Voltaire and the Triumph of the Enlightenment

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Voltaire and the Triumph of the Enlightenment

Scope:

To study Voltaire is to study both the most representative and the most influential author of the French Enlightenment—a rare combination of qualities in any era—and to study an individual thinker and historical personality of the utmost singularity. This course seeks not to judge Voltaire either philosophically or morally—each student of Voltaire reaches his or her own judgments in those domains—but to understand him historically in terms of his context, his dilemmas, his own changes, his influences, his major works, his ambiguities, and his place in the transformation of Western civilization.

Voltaire lived for eighty-four remarkably productive years; wrote many hundreds of works in almost all eighteenth-century literary, philosophical, and polemical genres; and left over 20,000 letters in a correspondence of great contemporaneous resonance. It is impossible to do justice to (or even to address) all or even most of these writings in a scholarly lifetime. Seeking those aspects of Voltaire’s thought and influence that most affected his contemporaries and the future and without losing sight of the individual man himself and his deliberate elusiveness, we shall address his role in the movement of thought and culture that has come to be called “the Enlightenment.”

We shall focus first on Voltaire’s origins and intellectual formation; his ambivalent place in his own culture; his rise to literary and social fame and then his social humiliation in aristocratic France; his exile to and fascination with England; his popularization of the seventeenth century’s philosophical and scientific revolutions, above all in their English models; and his use of the celebration of England to engage in a radical criticism of French society and values.

When Voltaire published a moral, religious, political, and philosophical critique of his own nation, on his return to France, he was banished from Paris, which led to a dramatic turn in his life. We shall examine the tranquil period of his remarkably fruitful interaction with the gifted Marquise du Châtelet and his subsequent movement from seeming optimism to philosophical and personal despair. We shall study how he expressed that despair in his “Poem on the Lisbon Earthquake,” how he wrestled with the problem of evil, and how from that experience there emerged Candide, his most enduring work. We shall attempt to understand his singular form of deistic belief in God linked to skepticism about God’s providence and how this belief led to a particular form of humanism that marked both his own life and thought and mirrored deeper changes in the culture around him. We shall examine his creation and use of the Voltairean “philosophical tale” as his most effective means of communication. We will also look at his emergence, at his estate at Ferney, as “the patriarch” of the French Enlightenment and its most energetic and successful crusader on behalf of remedying what it saw as the ills of the human condition. We shall look closely at his nuanced deism, at his quarrel with the atheists, and at his popular and influential contributions to historical writing and understanding. Finally, we shall analyze his great crusade on behalf of religious toleration and his apotheosis as the very symbol of the Enlightenment to which he gave his mind and soul.
Lecture One
“The Patriarch”: An Overview

Scope: Voltaire (1694–1778) was the most influential author of the eighteenth century, an epochal period that changed the thinking and culture of Western Europe and, through it, the world. He lived for eighty-four fruitful years, writing many hundreds of published works and well over 20,000 letters. His life both reflected and profoundly altered the movement we now call “the Enlightenment.” He wrote in almost every literary genre—from light verse to epic poem, drama, narrative fiction, essay, dictionary, philosophical treatise, and scientific popularization—and virtually created a genre, the “philosophical tale,” in which he has remained most alive for posterity.

For all his works and resonance, Voltaire remains in many ways an elusive thinker, who frequently changed both his views and his style of veiling the more “subversive” implications of his writings. It is important to study him, then, in terms of the manifest content of his thought, in terms of his influence, and in terms of the internal debates and unresolved dilemmas of his life’s work.

Outline

I. Voltaire is a figure of towering historical importance.
   A. By the length of his life, the variety of his involvements with the Enlightenment, and the extraordinary productivity of his literary and philosophical career, Voltaire is a figure of striking influence in the history of Western civilization and, simultaneously, a touchstone for other thinkers and movements of thought.
      1. Encouraged in his youth to write—he was an excellent poet by the age of eleven or twelve—Voltaire continued at his craft until his death at the age of eighty-four. His collected works take up more than a hundred dense volumes of published texts and more than a hundred volumes of correspondence.
      2. For the eighteenth century, which gave him so vast an audience, he was a master of theater, epic poetry, serious and light verse, essays, histories, philosophical treatises, polemical pieces, scientific popularizations, and a genre that he developed and made his own, the “philosophical tale,” the best known of which today is *Candide*.
      3. An irony of his literary career is that eighteenth-century readers, and Voltaire himself, would have believed that his immortality would be found in his tragedies and epic poetry. Today, his drama and poetry are read mainly for the clues they provide to his philosophical tales.
   B. From his own lifetime to the present, books about Voltaire have reached prodigious numbers. One knows much about both eighteenth-century and later figures by their remarkably diverse views of Voltaire.
      1. Virtually no one was lukewarm to Voltaire—a reaction that signals an important thinker. He was admired with adulation or loathed with hatred and contempt. Even today, people react deeply to Voltaire.
      2. For nineteenth-century traditional conservatives, Voltaire was the enemy. Voltaire’s anticlericalism and criticism of the Judeo-Christian traditions made him a touchstone for those in the nineteenth century, and many in the twentieth century, who believed the Enlightenment had marked a terrible turning point, when Europe divorced itself from its customary and traditionalist religious roots. Indeed, one Romantic poet placed the blame for the French Revolution on Rousseau and, above all, on Voltaire.
      3. For some Catholic and Protestant thinkers of the nineteenth century, however, Voltaire had anticipated the turn that Christianity had to take toward more awareness of social issues and the problems of remediable human suffering. Those thinkers who were open to liberal reforms said that Voltaire was driven to anticlericalism by the abuses of the churches in the eighteenth century. Some claimed he was the greatest Christian thinker of his day or, indeed, the “most Christian.”
      4. Yet Enlightenment devotees of Voltaire, and their nineteenth-century descendents, would have disagreed. They claimed he broke the pattern of European history, to move closer to what they took to be the human desire for natural knowledge and the pursuit of happiness.
   C. Voltaire was “the patriarch” of the French Enlightenment.
1. Denis Diderot was known as “le philosophe,” and Rousseau, as “Jean-Jacques,” but Voltaire was universally “the patriach,” the revered father of the Enlightenment.

2. He was sensitive to criticism and to his reputation, and believed that others claimed credit for his thought and work. He quarreled with many, if not most, other Enlightenment thinkers, but ultimately, he was the patron of the movement and its source of inspiration.

3. He set the agenda of the essential debates of the Enlightenment and the sharp anticlerical tone of the period.

4. He stamped the Enlightenment as committed to deism, a belief in God known through nature, with a rejection of all claims of supernatural revelation and, in particular, a rejection of the Judeo-Christian testaments.

