was “written for” and dedicated to Mme. du Châtelet. It was also undoubtedly written for the world at large, but Voltaire made no effort to get it published during his lifetime. It finally appeared in Volume 40 of the first collected edition of Voltaire's works,

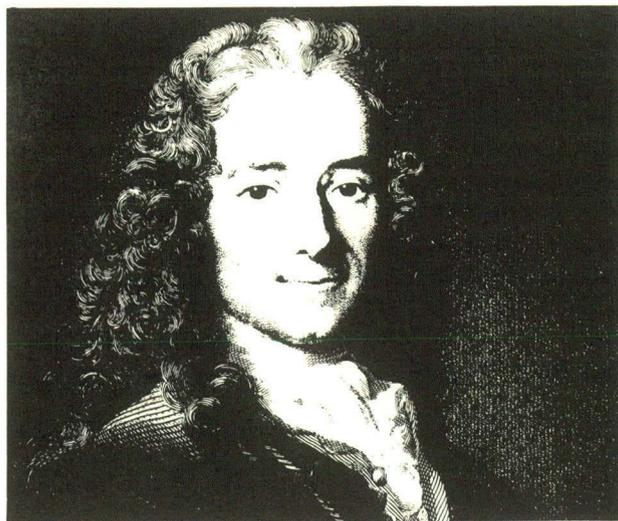
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prepared between 1785 and 1789. It seems that Voltaire wrote more candidly here about the touchiest questions, namely God and immortality, than in any of the books and pamphlets published while he was alive. He accepted the “design” argument but stated the case against belief in God much more forcefully than elsewhere, and he totally rejected any kind of belief in life after death. In 1738, he published *The Elements of the Newtonian Philosophy*, in which he demonstrated the superiority of Newton’s mechanics and cosmology to those of Descartes, whose views were still widely preferred by French scientists. The censorship in France was so severe that even this relatively harmless book had to be published in Holland, without mention of the author’s name.

During this period, Voltaire also composed numerous plays, the incomparable philosophical tales, of which *Zadig* and *Micromegas* are the most famous, and several huge histories. Because of their glittering style and streams of amusing anecdotes, these histories make delightful reading, even after more than two centuries, but the significance of Voltaire’s historical works transcends their literary merits. Explanations in terms of divine providence that fill the volumes of earlier historians, including Voltaire’s illustrious predecessor, Jacques Bossuet, are not allowed and, perhaps more important, history is treated as the story of peoples rather than of rulers and military leaders, with special emphasis on progress in the arts and sciences and their impact on society.

During this time Voltaire also achieved, for the only time in his life, official recognition from the French Court and the government. Through the influence of his friend, Mme. de Pompadour, he was appointed Royal Historiographer in 1745, and the next year, after a most disingenuous display of piety, he was elected to the French Academy. Mme. du Châtelet died in 1749, and in 1750 Voltaire accepted an invitation from Frederick the Great to become “philosopher-poet” in residence at Potsdam. Here he spent three disagreeable and largely unproductive years, ending in an entirely predictable quarrel with the king. Neither of the two behaved admirably, but the king showed much greater forbearance. Among other things Voltaire could not resist the temptation of ridiculing the king’s French poetry. He also engaged in financial dealings that bordered on criminality and were most unbecoming in a distinguished member of the Court. The break, when it came, was violent, but some years later all was forgiven, and the two resumed their amicable correspondence. In one of his letters, Frederick wrote with much justice: “Would that Heaven, which gave you so much wit, had given you judgment proportionately!”

Voltaire’s extensive and often unscrupulous financial speculations had made him enormously rich by this time and, after traveling for a year, he bought a chateau in Geneva that he named “Les Delices.” During his stay in Geneva, he published the first edition of his universal history, *Essai sur les mœurs* (1756), a multivolume work that introduced Western readers to the history of Arabic and Chinese civilizations. In Geneva he also wrote *Candide* (1759). On the front page it bore the inscription “Translated from the German of Dr. Ralph.” Voltaire vigorously denied authorship of *Candide*, but he was not displeased by the book’s enormous popularity.



Voltaire (1694-1778)

Courtesy of the Buffalo & Erie Co. Public Library

The Calvinists of Geneva were by no means pleased with Voltaire’s presence in their city. They objected to the theatrical performances at his chateau and they were particularly displeased by certain statements in the article “Genève,” written for Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* by D’Alembert at Voltaire’s suggestion. In 1759 he purchased a magnificent estate at Ferney, a few miles over the French border, where he lived unmolested by French, German, or Swiss authorities, until shortly before his death.

When Voltaire settled in Ferney he was sixty-six, immensely famous, and immensely rich. He was to live another eighteen years, and this final period became the most rewarding and productive of his life. He waged two campaigns that shook Europe like nothing since Luther’s break with the Church of Rome. The two campaigns were intertwined, but only the first was the result of deliberate planning.

