Voltaire (1694-1778): Bourgeois and Anglophile

The enlightenment really did not crystallize until Voltaire. In him, all the strands that had been separate seem woven together and formed into something that can be called the enlightenment. Both in his works and in his life Voltaire was the embodiment of this intellectual movement.

The Background of French History

To understand Voltaire's significance we must first look at French society in the first half of the eighteenth century. The institutions of French society had developed with much more continuity than the English. There had not been in France a religious revolution, comparable to the introduction of Protestantism into England in the 16th century, nor a political revolution, like the Civil Wars in 17th century England which gave an important role in politics to the House of Commons and the middle classes.

On the contrary, the consolidation of absolute monarchy under the long reign of Louis XIV had given French institutions an entirely different cast from the English. In religious matters, Henry IV had achieved harmony of a sort by promulgating the edict of Nantes 1598, thereby insuring a minimum of security to French Protestants or Huguenots. But Louis XIV revoked the edict in 1685 and large numbers of Huguenots emigrated to Holland, to Germany and to England. The emigres were extremely skilled artisans and entrepreneurs and their loss is said to have hindered, French economic development. With the Protestants gone, France was all Catholic, but religious strife continued in the tension between Jesuits and Jansenists. Louis XIV acted again from his divine, absolute authority. In 1709 he razed Port Royal, the Jansenist center where Pascal had stayed. The Pope followed suit in 1713, declaring Jansenism heretical in the bull Unigenitus. Jansenism did not die out, however, and it was to play a major role in 18th century politics as the noblesse de la robe defended it in its struggles against the monarchy. Finally, it was the Jesuits turn and they were expelled from France in 1762, losing out in their attempt to maintain the power of the Church against the monarchy. The result of these persecutions was to open the door to the criticism of the French religious establishment. Toleration for different religious persuasions was seen as a positive right existing in England but not in France. French Catholicism would have to defend itself not only against attacks on its practices, but more importantly, for its elusiveness and dogmatism. There was less room for disagreement with the authorities of Christ and they seemed more inimical to the claims of reason than the Churches in England. Thus, the claim of religious toleration would sound more radical in France than it had in England.

The political and social institutions in France also fostered a more radical intellectual response than in England. The reign of Louis XIV was crucial here too as it set in motion the developments of the eighteenth century. By consolidating the monarchy over the aristocracy and the other orders of society, Louis XIV made possible the regrouping of the nobility in the eighteenth century. The attempt by the nobility to defend its inherited rights and to gain more political power, in turn, rendered the French social structure more rigid than the English. Genealogies of French noble families were scrupulously cherished and were far more important in determining social status than in England. The insistence of the aristocracy on its exclusive privileged position, to the degree that the custom that nobles were forbidden to work for money was enforced, made the hopes of the higher orders of the bourgeoisie of ennoblement less
Voltaire II 2

Voltaire's experience reveals these themes clearly. Voltaire, whose real name was François Marie Arouet, was from bourgeois stock, and he resented the limitations his background imposed. One night, at the opera, a nobleman, Chevalier de Rohan, insultingly asked Voltaire his real name. Easily the sharpest wit France, Voltaire turned the question into a barb at Rohan. "The name I bear is not a great one, but I at least know to bring it honor." His quip sufficed to get Voltaire beaten up by Rohan's hirelings. Voltaire responded by challenging him to a duel and Rohan countered by making it unsafe for Voltaire to remain in France. All of this nasty affair impressed Voltaire with a hatred for a society in which merit and even genius, represented by himself, had to bow to inherited superiority and haughtiness, represented by Rohan.

Voltaire's sufferings at the hands of the ruling classes did not end even after his considerable success. Much later, in 1750, when Voltaire was the most celebrated lumière in all Europe, the enlightened despot, Frederick of Prussia, invited the poet to his court. There Voltaire thought he would be able to influence the monarch toward the politics of the enlightenment, while enjoying a role of eminence comparable to his abilities. Things went well between Frederick and Voltaire, at least for a while and Voltaire basked in the sunlight of high politics. Frederick even appeared to treat Voltaire as an equal. Soon Voltaire was told by La Mettrie, another kept intellectual at Frederick's Court, known affectionately as the king's atheist, that Frederick was only using Voltaire. The king's exact words were, "I shall need him another year at the most; one squeezes the orange and one throws away the peel." Again Voltaire had to learn that without inherited social position, his well-being was precarious and dependent upon the whims of others.

If Voltaire was subject to these abuses, imagine the dangers for less renown persons. Voltaire, after all, was the first man of letters in European history to earn his livelihood solely from writing. His career marks a turning point in the social history of the intellectual. Until then, writers were either aristocrats who dabbled in letters as an amusement, or commoners in the pay of high-born patrons. Voltaire's success marks the emancipation of the man of letters from economic dependency. The bourgeois had and arrived. Artists would not accomplish this goal until the bohemians of the nineteenth century.