5. Believing that the clergy had duped a superstitious people into giving it control over culture, education, censorship, and ethics, Voltaire also stamped the Enlightenment with the cause that was always dear to his heart—the pursuit of religious toleration.

6. In his political thought, Voltaire was a critical, rather than a systematic, thinker. In his political writing, he exposed abuses of power, rather than speculating on an appropriate, or just, system of government to correct them. He left the agenda for reform to posterity.

7. Above all, he set the tone for the Enlightenment, demonstrating the notion that once you have laughed at something, you never hold it in the same reverence again. Religious claims, intolerance, political leadership, abuses of power, professions held in high regard—all were fair game for Voltaire’s mordant wit.

8. By the last generation of his life, his estate at Ferney had become the mecca of enlightened European minds and as much a center of influence as most political capitals and courts.

II. Despite all the work Voltaire left and all the scholarly work that has been devoted to him, the man remains an elusive thinker, an enigma, in some way, for anyone who approaches him. No definitive work exists to explain Voltaire’s thought.

A. Given his heterodoxy and daring as a thinker, and the risks these posed, Voltaire had to mask much of his meaning.

1. He did so with his ironic style. In some instances, he will have a character make a compelling and convincing argument on a particular issue, only to say that he himself believes that people who say such things are heretics who should be burned.

2. He deliberately used double meanings so that in a court of law, for example, his text could be read innocently, but his knowing audience would understand the irony.

3. He attempted to affect multiple audiences simultaneously. He might give Christian readers, for example, sound Christian grounds to believe in religious toleration and the need to bring an end to the cruelty of persecutions. At the same time, he also addressed the audience that might see Christianity as he did—as inseparable from persecution as the author of persecution.

4. Voltaire once said: “The secret to being boring is to reveal everything.” Voltaire would not reveal everything, because what was clear changed over the course of life or, perhaps, over the course of the debate itself.

B. Further, the man himself embodied profound ambiguities.

1. Even in the same period of his life, Voltaire frequently changed his mind on fundamental issues of politics, God and providence, formal philosophy, ethics, and so forth. For Voltaire, life overflowed the categories by which we try to contain it in human thought. One critic wrote that Voltaire was “a chaos of clear ideas.”

2. Voltaire offered no systematic philosophy, because he wanted to contribute to different debates at different times under different circumstances, depending on his political standing at the time, his audience, and whether he was writing for the present or posterity. He had no will to consistency.

3. Voltaire wrote of a friend that he was sometimes Socrates, that is, always philosophically engaged and serious, and sometimes Epicurus, that is, always philosophically detached. He could have been writing about himself.

C. Voltaire always has the last laugh on us all, which may be by design. Laughter was a weapon for Voltaire, and irony was essential to that laughter.
D. He wrote: “I have, and can only have, no other goal but truth, but there is more than one truth, that time alone can disclose.”

Essential Reading:
Delon and Seth, Voltaire et L’Europe.

Supplementary Reading:
Lanson, Voltaire.

Questions to Consider:
1. One can well call the eighteenth century in France “the Age of Voltaire.” Are there any other ages that you think might well be defined by a single and singular thinker?
2. What are the problems of “interpreting” a protean thinker, some of whose variability is explained by external circumstances and some of whose variability is chosen as a way of being in the world?
Lecture Two

The Education of a Philosophe

Scope: In the past, scholars argued that Voltaire became a worldly poet in his youth, visited England, and returned a philosopher. In fact, the French Enlightenment, under Voltaire’s inspiration, would come to unite the worldly poets and philosophers under the title of *philosophes* and, indeed, Voltaire himself had effected that union in many ways before his exile to England. After receiving an excellent education from the Jesuits, the young man born François-Marie Arouet would move in circles in which new philosophies and tastes flourished, would fall in and out of deep difficulties with his father and the authorities, would change his name to the more aristocratic sounding “de Voltaire,” and would earn a substantial reputation as a poet, dramatist, and wit. He invested wisely and secured a certain financial independence.

In the salons and private societies of the early eighteenth century in France, Voltaire was exposed to the great philosophical debates of the past century, to a new religious philosophy called deism, and to the claims of free thought and of various heterodoxies. He seemed on the verge of important literary and social successes. Then, an encounter with a blue-blooded aristocrat showed him the limits of his seeming status, earned him the last of several stays in the Bastille, and as a condition for his release, saw him exiled to England (1726–1729). He left France with deep questions about his country and great openness toward what he would experience in England.

Outline

I. Scholars have profoundly changed their thinking about the young Voltaire.
   A. The traditional view of Voltaire is that in France, he was a poet, but during his exile in England (1726–1729), he became a philosopher. This view leaves out his excellent education in France.
   B. His immersion in French culture had already made him a *philosophe*.
      1. In the eighteenth century, the French used the term *philosophe* to mean not a formal or systematic philosopher but a philosopher of the French Enlightenment, someone who examined the issues of his day critically and analytically. In that sense, Voltaire was already a *philosophe* when he left France.
      2. Part of the traditional view of the reign of Louis XIV is that it culminated in a stifling orthodoxy and censorship that had killed the dynamism of seventeenth-century French intellectual life.
      3. In fact, France under Louis XIV was in a state of intellectual ferment. Even works published with official approval contained the great philosophical contestations of the age between received ways of thinking and new philosophical thought.
      4. The last fifteen to twenty years of Louis’s reign, especially his wars, had led to widespread suffering, unbearable taxation, agricultural crises, and famine.
      5. This situation led to intense moral and political criticism of the monarchy, rarely direct, but often in the form of idealized portraits of great rulers of the past.
      6. Voltaire would have been familiar with this literature, but his later political criticism does not use the past as a model; instead, he makes appeals to the future or to contemporary practices and he criticizes outright the abuses that he sees around him.
      7. Clandestine literature was copied by hand and widely circulated in France, containing radical philosophies, political and moral criticism, and heterodox religious tracts.
      8. In addition, by the late seventeenth century, the world of letters had become an international republic. Learned journals from Holland and other countries familiarized readers with the debates occurring throughout Europe and were widely read and discussed.
   C. While Voltaire was still relatively young, France experienced the cultural revolution of what is known as the Regency.
      1. In 1715, Louis XIV died and Philippe, Duke of Orleans, became Regent. Philippe was a free thinker and very interested in the new philosophy. He was familiar with deistic ideas and the works of some of the most heterodox minds and poets of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.
      2. Censorship was substantially lessened under Philippe’s rule. Critical literature now poured into the circles that the young Voltaire frequented.
II. Voltaire’s family secured for him an excellent Jesuit education.