It is not clear when Voltaire lost what little belief in Christianity he may ever have entertained. What is certain is that he opposed Christianity throughout his adult life and came to regard it as a major aberration of the human mind, as well as a terrible disaster for the human race. He believed Christianity had to be destroyed before one could achieve a rational and humane society. Christianity, he wrote to Frederick the Great, “is the most ridiculous, the most absurd, and bloody religion that has ever infected the world.” Voltaire did not openly write against Christianity until the 1760s. From then until his death he waged an unrelenting campaign against “the infamous thing,” as he called it. During the Ferney years, letters to his friends always concluded with the slogan “Ecrasez l’infâme,” and “l’infâme” was not, as some squeamish historians have alleged, fanaticism in general but the Christian religion.

The first of his major anti-Christian publications, *The Sermon of the Fifty*, was published in 1762, but it had been written several years earlier, possibly during Voltaire’s last years at Cirey. This pamphlet reads like a declaration of war on Christianity, and it is written in a deliberately inflammatory style. It attacks Christian mysteries like Transubstantiation as absurd; Christian miracles as incredible; the Bible as full of contradictions; the Jews, whose religion had led to Christianity,

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as an ignorant and mendacious people; and the God of Christianity as a cruel and hateful tyrant. The true God, the sermon concluded, “surely cannot have been born of a girl, nor died on the gibbet, nor be eaten in a piece of dough.” Nor could he have inspired “books, filled with contradictions, madness, and horror.” May the true God “have pity on the sect of Christians that blasphemes him!”

As another installment in the war against Christianity, Voltaire published in Holland, also in 1762, extracts from the *Testament of the Abbé Meslier*. According to Voltaire’s unsigned introduction, Meslier was a country priest who, while living an outward life of conformity, had composed a powerful defense of atheism, democracy, and revolution. Voltaire professed to deplore the “melancholy spectacle” of a priest, with a fine sense of justice and a highly developed intellect, condemning Christianity in such harsh tones. Meslier’s *Testament* became one of the great documents of the French Enlightenment, and its publication caused a tremendous stir. The fact that Voltaire did not share the more extreme of Meslier’s incendiary views did little to mollify his clerical enemies.

Unquestionably, the most powerful and also the most delightful of Voltaire’s missiles against Christianity was the *Philosophical Dictionary*, which is widely regarded as his true masterpiece. This melange of witty reflections on a vast variety of topics attempts to demolish the enemy by laughing him out of existence. Voltaire wrote the first articles in Potsdam as early as 1752. He kept jotting down ideas for a number of years, but he did not resume serious work on the *Philosophical Dictionary* until late in 1762. The first edition, then one small volume, appeared in Geneva in June 1764 with a false London imprint and without Voltaire’s name on the cover. As usual, Voltaire strenuously denied his authorship, but nobody took the denial seriously. The first edition sold out immediately. The Genevan government condemned the book to be burnt in September 1764; liberal Holland followed suit in December, and in Paris it was publicly burned in March 1765. In July of that year, it was put on the index by the Holy Office.

In spite of these condemnations, new and enlarged editions appeared year after year. In the final form given to it by Voltaire, the work was published in 1769 in two large volumes. It was reprinted in this form several times during the remaining years of Voltaire’s life. Even larger editions, incorporating material from other of Voltaire’s writings and some running to eight volumes, were brought out in later years. These later editions have been a nightmare for bibliographers, but they contain many glorious riches that might not otherwise have been available to readers of later generations. It goes without saying that the *Philosophical Dictionary* outraged Voltaire’s clerical enemies. Some started compiling “anti-philosophical” dictionaries that, as Voltaire would have put it, “regrettably” did not remotely rival the original work in popularity. From this time on, Voltaire came to be regarded by Catholic apolo-

gists as the Antichrist. Almost half a century later, Joseph de Maistre still proclaimed that hell had put “its entire power into the hands of Voltaire.” Voltaire did not at all mind being called the Antichrist. In fact, he often referred to himself as “Beelzebub’s theologian,” and he knew that the hatred he provoked proved the enormous effectiveness of his campaign.

– Voltaire’s second campaign was against judicial barbarism, and it led to the writing of two of his best and most constructive books, *Commentary on Beccaria’s “Of Crimes and Punishments”* (1766) and *Prix de la Justice et de l’humanité* (1777). This campaign, which did a great deal to prepare France for revolutionary change, was precipitated by the judicial murder of Jean Calas, a Huguenot trader in cotton goods, who, on the basis of malicious rumors, had been arrested for murdering his son. The rumors had it that the son, Marc Antoine, was planning a conversion to Catholicism and that, to prevent this, his father and the other members of the family had strangled him. Marc Antoine had not had the slightest interest in a conversion and had committed suicide in a fit of depression. The accusation leveled at the Calas family was unsupported by anything that would pass as evidence in a civilized court and was clearly inconsistent with common sense and all the known facts. The family was nevertheless tried and found guilty by the judges of Toulouse. The family property was confiscated, and Jean Calas was condemned to be broken at the wheel and then burned at the stake. The other members of the family were banished from France.

