

Voltaire

François-Marie d'Arouet (1694–1778), better known by his pen name Voltaire, was a French writer and public activist who played a singular role in defining the eighteenth-century movement called the Enlightenment. At the center of his work was a new conception of philosophy and the philosopher that in several crucial respects influenced the modern concept of each. Yet in other ways Voltaire was not a philosopher at all in the modern sense of the term. He wrote as many plays, stories, and poems as patently philosophical tracts, and he in fact directed many of his critical writings against the philosophical pretensions of recognized philosophers such as Leibniz, Malebranche, and Descartes. He was, however, a vigorous defender of a conception of natural science that served in his mind as the antidote to vain and fruitless philosophical investigation. In clarifying this new distinction between science and philosophy, and especially in fighting vigorously for it in public campaigns directed against the perceived enemies of fanaticism and superstition, Voltaire pointed modern philosophy down several paths that it subsequently followed.

To capture Voltaire's unconventional place in the history of philosophy, this article will be structured in a particular way. First, a full account of Voltaire's life is offered, not merely as background context for his philosophical work, but as an argument about the way that his particular career produced his particular contributions to European philosophy. Second, a survey of Voltaire's philosophical views is offered so as to attach the legacy of what Voltaire did with the intellectual viewpoints that his activities reinforced.

Voltaire's Enlightenment Philosophy

Voltaire's philosophical legacy ultimately resides as much in how he practiced philosophy, and in the ends toward which he directed his philosophical activity, as in any specific doctrine or original idea. Yet the particular philosophical positions he took, and the way that he used his wider philosophical campaigns to champion certain understandings while disparaging others, did create a constellation appropriately called Voltaire's Enlightenment philosophy. True to Voltaire's character, this constellation is best described as a set of intellectual stances and orientations rather than as a set of doctrines or systematically defended positions. Nevertheless, others found in Voltaire both a model of the well-oriented philosophe and a particular philosophy attached to it. Each side of this complex played a key role in defining the Enlightenment philosophie that he came to personify.

Liberty

Central to this complex is Voltaire's conception of liberty. Around this category, Voltaire's social activism and his relatively rare excursions into systematic philosophy also converged. In 1734, in the wake of the scandals triggered by the *Lettres philosophiques*, Voltaire wrote, but left unfinished at Cirey, a *Traité de métaphysique* that explored the question of human freedom in philosophical terms. The question was particularly central to European philosophical discussions at the time, and Voltaire's work explicitly referenced thinkers like Hobbes and Leibniz while wrestling with the questions of materialism, determinism, and providential purpose that were then central to the writings of the so-called deists, figures such as John Toland and Anthony Collins. The great debate between Samuel Clarke and Leibniz over the principles of Newtonian natural philosophy was also influential as Voltaire struggled to understand the nature of human existence and ethics within a cosmos governed by rational principles and impersonal laws.

Voltaire adopted a stance in this text somewhere between the strict determinism of rationalist materialists and the transcendent spiritualism and voluntarism of contemporary Christian natural theologians. For Voltaire, humans are not deterministic machines of matter and motion, and free will thus exists. But humans are also natural beings governed by inexorable natural laws, and his ethics anchored right action in a self that possessed the natural light of reason immanently. This stance distanced him from more radical deists like Toland, and he reinforced this position by also adopting an elitist understanding of the role of religion in society. For Voltaire, those equipped to understand their own reason could find the proper course of free action themselves. But since many were incapable of such self-knowledge and self-control, religion, he claimed, was a necessary guarantor of social order. This stance distanced Voltaire from the republican politics of Toland and other materialists, and Voltaire echoed these ideas in his political musings, where he remained throughout his life a liberal, reform-minded monarchist and a skeptic with respect to republican and democratic ideas.

In the *Lettres philosophiques*, Voltaire had suggested a more radical position with respect to human determinism, especially in his letter on Locke, which emphasized the materialist reading of the Lockean soul that was then a popular figure in radical philosophical discourse. Some readers singled out this part of the book as the major source of its controversy, and in a similar vein the very materialist account of "Âme," or the soul, which appeared in volume 1 of Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, was also a flashpoint of controversy. Voltaire also defined his own understanding of the soul in similar terms in his own *Dictionnaire philosophique*. What these examples point to is Voltaire's willingness, even eagerness, to publicly defend controversial views even when his own, more private and more considered writings often complicated the understanding that his more public and polemical writings insisted upon. In these cases, one often sees Voltaire defending less a carefully reasoned position on a complex philosophical problem than adopting a political position designed to assert his conviction that liberty of speech, no matter what the topic, is sacred and cannot be violated.

Voltaire never actually said “I disagree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.” Yet the persistence of the myth that associates this dictum with his name attests to the way that this invented statement captures well the spirit of his philosophy of liberty. In his voluminous correspondence especially, and in the details of many of his more polemical public texts, one does find Voltaire articulating a view of intellectual and civil liberty that makes him an unquestioned forerunner of modern civil libertarianism. He never authored any single philosophical treatise on this topic, however, yet the memory of his life and philosophical campaigns was influential in advancing these ideas nevertheless. Voltaire's influence is palpably present, for example, in Kant's famous argument in his essay “What is Enlightenment?” that Enlightenment stems from the free and public use of critical reason, and from the liberty that allows such critical debate to proceed untrammelled. The absence of a text that anchors this linkage in no way removes the unmistakable presence of Voltaire's influence upon Kant's formulation.