A. The vitality of Jesuit education played a major role in shaping the Enlightenment. The irony is that the Jesuits’ students displaced their teachers as the intellectual leaders of the culture.

B. Voltaire characterized his education as a period of Latin and bad poetry, but nothing could be further from the truth. How could these heterodox, innovative Enlightenment figures have emerged from their Catholic schools as such open-minded and critical thinkers without having received a striking education from the Church in France? What did this education entail?
   1. It involved a deep grounding in logic, disputation, and rhetoric, including categories of logic, analysis of argument, and the study of debate.
   2. As part of this training, students were encouraged to look for possible objections to what they were being taught or were trying to prove and to overcome these objections with effective arguments. This way of thinking became a habit of mind for the students.
   3. The classics and modern analysis of the classics were also stressed. The works of pre-Christian Roman authors, such as Horace, Cicero, and Lucretius, were studied as examples of rhetoric and poetry. Voltaire and his contemporaries were exposed to the finest pre-Christian models of learning, which were often themselves heterodoxical, anti-religious, and satirical.

C. Voltaire profited in particular from the specific milieu of the collège de Louis-le-Grand in Paris.
   1. Voltaire attended the most prestigious Jesuit college in Paris, the collège de Louis-le-Grand, from the age of ten until he was seventeen years old. There, he studied under the finest teachers and met the crème of French aristocratic society.
   2. He made social connections that would offer him invaluable patronage, protection, and influence in his later life.

III. The young man made a transition from Arouet to Voltaire.

A. Voltaire had serious conflicts with his father.
   1. Voltaire’s father began his career as a notary and had become a fiscal official in the royal bureaucracy. He had become wealthy and wanted his son to continue on that path by studying law.
   2. Voltaire wanted a literary career when such a career was unheard of in France. People of independent means might pursue literature, but it was not a respected profession.
   3. After school, Voltaire moved into literary circles, discussion groups, and the theater in Paris.
   4. His father’s attempts to settle him in administrative positions failed. When his father secured for Voltaire a diplomatic position in Holland, Voltaire fell in love with a French Protestant exiled there. At a difficult time in French/Dutch relations, this affair caused a scandal. Voltaire was dismissed and sent back to Paris in disgrace. His father wanted to have him deported, but Voltaire avoided that fate.
   5. Literary satires leveled at the regent were attributed to Voltaire, who was sent to the Bastille for eleven months as a result. He continued to write while in prison.

B. On his release, Voltaire was soon enjoying literary success and entered the world of societies and the court.
   1. In 1714, Voltaire was introduced to the Société du Temple, a long-standing gathering of heterodox, free-thinking men and women of letters. The society had been bullied during Louis’s reign but had come into its own during the Regency and became Voltaire’s intellectual home until 1723.
   2. The society encouraged Voltaire’s poetry and introduced him to the members’ indifference to religion, naturalistic versus supernaturalistic way of thinking, and epicureanism.
   3. He became a courtier at Versailles and learned the ambiguities of the would-be aristocratic bourgeois.
   4. Although the aristocracy at court realized Voltaire was of low birth, his wit and eloquence served him well, and he benefited from a time when the nobility wanted to be associated with the world of thought and letters.
   5. In 1718, he enjoyed a first and stunning literary success with his tragedy *Oedipus* and he changed his name from Arouet to Voltaire.

C. Voltaire enjoyed literary triumphs, fame, and wealth.
   1. Voltaire became the poet and playwright of France, much celebrated and sought after.
   2. In 1722, his father died and Voltaire inherited the family patrimony. He placed his investments extremely well—in commerce and, above all, in overseas commerce—resulting in substantial wealth.
Ironically for someone who would become one of the great pacifist writers of his time, Voltaire placed much of his investment in munitions manufacturers.

3. He was given pensions by various aristocrats, by the Regent and, later, by the King and Queen of France.

4. His early works mark a great deal of new philosophical input onto the French stage, with themes of religious toleration, the harm of abuses of power, and the dangers of fanaticism.

IV. At this height of fame and influence, Voltaire experienced humiliation, imprisonment, and exile to England.

A. In 1726, the heir of the aristocratic Rohan family insulted Voltaire for his social pretensions. Voltaire responded with his own witty insult. A few days later, Voltaire was assaulted by the nobleman’s lackeys. His aristocratic friends did nothing to help him.

B. Voltaire sought revenge but found himself in the Bastille instead.

C. As a means of leaving prison, he negotiated an exile to England.

D. He believed himself to be leaving a France that lacked respect for men of letters and science. France, in his mind, was a country of aristocratic abuse of power that did not appreciate those who might have a true utility for their nation and for mankind. In England, Voltaire believed he had discovered a different model of the world.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:
Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*.

Questions to Consider:
1. What are the tensions of an aristocratic culture that seeks a meritocracy of letters and intellectual talent?
2. Did Voltaire’s formal and informal education complement or oppose one another?
Lecture Three  

*Philosophical Letters, Part I*

**Scope:** Deeply impressed by English thought, and, above all, by the English scientific and philosophical revolutions of the seventeenth century, Voltaire sought to explain and to popularize British thinking to his French readers in one of his most influential works, the *Philosophical Letters*. He celebrated sound philosophers as more important to humanity than its political and military heroes, and he argued against any notion that the thinkers of one’s own native land are to be favored over another nation’s thinkers. Although he was respectful of René Descartes, who was beloved among the new philosophers in France, he praised the superior English empirical tradition, above all the work of Francis Bacon, John Locke, and Isaac Newton.

In his treatment of Locke and Newton, Voltaire supported and propagated a view of natural philosophy as limited in its claims to what is known from experience alone, urging the abatement of metaphysical claims. In Voltaire’s view, by limiting their philosophical scope, Locke and Newton achieved wonders in the realm of knowledge, and he sought to explain Newton’s achievement to his countrymen. In his discussion of the English practice of inoculation against smallpox, Voltaire offered a model of how knowledge gained from experience can be applied to reduce the suffering of the human condition, a model that would dominate Enlightenment thinking.

**Outline**

I. Voltaire’s *Philosophical Letters* (1734) set out to celebrate and popularize English thought. He was convinced that what had occurred in the scientific and philosophic revolutions in England in the seventeenth century was important to all mankind.

A. Although he meant “philosophical” in its broadest sense, that is, unbiased, open-minded critical inquiry, Voltaire, in his *Letters from England*, as the *Philosophical Letters* were also known, addressed the issue of the nature of formal philosophy. He also assigned philosophy a bold and provocative place in the history of England.

1. He asserted that philosophers are more important than political or military heroes. Some men changed the world by force of violence, but others changed the world by force of truth, and they are the true heroes of humanity.