To combat the anomalies, the absurdities, the abuses of French life was the self-appointed task of this bourgeois man of letters. In a sense, Voltaire invented the profession of the intellectual, standing in critical judgment of contemporary mores and institutions. Here was a writer who was neither a theologian, nor a philosopher; neither a scholar, nor a poet; neither a scientist, nor a historian --- although he wrote in many of these fields Voltaire fit comfortably in none of them, at least as they were then conceived. We must credit him with establishing the
model of a new profession in European culture, and he was really a pro. The style that Voltaire
developed to perfection was satire. He deflated the pompous, he revealed the hypocrisy of the
pious, he caricatured the ludicrousness of the sacred. Here is an example of his pungent wit
directed at his favorite target, Christian dogma:

A Jesuit missionary is in dialogue with a Chinese Emperor, patiently clarifying
difficult points of Christian dogma.
"Frère Rigolet: 'Our God was born in a stable, seventeen hundred and
twenty-three years ago, between an ox and an ass.... [his mother] was not a woman, she was a
girl. It is true that she was married, and that she had two other children, named James as the old
gospels say, but she was a virgin nonetheless.'

The emperor: 'What! She was a virgin, and she had children!'
Frère Rigolet: 'To be sure. That is the nub of the story: it was God who gave this
girl a child.'

The Emperor: 'I don't understand you. You have just told me that she was the
mother of God. So God slept with his mother in order to be born of her?'
Frère Rigolet: 'You've got it, Your sacred majesty; grace was already in
operation. You've got it, I say; God changed himself into a pigeon to give a child to a carpenter's
wife, and that child was God himself.'

The Emperor: 'But then we have two gods to take into account: a carpenter and a
pigeon.'
Frère Rigolet: 'Without doubt, Sire; but there is also a third, who is the father of
these two, and whom we always paint with a majestic beard: it was this God who ordered the
pigeon to give a child to the carpenter's wife, from whom the God-carpenter was born; but at
bottom these three are only one. The father had engendered the son before he was in the world;
the son was then engendered by the pigeon, and the pigeon proceeds from the father and the son.
Now you see that the pigeon who proceeds the carpenter who is born of the pigeon, and the
father who has engendered the son of the pigeon, can only be a single god; and that a man who
doesn't believe this story should be burned in this world and in the other.'

The Emperor: 'That is as clear as day.'"

This is Voltaire in his playful mood. Yet implicit in the dialogue is a transparent attack on
Christianity that would hardly win him much esteem in any high places.

Voltaire's animus against Christianity was to become typical of the French
enlightenment, an animus strong enough to lead us to look for the psychological dynamics and
unconscious motives. It may have been perfectly true that the Church represented and fostered
repression and injustice, but the spiritedness of the attack by the men of the Enlightenment
compels us to examine hidden dimensions in their motivation. Voltaire was educated by the
Jesuits, receiving the finest instruction available at the time, -- in the classics as well as in
theology. Deeply immersed in a Catholic world in his childhood, it must have been difficult for
him to make his spiritual voyage toward a secular or at least non-Christian outlook, a voyage
which probably left scars of ambivalence along the way. Voltaire and the other philosophes
could not simply recognize the inadequacies of their inherited tradition; they spent their life in
ridiculing it. This means they never fully escaped from it, that the attitude, symbols, and
standards of the Church were always with them and they always had to proclaim and justify
themselves against something that was still part of them. Voltaire and the philosophes were thus
men divided against themselves, creating something new but always finding it necessary to slay the father within their consciousness as if to affirm and legitimate the rightness of what they were doing. They felt it necessary to prove to themselves and the world that they were good, even though they blasphemed what was taken for the good by their contemporaries. Freud claimed that the humanitarian, the reformer, the do-gooder attributes of the philosophes may be, in part, reactions against feelings of guilt, feelings that the reformer is himself really evil.

These are in outline the social and psychological backgrounds in which Voltaire hammered out his new definition of man and the world. As we begin to examine his ideas and those of the other thinkers who are collectively termed the enlightenment, we should be wary of oversimplifying and homogenizing their ideas. Too often the enlightenment is taken as a uniform statement of all good things, especially of liberal values. Tolerance, progress, reason, democracy, private property, science, civilized behavior --- these notions are not simple dogmas or absolute values developed by men of mature reflection and moderation in the eighteenth century. It is true that Voltaire, Diderot, Montesquieu, D'Alembert, Condillac, Rousseau, Hevétius, d'Holbach, La Mettrie, Turgot, Condorcet and others supported most of these ideas, but not all and not in the same way. What we must focus on is the meaning of these ideas in the context of the eighteenth century and what they meant concretely, with all their connotations, emotional tones, ambivalences, and interrelations. What were the ideas responses to? What arguments were they dismissing? What arguments were relevant to them? Why? How did the ideas which together constitute the Enlightenment develop and change?