The sentence against Jean Calas was carried out with unspeakable brutality on March 10, 1762. When Voltaire heard about the execution he resolved to rehabilitate the wronged family. He mobilized all his influential acquaintances at the Court of Versailles, including Mme. de Pompadour and the Duke of Richelieu, and his powerful friends elsewhere, especially Frederick the Great and the Empress of Russia. He published pamphlet after pamphlet, in several languages, exposing the judges of Toulouse. The Toulouse authorities would not make the court documents available, and at first the king and the government refused to overrule them. Eventually the public clamor became so great that a new trial was ordered. On March 9, 1765, forty Paris judges declared Jean Calas to have been innocent in a unanimous decision. The Calas property was restored and the king granted 36,000 livres as compensation to the widow. There were festivities in Paris. Crowds gathered to applaud the widow and the judges. Voltaire, who always referred to this case as “mon meilleur ouvrage” (my best work), was from then on known as “the saviour of the Calas.”

Another case from the same part of France in which Voltaire intervened concerned Pierre Paul Sirven, a well-to-do Protestant, and his wife who had been sentenced to be hanged for the murder of their daughter. Here, too, it was charged that the daughter had been planning to become a Catholic, and again the evidence against the accused was incredibly flimsy and at variance with all the known facts. Fortunately, the Sirvens fled to Switzerland before their trial. It took Voltaire nearly nine years to establish their innocence and to have their fortune restored. The Sirven case, Voltaire wryly remarked in a letter, lacked “the éclat of the Calas case” because “nobody was broken on the wheel.”

Unfortunately the same could not be said about the beheading of the nineteen-year-old Chevalier de la Barre for blasphemy. La Barre and his young companion Gaillard d'Etallonde were accused of mutilating a wooden crucifix, making blasphemous remarks about the Virgin, and singing blasphemous songs. D'Etallonde escaped before the trial, and la Barre, pleading guilty to the other charges, steadfastly denied mutilating the crucifix. He was tried and found guilty of all charges by a court in Abbeville, near Amiens, on February 28, 1766. He was condemned to have his tongue cut out, his right hand cut off, and to be burned at the stake. The verdict was appealed to the *parlement* of Paris. Voltaire and most observers expected that the sentence of the Abbeville court would not be upheld and that la Barre would get off with a prison sentence. However, chiefly because of the ravings of the Paris clergy about the dangerous spread of infidelity, the *parlement* ratified the original conviction. It spared la Barre from having his tongue and right hand cut off, but the death sentence was confirmed, substituting decapitation for burning at the stake. To extract a further confession, la Barre was to be tortured before his execution. This incredible sentence was carried out on July 1, 1766. After his beheading, his corpse was burnt along with a copy of the *Philosophical Dictionary*.

Voltaire was powerless to save la Barre, but he obtained a position for d'Etallonde in the Prussian army and tirelessly worked for his rehabilitation, which was not granted until 1788, ten years after Voltaire's death. No case infuriated Voltaire more, and none contributed more to his determination to change the French legal code and its administration. "The atrocity of this act," he wrote to d'Alembert, "seizes me with horror and anger," and eight years later he told Condorcet that rage came into his heart and tears into his eyes every time he thought about this horror, which he described as "a hundred times more hellish than the assassination of Calas."

Voltaire was involved in many other cases. He succeeded in freeing Claud Chaumont, who was on the galley bench because he had attended a Protestant service. He also succeeded in freeing Jean Pierre Espinas, who had spent twenty-three years in the galleys because he had given lodging to a Protestant clergyman for one night. Not all cases involved religious bigotry. One of the most celebrated concerned General Lally, the French royal commissioner in India, who had been defeated by the English and was executed on unproven charges of disloyalty. Voltaire pursued his efforts to vindicate the general's name for ten years and received the news of his rehabilitation as he lay dying in Paris in May 1778. It roused him to write the last letter of his life. "The dying man revives upon hearing this great news," he wrote to the general's son, ". . . he will die content."

In 1778, Voltaire's latest play, *Irène*, was to be performed in Paris, and he expressed a wish to attend its premiere. He had been banished from Paris during the lifetime of Louis XV, but with the accession of Louis XVI and a new ministry that included his friend the Encyclopedist Turgot, Paris was once again open to him.