2. According to Voltaire, the greatest hero in history, greater than Caesar, Alexander the Great, Oliver Cromwell, or anyone else, is Newton. Others conquered the world, but he enlightened it.

3. Philosophy as a human enterprise knows no national boundaries. Many in France celebrated the seventeenth-century revolutions in science and philosophy, but they did so on the basis of chauvinism. French readers favored French authors, especially Descartes, but Voltaire urged that this is not the way of philosophy.

4. Philosophers have always been under suspicion of posing a danger to the state, but, unlike religious enthusiasts, they do not. For Voltaire, history shows us that theologians lead rebellions; philosophers work peaceably to enrich mankind.

B. Voltaire asserted the superiority of English over French natural philosophy, above all, the English achievements of the seventeenth century.

1. The theoretician of the new, inductive, experimental science, Francis Bacon, recognized the need to experiment, to begin with patient observation of nature, and to construct and test hypotheses, and in doing so, he provided the “scaffolding” of the new philosophy, which later generations used to achieve the revolution in science.

2. In Voltaire’s view, Bacon did not achieve major ends as a scientist, per se. He did not penetrate nature and discover its laws and operations. What he did was to provide a method of seeking knowledge, a method of philosophy.

3. That method had been given its formal exposition in epistemology (the philosophy of knowledge) by the towering figure of John Locke. Locke was the first to understand the nature of knowledge—that it is derived from experience, combined by the active human mind, and tested against the realities of nature.
4. Isaac Newton was the culminating achievement of Bacon’s method and Locke’s epistemology. He represented the summit of this new philosophy, whose superiority to Descartes, Voltaire believed, needed to be known both in general and in its particulars.

II. Voltaire praises and explains English empiricism.

A. Empiricism is learning about nature inductively, moving from the particulars of our experience to generalizations that are derived from those particulars and can be tested against them.
   1. Voltaire begins his discussion of English thought with a letter on inoculation against smallpox.
   2. The story of inoculation contains the philosophy of the Enlightenment in outline.
   3. Reason and experience determine us to employ a method with nature that saves lives and reduces suffering.
   4. Mothers in the Turkish highlands discovered that they could sell their daughters into slavery for a higher price if they were unmarked by the scars of smallpox. They noted that mild cases of smallpox provided lifelong immunity to the disease and limited the scarring, so they exposed their young daughters to benign cases of smallpox.
   5. The English ambassador’s wife observed this practice and brought the lesson back to England, where the first inoculations began. The practice was studied and the mortality rate showed that it worked.
   6. This model showed that knowledge could move us from helplessness to natural understanding to increased happiness. This is Voltaire’s paradigm of what empirical knowledge can and should be.
   7. Subsequently, Voltaire and the Enlightenment would wage a forty-year struggle for inoculation in France, where the idea was resisted by both religious and medical authorities.

B. Voltaire explains the philosophy of John Locke.
   1. René Descartes, who dominated the new philosophy in France, had argued that we must begin with rationally certain, clear, and distinct ideas that we find innate in our minds. From these, we may deduce by logic our knowledge of the world.
   2. For Voltaire, Locke’s sensationalism—meaning that we gather knowledge by the experience of the senses—was superior to Descartes’s rationalism and doctrine of innate ideas. This model links us to the “things” of the world and makes authentic scientific knowledge possible.

C. The dramatic part of Lockean epistemology that Voltaire wished to see popularized in France was the view that if our knowledge is all derived from our experience, then our knowledge is limited to our experience.
   1. The doctrine of innate ideas is a dead end. If people assume that the principles they hold were placed in their minds by God, inquiry ends. Locke saw that we must learn from God’s creation. The only way to do so is to study it patiently, drawing from sense experience our knowledge of how nature actually behaves.
   2. Locke avoided theorizing about the substance or nature of the mind. Every philosopher has had a theory about what the essence of the mind is, but for Locke, this question is beyond human experience. It should not surprise us that these “novelists of the mind” have never been able to convince one another.
   3. One of Descartes’s most central arguments was that the mind is immaterial substance, and thus categorically distinct from matter, which cannot think. Only the soul can think.
   4. Locke’s response to this was scandalous in its day: to say that the mind could not be material is the same as saying that an omnipotent God is incapable of creating matter that can think, if He so wished. How could any human being, limited to the knowledge of our senses, prescribe to God how the world must be made? For Locke, this skepticism about substance was nothing more or less than appropriate human humility.
   5. Voltaire defended Locke’s argument that philosophical skepticism is the only honest conclusion in metaphysical matters, even on the issue of whether or not matter might be capable of thought. There are limits to what human beings can know. The only honest conclusion in metaphysical matters is to admit ignorance.
   6. Voltaire expressed his belief in the necessity to admit the limits of human knowledge in his celebrated phrase: “I am proud to be as ignorant as John Locke on this matter.”
   7. For Voltaire, Locke taught us to avoid irresolvable metaphysical issues and problems and, instead, to study ourselves and the world through the limited natural faculties with which God chose to endow us. The proof of the superiority of this method for Voltaire is the Newtonian achievement.
D. Voltaire begins his popularization of Newton in France.
   1. Newtonian science was the fruit and proof of the superiority of Lockean empiricism.
   2. Through the empirical method, Newton had discovered the nature of light and its separation into primary colors.
   3. Through this method, Newton had discovered the law of gravity, with which the heavens and motion could be explained.
   4. The Newtonians came under fierce attack from Descartes’s followers, because the Newtonian method could not explain why gravity happens. What in matter accounts for the law of gravity? From what other principle was gravity derived?
   5. The Newtonians responded to this criticism by maintaining that the goal of science is not to explain why things occur but to understand how things behave. Science could not answer the ultimate question of the “why” of the world, but science could open to us the “how” of natural behavior.