There is one generalization that I believe cannot be denied. Although the philosophes came from many sections of French society, the ideas that they elaborated did tend to form an ideology for the bourgeoisie, itself a complex phenomenon. Voltaire, Diderot, and Rousseau all came from different sections of the bourgeoisie; but Montesquieu was from the noblesse de la Robe, d'Holbach's father had been ennobled, and Condorcet came from an old noble family. This is only to say that people can transcend the class of their birth. The bourgeoisie was an important economic force in the eighteenth century and easily the most dynamic sector of society. It should not be unexpected that their cause would be most closely related to that of advanced thinkers, since both groups were battling against the status quo.

Voltaire and the 17th Century Intellectual Inheritance

Descartes: Voltaire formed for himself a private intellectual history taking from the seventeenth century those men and ideas that helped him to formulate his own positions. Descartes and three English thinkers, Bacon, Locke and Newton, were his self-designated precursors. These men had elaborated the philosophical basis for "science." Voltaire found his method, his cosmology and general orientation, in these men, although we must be wary in taking what Voltaire says was their ideas as their ideas.

Descartes had a shaky position in Voltaire's intellectual tradition. In the Philosophical Letters on the English Nation, Voltaire compares Descartes to Newton and finds the former wanting. Descartes was accused of foggy metaphysical speculations, as against the sound experimental science of Newton. Descartes' philosophy, he describes, "...was no more than an ingenious romance, at best seeming probable to the ignorant. He erred on the nature of the soul, on the proofs of the existence of God, on the subject of matter, on the laws of motion, on the nature of light. He admitted innate ideas, he invented new elements, he created a world, he made man according to his own fashion --- in fact, it is rightly said that man according to Descartes is
Descartes' man, far removed from man as he actually is." (p. 71 bottom) What would be called the rationalism of Descartes was unacceptable to Voltaire.

Yet if we look at Voltaire's writings, the Cartesian method of doubt, Descartes' faith in the authority of human reason, his defiance of all tradition and convention, are all there. In Voltaire's definition of authority in the Philosophical Dictionary we find the spirit of Descartes, only more intense, more defiant. "Miserable human beings, whether in green robes or in turbans, whether in black gowns or in suplices, or in mantles and bands, [the reference is to priests of all kinds] never seek to employ authority where nothing is concerned but reason; or consent to be reviled in all ages as the most impertinent of men, as well as to endure public hatred as the most unjust." Simple common sense, which Descartes said no man claims to lack, is adequate for judging the affairs of life. Authorities, especially priests, obfuscated and obscured the obvious. Men were not babies needing to be told what was the truth and what was not. In fact the truth could only be known, when men were free of the restrictions and superstitions of the priests.

Newton:

Newton was the great genius for Voltaire, establishing the true system of the universe without the aid of theology or metaphysics. It was Newton who, putting, science firmly on the intellectual map, demonstrated the possibilities of unmystified human reason. In his Letters, Voltaire praises Newton's "System of Attraction," and summarizes Newton's work as follows: "in all bodies there is a central force which, from one end of the universe to the other, acts on the nearest bodies and on the most remote, according to the immutable laws of mechanics." (p. 79) Attraction or gravity is the unifying principle of the universe and all of nature can be explained by it, without resort to the interference of the supernatural. The implication of Newton's discoveries were exhilarating to Voltaire. In the field of optics: "Newton, with the help of nothing more than a prism, opened our eyes to the fact that light is an agglomeration of colored rays which, all together, produce the color white." (p. 83) Nothing could be hidden from the human mind in light of those miraculous discoveries. These sanguinary conclusions were not, as we know, Newton's. Though he thought his discoveries were divine acts and called for no homages to human reason, such was the implication Voltaire drew from him.

Locke: If Descartes contributed the method of doubt, and Newton the idea of nature, Locke had gone furthest in providing Voltaire with a concept of human nature, or reason. The Essay on the Human Understanding proved to Voltaire beyond doubt that man had no innate ideas, that man was a passive receptor of sensations, which were ordered by the faculty of reason and which gave an accurate knowledge of nature. The import of the doctrine of mind as a tabula rasa was that human nature was a product of environment, of upbringing and not of heredity. Thus if man's education were good, meaning it was not influenced by the fantasies of religion, man would be good. This was the basis for Voltaire's criticism of society. Locke's epistemology set no limits to the process of human enlightenment. Interestingly enough, these ideas were all adopted by Voltaire without any rigorous logical proofs and without the sense that they were true in themselves or that they served no other function than ideological ones. On the contrary, the ideas were ammunition for the war against the infames; they had practical utility in ameliorating man's condition. On the question of the immortality of the soul, for example, Voltaire is willing to admit that the matter is not resolvable by reason, but he concludes that it is morally necessary to believe it: "The common good of mankind requires that we believe the soul immortal." (p. 65) Voltaire was no theoretical genius. Instead he was a popularizer and an advocate, the great social
commentator of the Enlightenment. He was innovative not in epistemology but in delineating a moral posture of the Enlightenment. Voltaire's concept of reason is a prejudice not a deduced principle, open to philosophical debate. Peter Gay, in *The Enlightenment: an interpretation*, characterized Voltaire and the Enlightenment as the first critical era, one which eschewed faith and accepted nothing without putting it through the careful sieve of reason. It might be better to say that unconscious prejudice replaced faith as the source of prejudice in the eighteenth century.
Voltaire: Pascal, Deism and the Church

