

Voltaire's Philosophy and Worldview

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18^e European History

March 8, 2016

1 Introduction

In 1751, Rousseau challenged the Republic of Letters (Voltaire included) with his *Discourse on Arts and Sciences*. In it, Rousseau claims “depravation [is] palpable; our minds have been corrupted in proportion as our arts and sciences have made advances towards their perfection.” By means of example, he cites the learned societies of Egypt, Greece and China as prey to stronger nations, enslaved to “eloquence,” and “tainted with every vice.”¹ In short, Rousseau identifies exercises of the mind with servitude: “if neither the skill of [China’s] magistrates, nor the pretended wisdom of their laws, . . . could protect or defend them from the yoke of an ignorant Barbarian. . . of what use was all their art, their skill, their learning?”²

In 1755, Voltaire penned a curious and friendly response to Rousseau. Voltaire dabbles with complements and congratulations “you [Rousseau] will please people by your manner of telling them the truth about themselves,” only to remark matter-of-factly “you will not alter them.” Voltaire continues to write, as if in appreciation of Rousseau’s virtuosity, no one has “painted in more striking colors” the “horrors of human society.” Here he begins to soothsay: “in our feebleness and ignorance we expect so many consolations.” And then, in an echo of his earlier praise, Voltaire writes “no one has ever been so witty as you are in trying to turn us into brutes.” Enthusiastically, he proceeds: “to read your book makes one long to go on all fours.” Then, catching himself, Voltaire reasonably asserts “since, however, it is now some sixty years since I gave up the practice, I feel that it is unfortunately impossible for me to resume it.”³

The effect is punching. Dissembling in polite statements, Voltaire unfolds a strategic satire (which doubles as critique) and leaves the reader with a unique notion—the some sixty year old *philosophe* crawling about on his hands and knees. Indeed, this image works as an antipode to the Rousseau’s grizzled “horrors of human society.” Upon a first reading,

1. Issac Karmnick, ed., “The Portable Enlightenment Reader” (Penguin Books, 1995), 367-8.

2. Ibid., 368.

3. Ibid., 376.

Voltaire seems to strike an advantageous counterpose with Rousseau. But just what has Voltaire gotten past us?

I propose two methods to further analyze Voltaire's 1755 letter. First, let us consider its context. Certainly, the letter was not written to be published. It is a personal communication between two residents of Geneva. We will investigate how degrees of privacy affect its meaning. Second, let us examine the letters grammatical constructions/assumptions. Noticing the first person plural ("in our feebleness," "to turn us") I am curious: from what aggregate body does Voltaire speak? Consider, for example, the engraved frontispiece for Voltaire's *Philosophy of Newton*.

Perhaps Voltaire understood himself in a community of readers. What are the implications of this assumption? Specifically, what are the implications of reading Voltaire as an author in the perpetually plural—as if he carried the imaginary weight of an complete interpretive community? Carrying this metaphor, we see Voltaire, never alone, surrounded by intellectual *devas*, who, like helpful spirits, are audience to his irony. In this case, the frontispiece is misleading—it ought to portray Voltaire staring up at Newton, and likewise, Newton gazing softly down upon Voltaire.

2 Triptych

I wish to further develop the peculiarity of the “plural author” in Voltaire’s letter to Rousseau. In this section, I will generate a series of interpretive pieces from the tension between private communication and public irony letter. These pieces may be considered a small triptych of close readings, based on the following section of Voltaire’s 1755 letter.

I agree with you that science and literature have sometimes done a great deal of harm. Tasso’s enemies made his life a long series of misfortunes: Galileo’s enemies kept him languishing in prison, at seventy years of age, from the crime of understanding the revolution of the earth: and, what is still more shameful, obliged him to forswear his discovery. Since your friends began the Encyclopedia, their rivals attack them as deists, atheists—even Jansenists.⁴

4. Karmnick, “The Portable Enlightenment Reader,” 376.



Figure 1: Philosophie de Neuton

Let me sketch Voltaire's world-view in the context of the three references made above. The first will locate Voltaire in relation to the epic poem *Jerusalem Delivered*. The second will locate Voltaire in relation to Natural Philosophy. The third will locate Voltaire in relation to the Encyclopédie.

2.1 Jerusalem Delivered

Voltaire, in his scathing irony, inverts the harm which Rousseau claims the arts to have done: "I agree with you... Tasso's enemies made his life a long series of misfortunes." But who is (Torquato) Tasso? Pilfering around, here is what I have found.