E. For Voltaire, Newtonian science redefined what knowledge of nature was all about, removing it from abstract metaphysical speculation.
   1. Voltaire celebrated Newton’s famous phrase: “I will not feign a hypothesis,” meaning, “I will only speculate where there is knowledge and where hypotheses may be tested against our experience of the world.”
   2. Voltaire pays Descartes much due in his Philosophical Letters. For Voltaire, Descartes put the world on the road to truth by freeing us from the past and telling his contemporaries that all things were open to doubt and reexamination. It was Newton, however, Voltaire argues, who took the world to the end of that journey.
   3. In the Philosophical Letters, Voltaire reminds his French readers of Newton’s substantial accomplishment: his laws of motion, his theory of light, and his system of universal gravitation.
   4. Descartes’s physics assumed that everything that occurred did so by matter touching matter. The world was one vast material fluid in which everything affects everything else by motion. Voltaire asserted that this idea was logical, but that it had been superceded by the Newtonian demonstration that something we can’t understand metaphysically—action at a distance—does occur in nature.
   5. Voltaire summarizes the Newtonian achievement as Newton’s ingenious application of Lockean empiricism to the study of nature. For Voltaire, Newton’s work altered the human relationship to natural knowledge, creating almost boundless opportunities.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. What do Bacon, Locke, and Newton all have in common for Voltaire?
2. Why, for Voltaire, contrary to what almost all of his contemporaries believe, is philosophy no threat and, indeed, a potential great benefit to a society?
Lecture Four  

**Philosophical Letters, Part II**

**Scope:** Voltaire introduced his readers to an idealized England of religious pluralism and tolerance, balanced government, fair taxation, commercial energy, and the triumph of the secular over the sectarian. He drew portraits of all of the major religions in England, celebrating whatever seemed more tolerant, fair, decent, and lawful than the contrasting behaviors of the Catholic Church in France. Similarly, he praised the commercial activity and prosperity of England, linking it to the greater religious tolerance and less aristocratic values of Britain as opposed to France. While granting that the struggle for liberty in England usually emerged from rivalries among elites who were eager to despoil the common people, he argued that, nonetheless, the English had succeeded in building a liberty unknown in France and that it, too, was a cornerstone of British well-being.

For Voltaire, the English valued what served the nation well, including men of letters, philosophers, and merchants. He contrasts throughout, and ever more explicitly as his work progresses, an aristocratic, officially intolerant, and excessively traditionalist France to a commercial, politically free, and religiously tolerant England. In some chapters, he accomplishes nothing less than a reevaluation of what is important to a progressive and free human life.

**Outline**

I. The *Philosophical Letters* are Voltaire’s assault on what he sees as a religiously intolerant, politically absolutist, and socially aristocratic France.

   A. Voltaire sought to popularize England’s relative differences from France and to offer his readers an alternative set of perspectives from which to judge their own political, social, religious, and intellectual culture.
      1. Voltaire begins by discussing religion, which is striking given the context of religion in France in the early eighteenth century.
      2. King Louis XIV had revoked the Edict of Toleration that had been accorded the Protestants. They were no longer protected by law, and the penalty for preaching Protestantism was death.
      3. The Protestants of France went into refuge in Holland, Prussia, and England, ironically enriching those nations that were traditionally enemies of France.
      4. Voltaire’s argument that a nation could flourish, not despite religious diversity but because of it, was a stinging rebuke to the French belief that having only one religion was a necessity for social order and peace.

   B. Voltaire’s narrative voice in the *Letters* begins as that of a naïve orthodox Frenchman who is shocked to discover religious differences in his conversations. French readers would have shared that perspective. The voice changes over the course of the work to that of a heterodox, cosmopolitan man of the world.

II. Voltaire discusses English religion to attack French intolerance and Catholic orthodoxy and to engage in free-thinking discussions of spiritual matters.

   A. He begins with the Quakers, who for the French reader, would have been members of a bizarre cult. Voltaire’s discussion of the Quakers is gently ironic, and he uses them to criticize not only Catholics but also all established Christian churches.
      1. Voltaire notes that the Quaker appeal to Scripture is a model of how the Bible can be used to defend mutually exclusive positions. He describes a discussion with a Quaker on the subjects of baptism and circumcision to insinuate in the reader’s mind that one may find support in the Bible for totally different positions.
      2. Furthermore, Voltaire puts religion on a human plane when he says, “…there’s no arguing with an enthusiast. Better not take it into one’s head to tell a lover the faults of his mistress or a litigant the weakness of his legal case or to talk sense to a fanatic.” In other words, disputes about religion are human arguments that reflect human nature.
      3. The Quakers also practice a Christianity without ceremonialism or priests.
4. Despite their different doctrine, the Quakers live simple Christian lives of human equality, high ethics, and above all, religious tolerance.

5. Voltaire criticizes those aspects of the Quaker faith shared by revealed and supernatural religion in general, especially their enthusiasm and religious inspiration.

6. Voltaire stresses the dominance of the social over the religious, offering a purely secular and sociological analysis of the evolution of the Quakers.

7. Because they were not members of the Church of England and because their religion prohibited them from taking certain oaths, the Quakers were banned from almost all aspects of English life except trade and commerce. As a result, they acquired wealth, which in turn reduced the religious fervor and commitment of their children.

8. That manner of argument sounds reasonable in the twentieth century, precisely because we are the heirs of Voltaire and the Enlightenment. The French in the early eighteenth century did not talk about religion in terms of secular sociological phenomena. Voltaire’s secularizing of the history of a religion is an entirely different way of thinking.

B. Voltaire next turns to the Church of England, which he satirizes and criticizes insofar as it resembles the French Catholic Church. He also gently, if ironically, praises it insofar as it deviates from the French Catholic Church.

1. He criticizes the hierarchical episcopacy—the institution of archbishops and bishops—and its role in fomenting the wars and civil strife of England’s past.

2. He praises the clear, legal preeminence of the State over the Church and the highly imperfect but superior morals of the English Churchmen.

3. In France, many sons of aristocrats were named to positions in the Church, but they did not minister to the needs of the flock. Instead, they used the wealth they accumulated to lead corrupt lives in Paris and other cities. In England, only long-devoted service to the Church led one to be named a bishop.

4. As a result, Voltaire humorously notes, by the time British men are given power in the Church, in contrast to Frenchmen, they are no longer much interested in women or drinking. Thus, Voltaire invites his readers to laugh at the worldly behavior of their clerics, which means that they will never hold those clerics in the same reverence again.

C. In discussing the Presbyterians, Voltaire emphasizes their Puritanism, bitter zeal, and intolerance and he poses the question of how Britain remains peaceful.

1. His answer is that in England, the people have become wiser and more humane than their clerics. Again, this idea would have been provocative of thought and, among the orthodox, anger.

2. In addition, in France, trade and commerce are scorned as common. In England, the positive view of trade, along with the diversity of religion, has created a voluntary, peaceful, tolerant interaction that enriches and betters mankind. Voltaire’s final passage in the Letter on Presbyterians uses the example of the Stock and Commodities Exchange in London to show that religious pluralism is a great benefit to society.

D. Finally, Voltaire praises the intellectual merit and temperament of the Socinians (Unitarians), who are the closest English Christians to the deists, but given their lack of fanaticism, he concludes, they cannot succeed as a religion. Religions depend on fanaticism and chaos to sink their roots.