Pascal: If Voltaire found his philosophical heroes in Newton and Locke, his devil was Pascal, the mathematician who had gone astray. Voltaire wrote against Pascal on four different occasions and he could not rest until Pascal's ideas were slain. For Pascal, a scientist, should have been in the camp of enlightenment; instead he had betrayed his calling, in Voltaire's eyes, and gone over to the enemies of reason. In his polemic against Pascal, perhaps better than anywhere else, Voltaire was forced to clarify his view of human nature. Here more than anywhere else in Voltaire's voluminous corpus the spirit of the philosophe is defined.

Pascal was perplexing to Voltaire: here was a man of reason who was a mystic, a man of science who wore a spiked belt as form of penitence, completely against the natural law of attraction for pleasure and avoidance of pain. Pascal was something of a monstrosity, outside of nature who had to be dismissed, forgotten, pushed out of reality itself. Voltaire shows the same horror of Pascal that the Age of Reason in general had toward the insane (See Foucault, Madness and Civilization) Foucault suggests that in the middle ages madmen, lepers, criminals, all the abortions of nature, were integrated into social consciousness. The level of the bizarre was still part of God's world, part of nature. In fact the insane often reveled truths not available to ordinary rationality; they were in closer contact with the realm of the spirit. Their language was strange and alien but it did have meaning, important meaning could be found in it. The role of the fool in Shakespeare's plays illustrates this point. He speaks the truth where no one else can; he violates ordinary language, a privilege usually paid for dearly. There is a recognition here that what is considered sane, common sensical by society may often be a distortion of reality and the madman, being outside normal reality, can speak the truth. But in the eighteenth Century the insane were regarded with revulsion, and locked out of social reality physically and metaphysically. The insane were only freaks but they were visited in the madhouse for diversion by gentlefolk who poked at them and made fun of them. The insane were viewed as abominations of nature with whom no communication, no contact could be made. It was with something of this attitude that Voltaire regarded Pascal.

Pascal asserted that all men are wretched; Voltaire countered that only some men are wretched. (p. 125) Perhaps Pascal is wretched but not my friends, says Voltaire. Common sense alone would indicate that most men are pleasant, simple creatures.

Pascal had pointed to the contrary nature of man as a new proof of the necessity of religion to explain the mystery. Voltaire answered that if this is a proof of the validity of Christianity, it is not sound, for other traditions explain these paradoxes. The Greek legend of Pandora's box was as good an explanation as the Fall and original sin.

Pascal tries to answer metaphysical questions about ultimate reality; metaphysics is a dirty word to Voltaire. (p. 123)

Pascal points to man's failure to understand himself; at bottom man is a mystery to himself. Voltaire sees no mystery at all; man is motivated by self-love which is perfectly natural and understandable. Man as a moral being is a mixture of good and evil, not as Pascal would have it either a saint or a sinner. Voltaire concedes that Pascal is correct in saying men have both reason and passion, but they are not always in contradiction, not always causing anxiety. Voltaire favors the supremacy of reason, but he does not estimate that man can always be rational. He is not a glowing, optimist as many philosophes of the next generation would be. Pascal sees man as a polarity, swinging from one extreme to another; while Voltaire sees man as a mixture --- and
these two concepts of human nature are quite opposed to one another. Voltaire accuses Pascal of metaphysics in asserting the duality of human nature and that we cannot know essences. Voltaire tends to see man as fluid emotionally, a subject who changes to fit his environment and stimuli. Here is a good example of Voltaire's view:

"Man is not such a riddle as you may figure him to yourself to be, merely to have the pleasure of solving it. Man appears to hold his due place in the scale of beings, superior to brutes, whom he resembles with regard to the organs, but inferior to other beings, to whom he very possibly may bear a resemblance with respect to thought. Man is like everything else we see around us: a composition in which good and evil, pleasures and pains, are found. He has passions to excite him to action, and reason to direct those actions. If man were perfect, he would be God; and those contrarieties which you call contradictions are so many necessary ingredients to the composition of man, who is like everything else in nature, just what he ought to be. Thus might reason argue: it is therefore not reason that teaches man the face of human nature, and it is to faith only we ought to have recourse..." (p. 122)