Torquato Tasso was born in 1544 in Sorrento and died in Rome in 1595. He was a lover of men and increasingly paranoid at the end of his life. He believed his enemies, members of the aristocratic nobility, were poisoning him.⁵ In 1581, Tasso published the epic poem *La Gerusalemme Liberata*, *Jerusalem Delivered*. The poem runs in eight line stanzas over twenty cantos—illustrating the exploits of Christian Knights, Muslim Warriors and Sorceresses during the First Crusade in the holy city of Jerusalem.⁶ Its lyrical passion is best seen in the fluctuating relationship between the ingenious sorceress Arminda and the christened knight Rinaldo. Not only popular in its time, Tasso's work became the source for idyllic adaptions; it was reconfigured in operatic and masquerading modes throughout the French and Italian Enlightenment. Jean-Baptiste Lully adapted the tragédie en musique, *Armide*, for Louis XIV in 1686,⁷ to which Henri Desmarests penned a Baroque sequel *Renaud* in 1722,⁸ which, of course, influenced Sacchini's opera, of the same title, performed in 1783 for his patron Queen Marie-Antoinette.⁹ Moreover, as a image-rich narrative, *La Gerusalemme Liberata* inspired a number of paintings: Nicolas Poussin, *Armida discovers the sleeping Rinaldo* (1629); François Boucher, *Rinaldo and Armida in her Garden* (1734); Eugène Delacroix, *Clorinda rescues Olindo and Sophronia* (1856).

I believe Voltaire empathized with Tasso's passionate lyricism. Consider Voltaire's comment in the philosophical dictionary. "Everywhere the heart has the same duties: on the steps of the throne of God ... and in the depths of the abyss."¹⁰ How does Tasso weave together his epic? As a conflict between love and duty. Voltaire is deeply concerned for Christians slaughtered in metaphysical quarrels.¹¹ I imagine him uttering "Rinaldo, acquiesce to stay with Armida. Quit your crusade and follow volition." In the philosophical dictionary he reminds us "The soul acts internally ... above coercion."¹²

5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Torquato_Tasso

6. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerusalem_Delivered

7. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armide_\(Lully\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armide_(Lully))

8. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renaud_\(Desmarests\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renaud_(Desmarests))

9. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renaud_\(opera\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renaud_(opera))

10. Karmnick, "The Portable Enlightenment Reader," 119.

11. Ibid., 120.

12. Ibid., 116.



Figure 2: Rinaldo et Armida

We may contrast Tasso's and Voltaire's visions of war. In his 1754 *Essay on the Manners and Spirits of Nations*, Voltaire wrote “the field and the scaffold ran with blood on account of theological arguments, . . . for almost five hundred years, without interruption[.]” Tasso's idyllic duties and crusades develop into Voltaire's hallucinative absurdities. In Candide we find

Canegonde dead! Ah! best of worlds,
where are you? But what illness did she
die of? Was it because she saw me kicked
out of her father's noble castle?' ‘No,’

said Pangloss. ‘She was disemboweled by Bulgarian soldiers, after having been raped to the limit of possibility; they broke the Baron's head when he tried to defend her; the Baroness was cut to pieces; my poor pupil was treated exactly like his sister; and as to the castle, there is not one stone standing on another, not a barn, not a sheep, not a duck, not a tree; but we were well avenged, for the Abares did exactly the same to a neighboring Barony which belonged to a Bulgarian Lord.¹³

Tasso's suffering, as a man of letters, recapitulates the “perfect library of . . . calumnies”¹⁴ written against Voltaire. Tasso's 1595 literary enemies give some metonymical *umph* to detractors of the wealthy philosophes. I imagine Voltaire cherished Tasso's beautifully painful life (and poetry) as a period in history (and historical literature) where one meets “a few virtues, and some happy times; as we sometimes see a few scattered huts in a barren desert.”¹⁵ In short, Voltaire lived in community with Tasso by writing with Tasso in mind.

2.2 Natural Philosophy

Voltaire appealed to the community of natural philosophers when he wrote “Galileo's enemies kept him languishing in prison, at seventy years of age, fro the crime of understanding the revolution of the earth.” Galileo provides an excellent starting point for a morphological picture of the progress of the sciences (which Rousseau laid criticism upon and which Voltaire sought to slyly defend). Let us consider those phenomenon Galileo understood.

What Voltaire describes as “the revolution of the earth” is only a half-truth, filtered through various astronomical texts. The germ of Galileo's wisdom is contained in the “principle of inertia.” In 1604, Galileo experimentally discovered that a body falling from

13. Karmnick, “The Portable Enlightenment Reader,” 548.

14. Ibid., 376.

15. Ibid., 371.

rest at time $t = 0$ has a position proportional to t^2 . He was, however, uncertain whether the velocity of the falling object was proportional to time ($v = kt$) or distance ($v = ks$). By 1638, in letters, he argued for the latter and derived the correct path for projectile motion: the parabola.¹⁶