Hedonism

Voltaire's notion of liberty also anchored his hedonistic morality, another key feature of Voltaire's Enlightenment philosophy. One vehicle for this philosophy was Voltaire's salacious poetry, a genre that both reflected in its eroticism and sexual innuendo the lived culture of libertinism that was an important feature of Voltaire's biography, and also contributed to this culture through its celebration of moral freedom through sexual liberty. Voltaire's avowed hedonism became a central feature of his wider philosophical identity since his libertine writings and conduct were always invoked by those who wanted to indict Voltaire for being a reckless subversive devoted to undermining legitimate social order. Voltaire's refusal to defer to such charges, and his vigor in opposing them through a defense of the very libertinism that was used against him, also injected a positive philosophical program into these dynamics that was very influential. In particular, through his cultivation of a happily libertine persona, and his application of philosophical reason toward the moral defense of this identity, often through the widely accessible vehicles of poetry and witty prose, Voltaire became a leading force in the wider Enlightenment articulation of a morality grounded in the positive valuation of personal, and especially bodily, pleasure, and an ethics rooted in a hedonistic calculus of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. He also advanced this cause by sustaining an unending attack upon the repressive and, to his mind, anti-human demands of traditional Christian asceticism, especially priestly celibacy, and the moral codes of sexual restraint and bodily self-abnegation that were still central to the traditional moral teachings of the day.

This same hedonistic ethics was also crucial to the development of liberal political economy during the Enlightenment, and Voltaire applied his own libertinism toward this project as well. In the wake of the scandals triggered by Mandeville's famous argument in *The Fable of the Bees* (a poem, it should be remembered) that the pursuit of private vice, namely greed, leads to public benefits, namely economic prosperity, a French debate about the value of luxury as a moral good erupted that drew Voltaire's pen. In the 1730s, he drafted a poem called *Le Mondain* that celebrated hedonistic worldly living as a positive force for society, and not as the corrupting element that traditional Christian morality held it to be. In his *Essay sur les moeurs* he also joined with other Enlightenment historians in celebrating the role of material acquisition and commerce in advancing the progress of civilization. Adam Smith would famously make similar arguments in his founding tract of Enlightenment liberalism, *On the Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776. Voltaire was certainly no great contributor to the political economic science that Smith practiced, but he did contribute to the wider philosophical campaigns that made the concepts of liberty and hedonistic morality central to their work both widely known and more generally accepted.

The ineradicable good of personal and philosophical liberty is arguably the master theme in Voltaire's philosophy, and if it is, then two other themes are closely related to it. One is the importance of

skepticism, and the second is the importance of empirical science as a solvent to dogmatism and the pernicious authority it engenders.

Skepticism

Voltaire's skepticism descended directly from the neo-Pyrrhonian revival of the Renaissance, and owes a debt in particular to Montaigne, whose essays wedded the stance of doubt with the positive construction of a self grounded in philosophical skepticism. Pierre Bayle's skepticism was equally influential, and what Voltaire shared with these forerunners, and what separated him from other strands of skepticism, such as the one manifest in Descartes, is the insistence upon the value of the skeptical position in its own right as a final and complete philosophical stance. Among the philosophical tendencies that Voltaire most deplored, in fact, were those that he associated most powerfully with Descartes who, he believed, began in skepticism but then left it behind in the name of some positive philosophical project designed to eradicate or resolve it. Such urges usually led to the production of what Voltaire liked to call "philosophical romances," which is to say systematic accounts that overcome doubt by appealing to the imagination and its need for coherent explanations. Such explanations, Voltaire argued, are fictions, not philosophy, and the philosopher needs to recognize that very often the most philosophical explanation of all is to offer no explanation at all.

Such skepticism often acted as bulwark for Voltaire's defense of liberty since he argued that no authority, no matter how sacred, should be immune from challenge by critical reason. Voltaire's views on religion as manifest in his private writings are complex, and based on the evidence of these texts it would be wrong to call Voltaire an atheist, or even an anti-Christian so long as one accepts a broad understanding of what Christianity can entail. But even if his personal religious views were subtle, Voltaire was unwavering in his hostility to church authority and the power of the clergy. For similar reasons, he also grew as he matured ever more hostile toward the sacred mysteries upon which monarchs and Old Regime aristocratic society based their authority. In these cases, Voltaire's skepticism was harnessed to his libertarian convictions through his continual effort to use critical reason as a solvent for these "superstitions" and the authority they anchored. The philosophical authority of romanciers such as Descartes, Malebranche, and Leibniz was similarly subjected to the same critique, and here one sees how the defense of skepticism and liberty, more than any deeply held opposition to religiosity per se, was often the most powerful motivator for Voltaire.

From this perspective, Voltaire might fruitfully be compared with Socrates, another founding figure in Western philosophy who made a refusal to declaim systematic philosophical positions a central feature of his philosophical identity. Socrates's repeated assertion that he knew nothing was echoed in Voltaire's insistence that the true philosopher is the one who dares not to know and then has the courage to admit to his ignorance publicly. Voltaire was also, like Socrates, a public critic and controversialist who defined philosophy primarily in terms of its power to liberate individuals from domination at the hands of authoritarian dogmatism and irrational prejudice. Yet while Socrates championed rigorous philosophical dialectic as the agent of this emancipation, Voltaire saw this same dialectical rationalism at the heart of the dogmatism that he sought to overcome. His philosophy,

therefore, used satire, mockery and wit to undermine the alleged rigor of philosophical dialectic, and while Socrates saw this kind of rhetorical word play as the very essence of the erroneous sophism that he sought to alleviate, Voltaire cultivated linguistic cleverness as a solvent to the false and deceptive dialectic that anchored traditional philosophy