Voltaire was recognized and hailed by crowds at every stop on the journey from Ferney. In Paris, there were tremendous ovations in the streets, and everywhere he was hailed as

"l'homme aux Calas." Voltaire did not lose his head. "What crowds to greet you," somebody said to him. "Alas!" he answered, "there would be just as many to see me on the scaffold." The royal family ignored his presence, but he was feted at the Comedie Française and the Academy where only the clerical members refused to attend. At the Hôtel de Villette, where he was staying, he received visitors eager to pay their respects. The callers included Benjamin Franklin and Diderot, with whose writings and activities he was familiar, but neither of whom he had met. Benjamin Franklin brought his grandson and asked Voltaire's blessing for him. Voltaire stretched out his hand and simply said "God and Liberty." Diderot was so eager to impress him with his wit and eloquence that Voltaire had to accept the unaccustomed role of passive listener. After their meeting, Diderot is reported to have described Voltaire as a fairy castle, fallen in ruins, but still inhabited by an old sorcerer. When asked his opinion of Diderot, the "old sorcerer" remarked that there could be no doubt about the man's brilliance, adding that unfortunately "nature has denied him one essential gift, that of dialogue."

In May 1778, Voltaire was seized by a fever. The doctor diagnosed cancer of the prostate. He died on May 30. There were the usual rumors of agonized shrieks and death-bed confessions. The Marquise de Villette, who was with him when he died, denied all such assertions. "To the very last moment," she said, "everything showed the goodness and benevolence of his character, everything bespoke tranquility, peace and resignation."

Refused a Christian burial in Paris, Voltaire was buried surreptitiously outside the city. In 1792 his remains were moved to the Pantheon, but they were once again dispersed at the onset of the Restoration. The Nazis, quite fittingly, melted down his statue during their occupation of Paris. The best epitaph for Voltaire was perhaps written by Thomas Macaulay. "Voltaire possessed a voice," Macaulay wrote, "which made itself heard from Moscow to Cádiz, and which sentenced the unjust judges to the contempt and detestation of all Europe. . . . Bigots and tyrants, who had never been moved by the wailing and cursing of millions, turned pale at his name."

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It has been maintained by some reputable scholars that, regardless of his numerous public and private statements to the contrary, Voltaire was an atheist. However, the great majority of commentators agree that he was a sincere and ardent believer in God. It is true that, in one or two places, Voltaire discussed the subject without reaching a definite conclusion. Thus, in a late article entitled "On the Existence of God," he simply set out the arguments in favor of God's existence and those against it and did not declare that he sided with either. There are also passages in his correspondence that dismiss belief in God as absurd. Against this, it must be emphasized that in literally hundreds of books, articles, and letters he insists, with almost compulsive repetitiveness, that the order of

nature and the teleological character of biological systems requires us to infer the existence of a “supreme intelligence.” Moreover, Voltaire wrote extensively against the atheism of some of his fellow-Encyclopedists and of Spinoza, whom he always regarded as an atheist. Voltaire not only rejected atheism as false, but also believed that, if it became widely accepted, it would cause vast harm to the human race. It seems on balance more reasonable to assume that, like many other believers, Voltaire occasionally wavered and had spells of doubt and disbelief than that he engaged in a lifelong deliberate charade, deceiving not only the religious world but also his fellow-philosophers, many of whom he loved and admired.

Voltaire called himself a theist, but in fact the position he advocated is more commonly described as “deism.” This means that he believed in the existence of God while opposing revealed religion—miracles, dogmas, and any kind of priesthood. He always made a careful distinction between “true religion” and “superstition,” and he argued that, unlike superstitious religions, especially Christianity, the kind of religion he championed could only do good. In one place he wrote: “The sole religion is to worship God and to be an honorable man. This pure and everlasting religion cannot possibly produce harm.” “Superstition,” he wrote in the *Treatise on Toleration*, “is to religion what astrology is to astronomy—the mad daughter of a wise mother. These daughters have too long dominated the earth.”

In several places he tells us both what we can and what we cannot know about God. The lists of divine attributes supplied in different books are not entirely consistent. In the article “Theist” in the *Philosophical Dictionary*, the theist, i.e., the Voltairian believer, is said to be “a man firmly convinced of the existence of a Supreme Being, as good as it is powerful, which has created all the extended, vegetating, feeling, and reflecting beings, which perpetuates their species.” To this he characteristically adds that the theist’s religion “consists neither in the opinions of an unintelligible metaphysics nor in vain display, but in worship and in justice. To do good—that is his worship; to submit to God—that is his doctrine.” It should be noted that the Supreme Being is described as good but not as perfectly good, and as powerful but not omnipotent. In his very late essay “We Must Take Sides,” which deals exclusively with the existence and nature of God, goodness is omitted from the list of divine attributes; and the omission is not accidental. This time the emphasis is on the power, the intelligence, and the eternity of God. The Supreme Being is “very powerful” since it “directs so vast and complex a machine,” and it is “very intelligent” because “the smallest spring of this machine cannot be equalled by us, who are intelligent beings.” Human beings cannot make solar systems, and they also cannot make eyes or ears or stomachs. Since God can produce these things, He must be vastly more intelligent than even the most intelligent men.