The “principle of inertia” heralds an episteme shift from the global to the local. Galileo’s enemies scrupled over the theological implications of a material’s innate quality of motion. Inertia flew in the drooping face of Aristotelian mechanics. Projectiles no longer depended upon a constant motive force. Rather, trajectories were determined by initial conditions alone. This is an era Voltaire describes in his *Letters* (1733) as one where “men had learned to destroy the most impregnable cities with an artificial thunder … but they were still ignorant to the circulation of blood, … the laws of motion, … and a man that was capable to maintain a thesis on the “Categories of Aristotle,” the *universale a parte rei*, … was considered a prodigy.”¹⁷

To understand the contrast between the global and the local, it is helpful to discuss the contrast between the mechanics of Descartes and Newton. Whereas Galileo’s exposition of inertia laid the foundation for Newton’s first law of mechanics, Galileo’s work on projectile curves finds general kinship with Descartes’ algebraic geometry. The former man, Voltaire describes as one “who, by the vigor of his mind, is able to penetrate into the hidden secrets of nature”.¹⁸ The latter, Voltaire ridicules as “impulsive” and as having fallen into “the humour of forming hypotheses.”¹⁹ The former “add[ed] solidity to matter”—the latter “abandoned Geometry as a guide.”²⁰ Newton came to understand the subtle inverse-square law of gravity, Descartes required a global fluid to determine celestial motion; Newton embraced infinitesimal vector addition, Descartes embraced the coordinate curve.

In his correspondences and demonstrations, Galileo attempted to disseminate an awareness of the matter’s inertial property. Consequently, he was imprisoned in his home. Nonetheless, the implications Galileo’s “constant acceleration” were developed by Leibniz and Newton into the dual theories of differential and integral calculus. Voltaire’s defense of progress triumphs in front of these two disciplines, announcing how intellectuals in the eighteenth century would not suffer persecution as Galileo.

2.3 Encyclopédie

In the Great Cat Massacre, Robert Darnton claims “setting up categories and policing them is … a serious business” and thus “Diderot and d’Alembert took enormous risks when they undid the old order of knowledge and drew new lines between the known and unknown.”²¹

16. John Stillwell, *Mathematics and Its History* (Springer-Verlag, 1989), 168-9.

17. Karmnick, “The Portable Enlightenment Reader,” 54.

18. Ibid., 52.

19. Ibid., 56.

20. Ibid.

21. Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre*, 2nd ed. (Basic Books, 1984), 193.

Voltaire says Diderot and d'Alembert were attacked as “deists, atheists—even Jansenists.” Certainly Jansenism is a far-fetched accusation, for what relation does the Encyclodpedié bear to the “doctrines of Cornelius Jansen, … who maintained after St. Augustine the perverseness and inability for good of the natural human will”?²² To proceed, I suggest we ruminate on “perverseness and inability.”

The Encyclodpedié is perverse in that it was written in a dual misanthropic/philanthropic spirit. On one hand, Diderot faithlessly identified “good citizens” as the worst enemies of the Encyclodpedié. On the other, the Encyclodpedié’s authors (like others “too daring for the times in which their works appeared”) faithfully resolved to “remai[n] in obscurity until the day … the age they had outstripped [did pass] away and another century … [did overtake] them at last and finally [give] them the justice their merits deserved.”²³ Perhaps Diderot imagined the Encyclodpedié as a seed which was to germinate, not for his generation, but the next. In this sense, the Encyclodpedié is philanthropic. Its authors fractured encrusted Aristotelian categories, tilled the landscape beneath, and passed kernels of wisdom from “parent” to “child.” Liebniz’s calculus, Newton’s laws of motion, d’Alembert’s partial differential equations become auxiliary branches to the Galilean main.

As “Diderot and d’Alembert did not seek out the hand of God in the world but rather studied men at work, forging their own happiness,” the Encyclodpedié is “atheistic.” d’Alembert drew schematics, formulated techniques, and developed *applications*. These range from the theory of vibrations on strings to the use of hydrodynamics in regulating machinery.²⁴ His expositions offered compressed instructions for a reader to shape their world.

When Voltaire mocks the rivals of the Encyclopédie, he aligns himself with future readers who stand ready to appreciate his humour. He walks ahead of the Encyclo-pedists and prepares readers (none too different from ourselves) for to reap good harvest.

3 Conclusion

I hope the irony of Voltaire’s short remark to Rousseau has been unpacked with enough perspective for us to make a few short observations. First, Voltaire works with an audience. Second, Voltaire believes his audience includes artists and intellectuals. Third, Voltaire’s jests and satire reveal the degree to which he is aligned him with his audience. Bringing it all together, I have identified Voltaire as a curious member in the larger community of *philosophes* in France.

22. *Jansenism*, Oxford English Dictionary: 3rd. Ed.

23. Karmnick, “The Portable Enlightenment Reader,” 21.

24. Stillwell, *Mathematics and Its History*, 181.

References

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