III. Voltaire uses English government and society as a foil to criticize the despotism and unenlightened government of France.

A. The approach of the *Letters* departs from prior criticism, which had appealed to an idealized, medieval past; instead, it appeals to the possibilities of the present and the future, as shown in the prosperous, free, and fair England.

B. Voltaire idealizes English life to emphasize what he finds to be the reasons for England’s success and to place his criticism of France in bolder relief.

1. England is governed by laws, not by arbitrary individual wills. All parts of British government and life are under the rule of law, and all Englishmen are protected.

2. England has achieved limitation of government and power by civil liberties and legal equality.

3. England has also managed to avoid civil strife and the persecution that leads to rebellion by means of religious tolerance.
4. Unlike France, England has achieved equality of taxation. In France, the nobles and the Church pay no tax, and the country has become known as the home of the impoverished peasant who must hide all surplus, or risk yet higher taxation. England, in contrast, is the home of the comfortable yeoman, the farmer who is protected and free.

5. England has accorded an honorable status to commerce.


7. In short, the peacefulness and prosperity of a tolerant, secular, lawful, free, and commercial England is seen in contrast to an intolerant, anti-commercial, aristocratic, and despotic France.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:
Locke, *A Third Letter Concerning Toleration*.

Questions to Consider:
1. Voltaire is trying to reach both free-thinking and conventional French readers. What does he most want them to understand about English religious life?

2. What he does most want them to understand about English society?
Lecture Five
The Years at Cirey

Scope: Voltaire returned to France, overseeing the publication of his *Philosophical Letters* (1734). The response to this work by the clergy and secular authorities was furious, and Voltaire was banished from Paris. He took physical, personal, and intellectual refuge at the estate of the Marquise du Châtelet. Emilie du Châtelet was one of the most remarkable thinkers of the eighteenth century, a woman who had mastered some of the most difficult philosophical, mathematical, and scientific legacies of the seventeenth century. Voltaire and Mme. du Châtelet built themselves scientific laboratories and a theater, and these years, from 1735 to 1749, were some of the most productive of Voltaire’s life.

In particular, Voltaire and Mme. du Châtelet successfully undertook the explanation and popularization of the Newtonian achievement in science, physics, astronomy, and philosophy to a French audience. This work transformed the understanding of the French intellectual community. Voltaire also produced striking and influential works in theater, philosophy, and history. This idyll came to an end with the death of Mme. du Châtelet in 1749, an event that would alter the course of Voltaire’s life.

Outline

I. Voltaire returned to Paris to publish the *Philosophical Letters* and to reestablish himself as a central figure in French life.

A. The book was a bestseller, to Voltaire’s trepidation and delight. He knew that certain people would consider the work dangerous and irreligious, but he had taken precautions that he thought would probably save the work from major condemnation.
   1. First, France had recently entered into an alliance with England, and Voltaire believed that the authorities would find it only natural to explain the government and country of a new ally.
   2. In addition, Voltaire had avoided certain controversial subjects in the *Letters*, especially deism.

B. The Church and the secular authorities responded with vehemence to the work. Reviews, brochures, and pamphlets by Catholic intellectuals denounced the work, and official prosecutorial proceedings were undertaken against Voltaire.
   1. The reviewers said that Voltaire was advocating Quakerism, had set out to destroy the Christian religion, had spoken in favor of republicanism, and had attacked the foundations of religion, the monarchy, and the customs of France.
   2. Reviewers also accused Voltaire of sedition, saying that he wished to foment rebellion and civil war in France.
   3. Even the chapter on inoculation drew the ire of the clergy, who argued that the idea is an attack on divine providence, to which the French know how to submit.

C. Voltaire, facing both prosecution and persecution, was effectively forced from Paris. Although he occasionally returned to Paris during his life, this exile did not end until 1778.

II. The Marquise du Châtelet offered Voltaire refuge at her estate at Cirey.

A. Mme. du Châtelet was one of the foremost Newtonians and thinkers of eighteenth-century France. She was known, in fact, as Lady Newton or the divine Emilie.
   1. Her father had given her an intensive and far-ranging private education with superior tutors.
   2. She had entered into an aristocratic marriage of convenience with the Marquis du Châtelet and lived in a somewhat threadbare estate at Cirey. Voltaire’s funds were later used to repair the estate, to add a laboratory, and to make life there more comfortable.
   3. Mme. du Châtelet was a voracious reader and student. She had a deep intellectual familiarity with English life and thought, which gave her an immediate intellectual bond with Voltaire.
   4. She was a deist, she wrote scientific treatises that were taken seriously by the finest scientific minds of Europe, and she had translated the whole of Newton’s *Principia Mathematica* into French.
   5. Mme. du Châtelet had mastered Newton’s optics, complex mathematics, and physics. She also understood his deep meaning on the subject of hypothesis—that where empirical scientific knowledge to answer a question does not exist, one does not feign a hypothesis that cannot be confirmed to
explain the phenomenon. Instead, one seeks to draw generalizations from nature that become hypotheses and can be tested.

6. Mme. du Châtelet had also mastered metaphysical philosophy and was a critical student of both the Old and New Testaments, which was rare in France at the time. She introduced Voltaire to biblical study.

B. Mme. du Châtelet and Voltaire were friends, lovers, and intellectual collaborators in a relationship that lasted fifteen years.

1. Her intellectual influence on Voltaire was long ignored, but she has come to be seen as his central teacher in many areas of study and as the catalyst to his intellectual development.

2. She dramatically deepened his understanding of physics, the Newtonian enterprise, and the metaphysical debates of seventeenth-century philosophy, introducing him to Leibnizian philosophy (with which he would wrestle for a generation).

3. Cirey became a center of Newtonian study and persuasion. Almost all the great Continental minds who sought to convert European thinkers from Descartes’s philosophy and physics to those of Newton came to Cirey. These thinkers also discussed the strategies of persuasion that could be used to convince European readers of the superiority of Newton and the wonder of his accomplishment. Voltaire and Mme. du Châtelet played critical roles in winning the Continent over to Newtonian science.

C. At Cirey, Voltaire was happy, energetic, and productive, working in almost all genres.

1. His Elements of Newton’s Philosophy and his Treatise on Metaphysics reveal a new intellectual depth in Voltaire.

2. The Elements goes far beyond the Philosophical Letters, seeking to broaden understanding of both the full scope and the particulars of the Newtonian achievement. In this work, Voltaire also rejects the dialogue as a form of popularization and chooses to explicate Newtonian thought simply and directly, including the theories of optics, gravitation, and action at a distance.

3. The Treatise draws out the implications of Lockean philosophy for the limitations on human knowledge and for a more expansive, empirical proof of the existence of God and the foundations of an empirical, natural theology.