As we shall see shortly, Voltaire primarily relies on various forms of the design argument to justify belief in God. However, he realized that, even if it is otherwise unobjectionable, the design argument cannot prove God’s eternity. Watchmakers and other “manufacturers” are born and they die. How do we know that the Supreme Designer has no beginning and no end? Voltaire never addresses the latter of these issues, but he

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has no doubt that he can take care of the former and thus prove God’s “infinite duration.” To do this, he borrows a version of the cosmological argument found in Locke. God is eternal, Voltaire writes, since He “cannot be produced from nothing, which, being nothing, can produce nothing.” Thus, given the existence of something, it is demonstrated that something has existed for all eternity.

The argument is doubly fallacious. Even if it succeeded in proving that there must be an entity that has always existed, it does not follow that this eternal entity is God. Furthermore, the “principle” that something cannot come from nothing does not, in conjunction with the statement that something exists now, yield the desired conclusion that some particular being must always have existed. The conclusion that follows is that at all times there must have been something in existence, which is not at all the same thing as that one and the same thing has always existed. An infinite series of causes, each of whose members is of finite duration, is entirely consistent with the facts that something exists now and that something cannot come from nothing. (These criticisms disregard the vagueness and ambiguities in the principle that something cannot come from nothing. It occurred neither to Locke nor to Voltaire that, as it stands, the principle is much too vague to be employed in a serious philosophical argument.)

Not only God, but matter too is eternal. Voltaire’s God is thus a Demiurge rather than a Creator. “My reason alone proves to me a Being who has arranged the matter of this world,” he writes in the article “God-Gods” in the *Philosophical Dictionary*. Reason, however, is “unable to prove that he made this matter—that he brought it out of nothing.” In the article “Matter” and also in *The Ignorant Philosopher*, he goes further and maintains that reason requires us to hold that matter *is* eternal. In one of his customary stabs at the scholastic philosophers, he remarks that “today we are lucky enough to know by faith that God drew matter from nothingness,” but this is not a conclusion warranted by the evidence. Nor is it in fact the view of most religions. In their view the “divine hand” arranged the world out of chaos, not out of nothingness. Belief in the eternity of matter has not “injured the cult of the Divinity in any nation.” We are not diminishing the majesty of God if we describe him as “the master of an eternal matter.” Not even Genesis teaches creation out of nothing. It simply asserts that the gods, *Elohim*, not *Eloi*, “made heaven and earth,” leaving it open whether there was any matter out of which heaven and earth were shaped.

Voltaire’s pronouncements on the relations between the Demiurge and the rest of the universe are far from clear. In the article “Infinity” in the *Philosophical Dictionary* he writes that the Supreme Being, by “modifying matter,” caused “worlds to circulate in space and form animals, vegetables and metals.” He approvingly mentions the view of the Romans that “matter,

in the hands of God, was felt to be like clay on the potter's wheel," although he adds that such a comparison is no more than a "feeble image" to express divine power. In *The Ignorant Philosopher*, he remarks that "he cannot conceive that the cause that continually and visibly actuates nature" could have been inactive at any time and that an "eternity of idleness" is incompatible with his other properties. He concludes that the world has probably always "issued from a primordial and necessary cause as light emanates from the sun." Voltaire emphatically disagrees with the teaching of non-Christian religions and of Hesiod and Ovid that before the Divinity's intervention matter was in a state of chaos. "Chaos is precisely contrary to all the laws of nature" and "chaos never existed anywhere but in our heads." As a convinced determinist, Voltaire could have added that, since what goes on in our heads also happens according to laws, in the sense here in question, chaos never exists even in our heads. If initially there was no chaos, there also was not the order we now find in the world. In the course of replying to the charge that belief in the eternity of matter commits him to Manicheism, Voltaire wrote: "Here are stones an architect has not made; he has raised an immense building with them; I don't accept two architects; brute stones obeyed power and genius."

It would appear that Voltaire did believe in one or more datable ordering acts on the part of the Demiurge. Initially, matter was not without order, but the order we now have was imposed on it by the Demiurge. Furthermore, as we shall see later on, Voltaire believed that the Demiurge was involved in the production of every biological structure so that, as far as living organisms are concerned, creation is still going on. The similarity of Voltaire's views to those found in Plato's *Timaeus* is obvious, but, according to most of his interpreters, Plato did not believe that the imposition of order by the Demiurge occurred in time.