Pascal was terrified by the silence of the infinite; the scientific study of nature had produced a religious response in him. Voltaire tends not to become obsessed with despair and thinks equanimity is possible for all men, an equanimity suitable for the middle class. Pascal speaks of his despair at the miserable state of man in an obscure corner of the universe. Voltaire answers: As for me, when I look at Paris or London I see no reason whatever for falling into this despair that M. Pascal is talking about; I see a town that in no way resembles a desert island, but is peopled, opulent, civilized, a place where men are as happy as human nature allows." (p. 125)

Pascal shows how the Old Testament prophesied the New Testament and is a sort of proof of Christianity. Voltaire looks at the Old Testament and judges that its greatest heroes, Solomon the wise, for example, were not worthy of emulation. King David was constantly defying God and that cannot be considered good behavior. Pascal tended to give an allegorical interpretation to the Bible and Voltaire a literal one.

Pascal tended to favor the contemplative life and Voltaire the active life as the best road for man.

To Pascal, man, by his nature, was always absorbed with the problem of his religious destiny and with the state of his soul, since man was always thinking of the future and the future meant his death. To Voltaire, the future meant building a better civilization. The future itself had to be tamed and his motto was "savoir pour prevoir." Concern for the future is a precious gift for Voltaire. "If man were so unhappy as to be completely taken up with the present we would not sow, we would not build, we would not plant, we would provide for nothing..." (p. 132 #22) For Voltaire the future means providing, for Pascal it means Providence. Voltaire is expressing the bourgeois spirit of concern for our material destiny over our spiritual destiny. Voltaire's inability to see Pascal's need for self-understanding results in a bourgeois condemnation of contemplation.

"This phrase 'see only ourselves' makes no sense. What sort of thing is a man who doesn't act and yet supposedly contemplates himself? I say not only that such a man would be an imbecile, useless to society, but that such a man cannot exist: for what would he contemplate? His body, his feet, his hands, his five senses? Either he would be an idiot or he would make some use of all that. Would he stop at contemplating his faculty for thought? But he can contemplate that faculty only by exercising it. Either he will think of nothing at all, or he will think of the
ideas he has already had, or else he will compose new ones. Now he cannot get ideas except from the outside. So there he is, necessarily preoccupied either with his sense or with his ideas; there he is, outside himself --- or an imbecile." (p. 132 #23)

The inward gaze, the contemplation of the soul, the analysis of the psyche these are incomprehensible to Voltaire who favors an outward gaze, an extroversion, an action in society and among things as the vocation of man. For Pascal tranquility is impossible for when we are alone we are filled with dread. Voltaire favors a Stoic-Epicurean answer to the problem: tranquility is possible through the regulation of the passions, by leading an orderly active life. Pascal sees behind all forms of action, including work, nothing more than a diversion from the contemplation of our fate, of metaphysical horror. Action is prompted by the negative goal of the avoidance of our fear of death. Voltaire seems in bad faith when he denies the role of contemplation, for he was often depressed himself and the promised tranquility that he speaks of is a pose he is taking for purposes of controversy. In fact it is the official pose of the eighteenth century activist.

The Idea of Evil:

Even though Voltaire was greatly impressed with the possible contributions of science to alleviate human misery, and even though he had great faith in the ability of human reason to wipe away the superstitions of religion and the injustices of the contemporary social and political structure, he was yet not very optimistic about the future of man. In the first half of the eighteenth century, Voltaire realized, the Enlightenment had not spread very far. There were only dim flickerings of reason in Paris, London, Edinburgh, Berlin, Amsterdam and Vienna, but Europe as a whole was a vast sea of darkness. How far could the Enlightenment spread? What were the obstacles it had to overcome and were they surpassable? How perfectible was the human race?

As late as 1734 the philosophes were still not the bearers of the most optimistic view of human destiny. Rather it was Leibniz, with his Christian cosmology and his idea of the great Chain of Being, who represented the optimists. Alexander Pope published, in 1734, his Essay on Man, which had great success in England and France, and which expressed the Leibnizian view. The world existed according to a preestablished harmony of God's design in which all beings were ranged in a scale from the lowest on up to God in the form of a great chain. Since God is infinitely Good, this world is the best possible of all conceivable worlds. From man's point of view, there is evil, but from God's point of view there is none: "all partial evil is universal good." Nothing is really evil in all creation. Pope dismissed all critics of the established order of things natural and political, proclaiming "whatever is, is right." A moral justification for a conservative attitude was thereby established.