4. Voltaire was also writing major works in history, ethics, drama, and poetry; composing some of his major philosophical tales and tragedies; and continuing his output of occasional, polemical, and light pieces.

5. In addition to the Elements and the Treatise, Voltaire wrote The Worldly Man, a celebration in verse of luxury over austerity, a criticism of the notion of “the good old days,” and an attack on the concept of the Garden of Eden as paradise, where humans had no luxury, no surplus, and no culture.

6. Another important work is the Discourse in Verse on Man, loosely based on Alexander Pope’s Essay on Man. Here, Voltaire addresses the universality of our search for happiness and the concept of liberty.

7. We are limited in our search for happiness, not by metaphysical and philosophical boundaries, but by our own intellectual and moral weaknesses, by the forces of nature, and by human pride and anger.

8. All these limitations can be mitigated, in part, by knowledge and a philosophical spirit that can help us address our intellectual and moral blindness, increase some of our empire over nature, and help us understand how pride and anger stand in the way of attaining what we want most.

9. Voltaire dedicated a drama, Mohomet, to the Pope, who sent Voltaire a medal in honor of his play on the religious fanaticism of Muhammad and his followers. This act infuriated the clerics of France and enchanted Voltaire. His reputation and fame soared.

10. He became tutor by correspondence (in poetry and philosophy) of Prince Frederick of Prussia, the future King Frederick II, by the invitation of the crown prince.

III. The death of Mme. du Châtelet in 1749, from complications while giving birth to the child of another lover, ended a personal, educational, intellectual, and productive idyll for Voltaire.

Essential Reading:


Voltaire, The Elements of Sir Isaac Newton’s Philosophy.
Supplementary Reading:
Voltaire, *Treatise on Metaphysics*.

Questions to Consider:
1. Thinking about historical contingencies, how much of Voltaire’s intellectual direction was affected by his association with Emilie du Châtelet at Cirey?
2. Is it even possible today for any intellectual to be on the frontier of as many fields as Voltaire was in the eighteenth century? Why or why not?
Lecture Six
From Optimism to Humanism

Scope: The death of Mme. du Châtelet marked the beginning of a long period of doubt, uncertainty, sadness, and anxiety in Voltaire’s life. He moved to the Prussian Court (1750–1753) at the invitation of his correspondent and, in many ways, pupil, King Frederick II, but he left there deeply disillusioned and humiliated. He had difficulty settling anywhere in Europe, so deep was the animosity toward him from the clergy and authorities under its influence; finally, he gained permission to live in Protestant Geneva (1755), eventually purchasing an estate, Ferney, that straddled the French-Swiss border. The Lisbon earthquake and the outbreak of general European war, both in 1756, left him very close to despair.

In his Poem on the Lisbon Earthquake (1756), Voltaire reassessed his Leibnizian optimistic philosophy and theology, seeing evil and suffering as inexplicable given an infinitely good God and asserting that suffering humanity requires his love more than God does. This poem produced a furious response from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose Letter to Voltaire on Providence accuses Voltaire of attacking the Divinity. Paralyzed in his response for years, Voltaire finally produced it, in his most enduring philosophical tale: Candide, or Optimism (1759). Its essential themes are the irrelevance of abstract metaphysical philosophy, the reality of evil, the unknowability of Providence, and the need to work to alleviate the suffering of the human condition. Candide both reflected and helped produce a major shift in Enlightenment thinking away from theology and toward a humanistic focus on the pains of the human condition. Candide also marks the decisive moment in Voltaire’s life when he becomes, in part to his own surprise, the crusader for “the party of humanity.”

Outline

I. Leibnizian optimistic philosophy appealed to Voltaire’s deism and philosophical spirit and, indeed, attracted a large and growing number of European thinkers.
   A. In his Essays on Theodicy, Leibniz proposed an answer to the question of why evil exists in a world created by God, who is infinitely wise, powerful, and good: God would not create a perfect world, because He is the only perfect being. Knowing that He will create an imperfect world, He creates, it logically follows, “the best of all possible worlds.”
   B. From this it further follows that God chose everything in the creation as necessary to the existence of the best of all possible worlds. Nothing is truly “evil.” God has a sufficient reason for all things, and if we had God’s knowledge, we would understand the good of what we might think, from our limited perspective, to be evil.
   C. The conclusion, drawn by Alexander Pope in his Essay on Man, is, “Whatever is, is right.”
   D. Voltaire always felt a tension about this philosophical optimism; in the 1750s, he came to reject it.

II. In the 1750s, Voltaire was near despair about his personal life, his place in the world, and the sad state of European affairs.
   A. Mme. du Châtelet’s death was devastating for Voltaire.
   B. With nowhere to go, he accepted an invitation to live at the court of King Frederick II of Prussia. There, he thought he would serve as an enlightened advisor to an enlightened king, but he found that he had been invited as an adornment to the court and was humiliated.
   C. In 1753, Voltaire left Prussia, taking with him and intending to publish some of Frederick’s most egregious love poems. Frederick discovered that the poems were missing and had Voltaire stopped at the border; Voltaire spent five weeks in prison.
   D. Voltaire, again, had nowhere to call home, but in 1755, he ultimately obtained permission to live in Geneva. In 1759, he will purchase Ferney, his estate on the French-Swiss border.
   E. On November 1, 1755, the Lisbon earthquake occurred.
      1. Lisbon was in ruins, with tens of thousands dead or suffering.
      2. The earthquake seared Voltaire’s and Europe’s consciousness.
3. It raised the central question: How could the evil and suffering of the world be reconciled with the
goodness of God?

III. Voltaire published a Poem on the Lisbon Earthquake, describing the suffering and asking why an omnipotent
God could not have created a world without such catastrophe.

A. For Voltaire, one must choose between a Leibnizian optimism that denied the existence of evil and a cry of
humanistic anguish that admitted it.
1. Attempts at philosophical explanation of suffering add insult to injury. You do not cure our evils when
you deny them in the manner of Leibnizian optimism.
2. Evil is real and incomprehensible.
3. God exists, but we cannot understand his providence.
4. Humanity, not God, requires our love and attention.
5. The poem concludes with the tale of a man who wanted to give a gift to God but asked, “What can one
give to God; what does God not have?” The answer: defects and sorrow, ignorance and woe. Those
were man’s lot, along with hope.