In his earlier writings, Voltaire did not hesitate to speak of God as good and just. This was in harmony with his generally optimistic view about the prevalence of both virtue and happiness on the human scene. In the *Philosophical Letters*, in response to Pascal's gloom, Voltaire declared that animals were generally very contented and that many human beings led reasonably happy lives. Rather smugly, he observed that when he looked at Paris or London he saw nothing remotely like the "desert island" to which Pascal had compared our "mute universe." What he saw were "opulent" and "civilized" places where men were "as happy as nature allows." To Frederick the Great he had written in a similar vein in 1738 that "when everything is counted and weighed up . . . there are infinitely more enjoyments than bitterness in this life."

In succeeding years, as his sympathies widened and his observations grew more extensive, Voltaire drastically changed his outlook. The Lisbon earthquake of 1755, in which 15,000 people were killed and another 15,000 seriously injured, finally made him doubt not the existence but the goodness and justice of God. What irritated him beyond measure were the facile attempts to explain why the disaster was in complete harmony with the perfect goodness of God. Bishop William Warburton, an influential Anglican divine whose main claim to posthumous

fame is an attempt to obtain a prosecution of Hume on charges of blasphemy, asserted that the Lisbon earthquake, "displayed God's glory in its fairest colors." In a sermon on the cause of earthquakes, John Wesley attributed the disaster to "sin," to "that curse that was brought upon the earth by the original transgression of Adam and Eve." Many Christian apologists claimed that the explanation must be sought in the wickedness of the inhabitants of Lisbon. Rousseau argued that the earthquake was a just punishment of men who had abandoned a natural country life for the artificial pleasures of big cities, that if men had lived in villages, the number of victims would have been much smaller. Moreover, writing specifically in reply to Voltaire's long poem on the Lisbon earthquake, Rousseau added that, as the only alternative to a suicidal pessimism, we must continue to have faith in the goodness of God—we must believe that in the long run things turn out well and that from a sufficiently broad perspective everything will be seen to make sense.

"Voltaire called himself a theist, but in fact the position he advocated is more commonly described as 'deism.' This means that he believed in the existence of God while opposing revealed religion—miracles, dogmas, and any kind of priesthood."

Voltaire disposed of these and similar "explanations" not only in the poem on the Lisbon earthquake but also in *Candide*, in which the character Doctor Pangloss is a composite of Leibniz, Rousseau, and Alexander Pope. The latter was the author of *The Essay on Man*, in which it had been maintained that really "there are no evils," but if there were any "particular evils, they compose the general good." Nobody had shown that there were more sinners in Lisbon than in London or Paris. Yet Lisbon lay shattered while Paris danced. Even if the adult victims of the earthquake had been such dreadful sinners as to deserve their fate, what about the infants that lay crushed and bloody on their mothers' breasts? Moreover, what happened in Lisbon was only an extreme illustration of the suffering that is the inevitable lot of living things. "All the world," Voltaire writes, "in all its members groans, all born for suffering and for mutual death." The "ferocious vulture" darts upon its "timid prey" and "feasts with joy" on its helpless victim. Its triumph, however, is short-lived. For soon an eagle "with sharply cutting beak devours the vulture." The eagle in turn is reached by a deadly shot coming from a man who not long afterwards lies dying in the dust of a bloody battlefield. There he serves as the food of voracious birds. Beast and men suffer, almost without ceasing, but men suffer more because, in addition to all their illnesses and misfortunes, they are conscious of their inevitable extinction.

We must not listen to the optimists who tell us that "all is well" and that the misery of each part composes the happiness of the whole. The universe, Voltaire replies to the optimists, "gives you the lie, and your own heart refutes a hundred times the error of your mind." Pope's "general good" is a "strange thing indeed, composed of the [kidney] stone, the gout, all crimes, all sufferings, death, and damnation." No, evil is very

real, and Epicurus was right to insist that its existence rules out a God who is both all powerful and perfectly good. The problem of evil is “an abyss whose bottom nobody has been able to see,” “an inexplicable chaos for those who search honestly,” an “unshakable rock” against which the arrows fired by a hundred “bachelors and doctors of divinity” have been totally ineffective. It is a “terrible shelter” for atheists who are wrong in concluding that there is no God but right in questioning His goodness and justice. In one place, in discussing Manicheism, Voltaire seems to incline to the view that God is indeed good but not all-powerful. He tells his imaginary Manicheist that one deity is more economical than two, and he prefers to believe that the true God is the good Ormazd, speculating that possibly this deity “could not do better.” He is a “powerful, wise, and good” being but also one who is limited by the materials he works with.

Most frequently in his later works, Voltaire simply regards the entire situation as a baffling mystery that requires us to confess the limits of our understanding. If my understanding is so weak, he wrote, that I cannot even know “by what I am animated” how “can I have any acquaintance with that ineffable intelligence which visibly presides over the universe?”