Then, in 1755, came the Lisbon Earthquake, taking 30,000 to 40,000 souls and causing unimaginable horrors and misery. How could such destruction occur in the best of all possible worlds? How could God's goodness and his benevolent governance of the world be reconciled with such a catastrophe? The hack theologians of the day went to elaborate lengths to rationalize God's ways to man. Lisbon was a modern day Babylon, a city of sin, and the earthquake was a sign of divine punishment, went the feeble argument. Voltaire was greatly upset by the natural disaster but even more upset by the foolish and callous explanations given by the men of God. He wrote two works in response to the event and to the debate; one a poem, "The Lisbon
Earthquake," and the other a novel, Candide. The subtitle to the poem, "an inquiry into the maxim, 'whatever is, is right,' shows his intention of attacking the philosophical optimism of Leibniz and Pope. And as for the theologians, their arguments were childish: was Lisbon any worse than Paris or London, known centers of degenerate living? Was everyone in Lisbon equally evil and deserving of the same punishment? Were the children of Lisbon, for example, who had no moral responsibility, evil, damned and deserving of death? If the Lisbon Earthquake were an example of God's justice, his attribute of infinite Goodness was surely in question.

Voltaire's greater efforts went to the refutation of Pope and the idea that this was the best of all possible worlds. The poem, "The Lisbon Earthquake," begins with a quite Pascalian description of the human condition: "Oh wretched man, earth-fated to be cursed! /Abyss of plagues, and miseries the worst!" In a black mood, Voltaire continues to give a view of humanity as thoroughly evil, condemning idle optimism as ridiculous and even reprehensible.

Of Nature's Lord who boasts his mighty power
Thus the world's members equal ills sustain,
And perish by each other born to pain:
Yet in this direful chaos you'd compose
A general bliss from individuals' woes?
Oh worthless bliss! in inured reason's sight
With faltering voice you cry,"What is, is right"

The human condition warrants no source for hope, only a complete pessimism is the true realism. Reform is chimerical; progress is absurd; happiness is a delusion.

The mind from sad remembrance of the past,
Is with black melancholy overcast;
Sad is the present if no future state,
No blissful retribution mortals wait,
If fate's decrees the thinking being doom
To lose existence in the silent tomb.
All may be well; that hope can man sustain,
All now is well; 'tis an illusion vain.

Pascal would agree completely with these sentiments: man looking at the future has little source for hope, except Voltaire is speaking even within Christian hope, which, for Pascal gave some assurance to man. To Voltaire, even Christian hope is illusory.

The novel Candide went still further. Here it is not "natural disasters" that are the cause of human misery, but human nature itself. Candide, the mock-hero, is an innocent lad, trained by the Leibnizian philosopher, Doctor Pangloss. Through no fault of his own, this pure and good specimen of human nature at its best, is submitted to a series of disasters and tortures that makes the fate of the people of Lisbon seem light. He is enslaved, he is beaten, he looses his lover, his friends, his fortune, he commits murder unintentionally, he is deceived and used --- all of this due to the innate wickedness of human nature and the unintentional cruelty of Fortune. The experience of the hero is not unique: the people he meets tell him their melancholy life histories that make his own seem not at all unusual. Human societies are prisons in which all manner of plague and pestilence besets the prisoners, mostly by their own doing. The only exception is a
small community called El Dorado, which, tucked away in an obscure corner of Latin America, makes Candide even more unhappy because this utopia, although tasted, cannot be achieved. The novel confirms the beastliness of human nature and Candide, after giving up Panglossian optimism and still searching for a wise man to teach him a moral way, embraces a Manichean philosopher as the most realistic. Evil is thus a positive force in the world and one must be wary of it, withdrawing as much as possible from the intercourse of man. Candide concludes with the negative judgment: "Cultivate your own garden."

The Idea of Happiness

Voltaire's concept of happiness is well illustrated in the moral law of Candide, "Cultivate your own garden." The only happiness that is attainable by man, and it is a small portion indeed, is through the private gratification of one's own affairs. Voltaire subscribes to a mixture of Stoic and Epicurean ethical doctrines that was widespread among the educated classes in the eighteenth century. One should be somewhat withdrawn from the active affairs of the community with a degree of resignation. Society and human fate should be accepted as they are, imperfect and often cruel, while the individual will seek tranquility and calm with a small circle of friends. The world is unchangeable and hopeless, while happiness, to the degree it is possible, comes surely from individual attainments. Happiness is achieved through a regulation of the passions, by reason. Moderation in all things is best. Thus, Voltaire's garden is not a sumptuous, fulfilling, Garden of Eden.