Voltaire occasionally had recourse to the cosmological argument not only in Locke’s version mentioned earlier but also in the form in which it is found in Samuel Clarke. Voltaire’s statement of the argument is greatly inferior to Clarke’s own formulation, and it is evident that he does not have his heart in this argument, which seems to be too scholastic and metaphysical for his taste. On the other hand, he defends numerous versions of the design argument with great enthusiasm. He regards it as a genuinely empirical argument and he finds it adequate to the task of proving the finite Demiurge whose existence he champions. Contemporaries like Holbach who scoff at the argument are castigated at great length. This much despised argument, he writes, in the article “God-Gods”

“If my understanding is so weak, [Voltaire] wrote, that I cannot even know ‘by what I am animated’ how ‘can I have any acquaintance with that ineffable intelligence which visibly presides over the universe?’”

in the *Philosophical Dictionary*, “is that of Cicero and of Newton. This alone might somewhat lessen the confidence of atheists in themselves.” Many sages, “observing the course of the stars, and the prodigious art that pervades the structure of animals and vegetables,” have acknowledged “a powerful hand working these continual wonders.” The appeal to final causes is “the most natural” and “for common capacities” the most perfect argument to show that an intelligent being “presides over the universe.” As with many other defenders of the argument, both before and after him, the starting point is what we know or supposedly know about the relation between a watch and its intelligent maker. “When I see a watch whose hand marks the hours,” Voltaire wrote, “I conclude that an intelligent being has arranged the springs of this machine in order that the hand may mark the hour.” If a clock is not made for the purpose of telling the time, he wrote in “Final Causes,” also in the *Philo-*

sophical Dictionary, he is prepared to “admit that final causes are nothing but chimeras,” adding that he would be content “to go by the name of a fool” to the end of his life. Needless to say, Voltaire did not think that he had to go by the name of a fool to the end of his life. Unlike those who have “willfully shut their eyes and understanding,” he gladly admitted that there is design in nature, and, if there is design, then “there is an intelligent cause: there exists a God.”

In a passage quoted earlier, Voltaire spoke of “the prodigious art” that pervaded the structures of animals and vegetables. This art is displayed in a great variety of ways but most undeniably and impressively in the construction of bodies of animals and men. “Consider yourself,” says Freind, the sage who brings the misguided atheist Birton to his knees: “examine with what art, never sufficiently explored, all is constructed within and without for all your wishes and actions.” There is not one “superfluous vessel.” The arrangement throughout the body is so artful that “there is not a single vein without valves and sluices, making a passage for the blood.” From the roots of the hair to the toes “all is art, design, cause, and effect.” It is “audacious madness” to deny that we are here confronted with final causes. A sane person has to admit that the mouth was made to eat and speak with, the eyes “admirably contrived for seeing,” the ears for hearing, and the nerves for feeling. Nothing perhaps shows the presence of design more clearly than the arrangement of the reproductive systems in males and females alike and the pleasure associated with the sex act that guarantees the perpetuation of the species. Even Epicurus, the unbeliever, would be obliged to admit that “pleasure is divine” and that pleasure is a “final cause” leading to the incessant introduction of new organisms into the world. “When I see the springs of the human body,” Voltaire writes in the relatively skeptical paper “On the Existence of God,” “I conclude that an intelligent being has arranged these organs,” an intelligent and “superior being” who “skillfully prepared and fashioned the matter.” In *The Ignorant Philosopher*, this superior intelligence is referred to as “the supreme artisan” or “workman” who “actuates” the enormous multitude of biological arrangements and who, except for the superiority of his intelligence and skill, is in these respects entirely comparable to human craftsmen.

The order or lawfulness of the universe, especially as it is exemplified in the movements of the heavenly bodies, is just as strong evidence for a supernatural Designer as the purposive character of biological structures. The order of the universe, he writes in the article “Atheism” in the *Philosophical Dictionary*, “now that it is better known, bespeaks a workman; and so many never-varying laws, announce a law-giver.” So far from promoting atheism, Newton’s discoveries in mechanics have greatly strengthened the case for a cosmic designer. Voltaire was particularly pleased with his dictum that “as a catechist proclaims God to children, so Newton demonstrates him to the learned.” In one place he quite correctly attributes this remark to “a philosophical Frenchman who was persecuted in his own country for asserting as much.” This theme is developed in detail in the essay “We Must Take Sides,” where he writes: “The unvarying uniformity of the laws which control the march of the heavenly bodies and the movements of our own globe” show that there is “a single, universal and powerful intelligence.”

There are three possible ways of accounting for the order in the world. One is blind chance; the second is the view that the order was produced by the heavenly bodies behaving in an orderly fashion; and the third is the postulation of an eternal Orderer or Geometrician. Taking as his illustration one of Kepler's laws, Voltaire dismisses blind chance as "extreme folly." Surely it is preposterous to maintain that blind chance has produced an arrangement in which "the square of the revolution of one planet is always to the squares of the others, as the cube of its distance is to the cubes of the distances of others, from the common centre." Voltaire next rules out the possibility that the planets themselves or more generally "Nature" are responsible for the order discovered by astronomers. In the "Dialogue Between the Philosopher and Nature," Nature remarks that "she" is no mathematician and that yet everything "in and about" her is "arranged agreeably to mathematical laws." The philosopher draws the consequence. If "your great universal system knows nothing of mathematics," the philosopher responds, and if nevertheless the laws by which "you are regulated" are those of the "most profound geometry," there must necessarily be "an eternal geometrician, who directs you, and presides over your operations." Again, in "Atheism" in the *Philosophical Dictionary* we are presented with the disjunction that "either the planets are great geometricians or the Eternal Geometrician has arranged the planets." The former alternative is plainly absurd, and hence we must embrace the latter.

At times, Voltaire appeals to the fact, or rather what he takes to be the fact, that the universe is a vast machine. "When we see a fine machine," he writes, "we know that there must be a 'good machinist' with 'an excellent understanding.'" This argument is "old, but is not therefore the worse." It should be remarked that it is not identical with the one appealing to the orderly nature of the universe, but it is doubtful that Voltaire perceived the difference between them.

Another version of the design argument is based on copies or reproductions that human beings make of natural objects or collections of such objects. Since the copy required an intelligent cause, we may affirm the same of the original. Voltaire's main illustrations were "orreries," the then newly invented contraptions in which the bodies of the solar system were represented by balls moved by wheelwork. An orrery is "the chef d'oeuvre of the skill of our artisans," and everybody admires Lord Orrery for his invention. Yet it is a very imperfect copy of the solar system and its revolutions. "If the copy indicates genius," how much more must there be in the maker of the original! Similar considerations apply to landscape paintings, drawings of animals, or models in colored wax. They are the work of "clever artists." If this is true of the copies, it must also be true of the original. "I do not see," Voltaire observed, "how this demonstration can be assailed."

There is also the problem of accounting for intelligence. Even a materialist like Holbach cannot deny that there is "some difference between a clod and the ideas of Newton." Intelligent beings like Newton cannot have been "formed" by something blind, brute, insensible, i.e., by matter. It follows that "Newton's intelligence came from some other intelligence." These quotations come from the previously mentioned article on "Atheism." The argument is repeated a short time later in a letter to

D'Alembert (July 27, 1770). "It seems to me absurd," writes Voltaire, "to derive intelligence from something like matter and motion which are not intelligent." It may be interesting to note that D'Alembert himself, who eventually became a thoroughgoing atheist, accepted this argument in his earlier years.

After this argument one is prepared for the worst, and the worst does not fail to come. What is the purpose of the sun? Most educated people since Copernicus would not find this an easy question. Not so Voltaire in one of his Panglossian moods. "When the atheist lights a candle," he writes, "he admits that it is for the purpose of giving light." He should then similarly admit that "the sun was made to illuminate our part of the universe." Fortunately, however, such Panglossian outbursts are rare. Most of the time, Voltaire confesses that we do not know the purpose of the universe nor presumably that of the sun. In the "Dialogue Between Nature and the Philosopher," the philosopher asks his "beloved mother" why she exists and why, in fact, anything exists. Nature modestly replies that she knows nothing about the matter. The philosopher persists: Why would not "nothing itself" have been preferable to "that multitude of existences formed to be continually dissolved," the animals born to devour others and to be devoured in their turn, the numberless beings whose lives are filled with pain, and the tribes of "reasoning beings" who never or at most rarely listen to reason? For what purpose, he demands, was all this? Leave me alone, Nature replies in effect. "Go and inquire of Him who made me."

The question of the purpose of the universe also arises for Voltaire when he tries to answer the opponents of the design argument who bring up the obvious imperfections in the world as a reason for questioning the wisdom and even the existence of a supernatural designer. Some critics have brought up such phenomena as earthquakes, eruptions of volcanos, and "plains of moving sands." Others have mentioned frightening and poisonous animals like serpents and sharks. And there is, of course, the problem posed by "the woes and crimes of mankind." Voltaire always gave the same answer to such challenges. The various imperfections may show that the designer lacks goodness and concern for the welfare of living things. Perhaps they even show that He is malevolent, but they do not weaken the inference to a designer of *some* kind. "If the naves of your chariot wheel catch fire," he writes, this does not show that "your chariot was not made expressly for the purpose of conveying you from one place to another." Similarly, the existence of serpents and "so many wicked men worse than serpents" does not show that either serpents or men were not designed. If flies could reason, Voltaire adds, they would undoubtedly complain to God about the existence of spiders, but they would nevertheless admit that the spider's web was arranged in a wonderful manner. ●

End of Part I

Part II of this article, containing a detailed critical discussion of Voltaire's various versions of the design argument as well as of his views on immortality and miracles, will be published in the next issue of FREE INQUIRY.—ED.