The idea of happiness in the eighteenth century (see, Mauzi, L'idée du bonheur au dixhuitième siècle) was based on a kind of technique, a manipulation of the environment to achieve limited sensual gratification. It was an aesthetic conception based on taste and elegance in manners; etiquette, delicacy and formality were standards in all behavior. Individual self-interest was assumed as the cornerstone of all action; only the Scottish moral philosophers looked to some sort of altruism as significant in morality. The individual was a self-interested party seeking sensual gratification through the moderation of his passions by use of reason. To Voltaire, there was no innate moral sense in man and one could reasonably expect of him no more than a mixture of good and evil, wisdom and folly. The name given to the man who had succeeded in attaining human happiness, who applied the technique well, was honnête-homme. The honnête-homme is decidedly bourgeois, although his manners have been polished by a certain degree of aristocratic grace. The ideal is thoroughly secular as man is placed in the natural and social worlds, but not to any important extent in the supernatural. Grace is attained on earth, though one is unsure about the ultimate immortality of the soul. Voltaire, cosmopolitan and worldly-wise, liked to think of himself as a realist, going neither to the extreme of optimism nor pessimism. His mood would change with the flow of his emotions and with the events of society, so that his attitudes are not completely uniform. He sought to find the equanimity of the honnête-homme and was neither a saint nor a warrior, a sage nor a monk. Voltaire's stinging satires of the customs of his time were thus not prompted by frustrations of a possible coming millennium of peace and happiness. Although he greeted warmly the scientific advances of Newton and the philosophy of Locke, he did not move toward an easy acceptance of a steady amelioration of the human condition. He was more radical in his negative criticism of Christianity than in his positive view of the reconstruction of society.

Deism
Voltaire was not an atheist. Fierce as his barbs against Christianity and myths were, he could not bring himself to deny completely the supernatural. Though he adopted the vision of a mechanical universe, uninterrupted in its processes by miracles and witches, he did not draw the conclusion of complete materialism. Though he was not impressed by the Church as an institution or by the efficacy of prayer, the argument from design seemed to him irrefutable. Such a beautiful work as this universe was, required a builder who was beyond human capacities. In his *Philosophical Dictionary* (P.14) he defined his own religion.

"Last night I was meditating; I was absorbed in the contemplation of nature, admiring the immensity, the courses, the relations, of those infinite globes which are above the admiration of the vulgar.

I admired still more the intelligence that presides over this vast machinery. I said to myself: A man must be blind not to be impressed by this spectacle; he must be stupid not to recognize its Author; he must be mad not to adore Him.

Deism, or natural religion as it was also called, had begun in England and became widespread the in the early eighteenth century, with Toland, Collins, Tindal, Wollaston and others. Newton and Locke had provided the basis for it, but neither were deists. Voltaire was not the first to import natural religion to France, being preceded by Montesquieu and others, but he did greatly help to spread it. Voltaire's deism looked at Judaism and Christianity as perverse sects, dangerous to the well-being of man by inciting fanaticism and war through superstition, fairy-tales and myths. In *Sermon of the Fifty*, he wrote, "...the Christian sect is actually nothing more than the perversion of natural religion; when reason, freed from its chains, will teach the people that there is only one God, that this God is the universal father of all men, who are brothers, that these brothers must be good and just to one another, and that they must practice all the virtues; that God, being good and just, must reward virtue and punish crimes; surely, my brethren, men will be better for it, and less superstitious." Voltaire's natural religion was thus an explanation for the origin of the universe and a groundwork for a universal system of ethics. There is very little in this position of religious experience as such, the relation of God to man, and more of a framework for civilized morality.

**History**

The success of the enlightening process depended on the nature of history, the development of human society in time. One's estimate of what this process was like was crucial to one's world view. The eighteenth century witnessed the secularization of history. Bishop Bossuet's *Histoire universelle* was the last major attempt to write the story of mankind from the perspective of a Christian drama of man's fall and redemption. Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Hume's *History of England* and Voltaire's *Century of Louis XIV* and *Essay on Customs* were each major historical works.

Yet the *Essay on Customs* is peculiarly an unhistorical work, lacking in historical sense. Rather than describing a genuine evolution and judging each historical epoch in its own terms, Voltaire sees the past as a miserable story of human error and folly.

It must once again be acknowledged that history in general is a collection of crimes, follies, misfortunes, among which we have now and then met with a
few virtues, and some happy times, as we sometimes see a few scattered huts in a barren desert ...

Voltaire judges the past in terms of his own values, the cardinal sin of historiography. Having no eye for the validity of alien ways of doing things, he dismisses earlier customs as "ridiculous," "absurd," and inhuman. There is no real development or evolution at all, and history is written as entertainment, teaching only the lesson of the ubiquity of evil. Human nature does not develop or unfold; it is everywhere the same, and differences are due only to Fortune. "... whatever concerns human nature is the same from one end of the universe to the other, and that what is dependent upon custom differs ... it is the effect of chance." (p. 184) The error Voltaire thus makes is to project his own motivations and the taste of his times upon the whole panoply of human experience. There is no fundamental difference between a Christian priest and a Hindu Brahman; they are both duplicitous obscurantists. Voltaire's conception of history is a flat and static presentation of what he calls human nature.

This philosophy of history leaves Voltaire with a major difficulty: how to account for the Enlightenment? Was there no progress at all through the long millennia of recorded experience? Was not the rude savage at all different from the polite, civilized Frenchman? Yes, there has been some progress, Voltaire answers, in science, in the arts of production, in the gentleness of manners, but it is far from a definite, clear development. In fact, Voltaire is not much interested in writing about progress. He is far more concerned to refute Bossuet, to show that Judaism and religious periods in general, were morally the lowest point in human experience. In his history, as in his other writings, Voltaire is first of all the Anti-Christian, and only secondly, the apologist for the Enlightenment.

Politics

Without any hopes for a radical betterment of human nature or society, Voltaire, like many of the philosophes, was not a political revolutionary. The monarchies of Europe were not going to topple and it is not likely that he would have encouraged such a possibility. Voltaire favored change and reform but most characteristically from above, not from below. He tended to disdain the vulgar masses, doubting that enlightenment could rid them of their seeming eternal need for the superstitions of the priests. So Voltaire thought the best way of curing France of abuses was through the education of the Prince. To influence the policies of a monarch, to encourage him to apply reason to his rule, to make knowledge reign over and shape power --- these were Voltaire’s political goals. Thus, Voltaire went to Prussia, as Diderot was later to go to the Russia of Catherine the Great, with the expectancy of success. There was so much that could be done: reform of the educational institutions, abolishing censorship over the press and publishing in general, reform of the legal processes to insure some form of equity for all, elimination of barriers to free trade and commerce, fostering industry and abolishing guilds, reform of the tax system to better distribute the public burden, mollifying the privileges of birth, eliminating corruption from bureaucracies, and above all, establishing freedom of conscience in religious matters. This was more or less the universal program of educated men in the eighteenth century. This is what they meant by freedom and equality. These proposals, taken together, were nowhere instituted in the eighteenth century and it was only the Revolution of 1789 that even took them seriously. Together they form a fairly radical platform, given the conditions of eighteenth century politics and they constitute what has come to be known as liberalism, the ideology of middle class, the merchant, financial and industrial interests. Voltaire, however,
thought of these measures as the fulfillment of human nature and as such they constituted natural rights. They were not seen as benefiting one class more than another, though the aristocracy would certainly not welcome them with warmth.

The only impediment Voltaire saw to establishing a just society were the superstitious mysteries that prevented reason from prevailing. He thought that men of good will would have little trouble in judging matters of government. The problems of correcting abuses were not hidden from men's minds and with relatively little effort solutions could be found. Achieving an orderly and free society could be done in little time and without great disruption. In his own life he was a fierce crusader against what he saw as injustice anywhere in Europe. The exercise of unjust, repressive authority by the aristocracy, the monarch or the church, would inevitably be met by his broadsides and his wit. Still it is hard to grant that Voltaire desired democracy, a claim some historians have made (See Peter Gay, Voltaire's Politics). The extent that inequality of station could be abolished was thought slight by Voltaire. He always argued against the abolition of private property, pronounced by a few communists in the eighteenth century like Father Meslier, Mably and Morelly, regarding it as fundamental to social justice. Private property was a great stimulus to prosperity and civilization, Voltaire felt, and even luxury, the partial result of private property, was not morally bad, as many moralists claimed. The example of England was always before his eyes, an example that demonstrated how freedom, religious toleration, an unrestricted press, were intimately connected with prosperity brought by merchants in a framework of free enterprise.

Along with private property, the idea of the State was crucial to eighteenth century political theories. How could one account for the origin of the State? Was the State a repressive institution, or was it part of the moral advance of civilization? Voltaire gave no clear answers to these fundamental questions of political theory. But his view of human nature as a mixture of good and evil leads him, in general, to expect no great changes in the institutions of power. For this reason the form of the state, monarchy, aristocracy or democracy, tends not to play an important role in his political ideas. In the Philosophical Dictionary in the article on "Country" he says:

But which of the two is be preferred for a country --- a monarchy or a republic? The question has been agitated for four thousand years. Ask the rich, and they will tell you an aristocracy; ask the people, and they will reply a democracy; kings alone prefer royalty, Why, then, is almost all the earth governed by monarchs? In truth, the genuine reason is, because men are rarely worthy of governing themselves."
(p. 154)

Thus, the politics of the philosophes in their first and perhaps greatest representative were ambiguous on all but religious toleration. Voltaire tended to be radical in his expression and in protest over specific issues, but he did not offer a coherent theory of political change and he did not champion fundamental social reformation. He can best be thought of as a genuine advocate of limited human justice for all and a partisan of the cause of the middle classes. He made an identification of the restrictions of the bourgeoisie with the restrictions on human freedom, and he saw economic prosperity as a necessary condition for a general enlightenment.