B. Jean-Jacques Rousseau replied in 1756 with a Letter to Voltaire on Providence, which stung Voltaire.
1. Rousseau asserts that Voltaire has betrayed both providence and the hopes of mankind. He has written
against God and denied human beings their solace.
2. Rousseau also says that Voltaire has judged by a false standard. Our rational knowledge of God’s
nature and necessary creation of the best of all possible worlds wholly outweighs the appearances of
things.
3. According to Rousseau, God has harmonized the physical and moral world. Cities are centers of
corruption; human beings were meant to live simply in the countryside. God put earthquakes in nature
so that we would know how to live.

IV. Voltaire replied to Rousseau, from yet deeper anguish, with Candide, or Optimism.

A. For Voltaire, the years between the earthquake and Candide were the darkest period of his life.
1. His own protégé, Frederick, plunged Europe into war in 1756.
2. Voltaire’s correspondence became tortured, intertwining the earthquake, the war, imminent European
famine, the philosophers’ optimism, and Rousseau’s critique. It seemed to Voltaire that the world was
ending, yet the philosophers were saying that this is the best of all possible worlds.

B. His answer to Rousseau, which seemed to surprise Voltaire as well, is Candide. Its themes are simple:
1. Leibnizian philosophy, or any metaphysical philosophy that seeks to deny evil, is absurd and irrelevant
given human suffering. Candide, who is Everyman, is a student of Pangloss, a Leibnizian philosopher.
Pangloss can view any human suffering and abstractly reason that we are still in the best of all possible
worlds.
2. Philosophical optimism equals fatalism. If whatever is, is right, then whatever will be, will be right.
Why work to intervene against suffering, war, and disease, if these things will still exist in the best of
all possible worlds?
3. Philosophical optimism denies the human reality of irredeemable pain, injustice, and cruelty. Candide
travels through a landscape of war, arrogance, abuses of power, religious persecutions, and disease.
Evil is real, and we cannot understand God’s providence.
4. The only antidote to despair is purposeful human labor to satisfy human needs. We must pay attention
to the real sources of well-being and the causes of remediable suffering.
5. At the end of Candide, Pangloss returns to offer an elegant explanation of why, despite all the
catastrophes they have experienced, they are still in the best of all possible worlds. Candide replies,
“That is well said, but we must cultivate our garden.”
6. The cultivation of the human garden is the only antidote to the despair in which we would otherwise
find ourselves if all we had was philosophy for consolation.

V. Candide marked a crucial turn from abstract philosophy to humanistic activism.

A. Voltaire settled in as the crusading “patriarch” of Ferney, attacking what he saw as suffering that could be
remedied.
B. European culture also experienced a shift—the displacement of philosophical theology by Voltaire’s focus on the causes of pain and suffering in the human condition.

Essential Reading:
Voltaire, “Poem on the Lisbon Earthquake,”
Voltaire, *Candide*.

Supplementary Reading:
Leibniz, *Essays on Theodicy*.

Questions to Consider:
1. How does one refute a formal (and formidable) philosophical system with a tale?
2. What might Voltaire mean by writing that God earns his respect, but weak mortals earn his love?
Lecture Seven
Voltaire and the Philosophical Tale

Scope: To express his deepest philosophical views and commitments, Voltaire, in writing *Candide* (1759), chose a form in which he already had expressed himself many times, the “philosophical tale” (in French, the *conte philosophique*). Although contemporaries, and probably Voltaire himself, would have expected his most enduring genre to have been theater or poetry, it was, in fact, the philosophical tale that emerged as the most influential vehicle for Voltaire’s analyses, criticisms, and explorations of the world in which he found himself. The philosophical tale was also an influential vehicle for the debates that Voltaire was having with himself. In *Zadig* (1747), Voltaire explored, among many other things, the fate of justice and virtue in the world, and he began his internal debate about God’s providence. In *Micromégas* (1752), he explored, also among many other things, the tension between the objectivity of scientific knowledge and the relativity of experience. In *The Tale of the Good Brahmin* (1761), he examined the tension between happiness and intelligence, despite philosophy’s seemingly obvious commitment to both. In all of these, he scrutinized the paradoxes and inconsistencies of human nature.

Further, the philosophical tale was an ideal vehicle for Voltaire’s more confident criticism of religious and political abuses, and in dozens of these, he examined and satirized the role of the clergy, missionaries, kings, aristocrats, pedants, atheists, and enemies of the Enlightenment. His work was always anonymous or pseudonymous, and so popular that many publishers claimed work to be by Voltaire that was, in fact, by others. He learned to signal to the world what was and was not his own, and he became the most widely read Enlightenment author in the world.

Outline

I. Voltaire’s most enduring genre, and the one that is most uniquely Voltairean, turned out to be the philosophical tale.
   A. Voltaire would have expected his theater or poetry to carry his fame.
   B. Voltaire published over twenty-five *contes philosophiques*.
   C. These tales, some quite long, some just a few pages, cover a wide range of themes and were printed between 1747 and 1774.
   D. The philosophical tale joins together the essential Voltairean traits.
      1. These tales were the perfect vehicle for Voltairean wit and satire. The tales are full of in-jokes about real events and people, which readers found charming. In addition, the tales satirize types of characters in the world around the reader, such as kings, courtiers, clerics, lawyers, and medical doctors. He uses this satire for arguments without committing himself to a point of view.
      2. At the heart of Voltaire’s style is his skill at making readers draw their own conclusions. The author structures the events and juxtaposes the characters, but the reader draws the inference. He said of one work, and it is true of all the philosophical tales, “It is a work that says more than it seems to say.” The tales operate on one level to amuse readers and on another to prompt readers to analyze contemporary society and the human condition.
      3. Also important in Voltaire’s style are his juxtapositions of dark or earnest themes and broad humor, of the realistic and the absurd. He places improbable characters in improbable plots, yet the tales are charged with moments of realism, suffering, and cruelty and contain deep discussions of God, providence, and the nature and meaning of human life.
      4. Voltaire exposes the ambiguities of the human condition. His characters are not fixed models but flawed human beings with both strengths and weaknesses. He tries to capture the inconstancies of human behavior on both the individual and the institutional level.
      5. Finally, Voltaire is practiced at the art of transforming caricature into deep character sketch. His exaggerated characters reveal deep human personalities; they are portraits that capture the essence of real people in the world.
II. Before *Candide*, the major tales were *Zadig* (1747) and *Micromégas* (*Little/Large*—1752). *Zadig* addresses human and divine justice at formal and informal levels.

A. On the surface, the tale is about the good citizen Zadig, who earns the favor of the king of Babylon but is betrayed by his envious neighbors. He flees the wrath of the king and wanders the ancient world, experiencing injustice, ingratitude, and suffering. Eventually, Babylon falls apart in a civil war and Zadig returns and overcomes his enemies; Zadig becomes king and rules with justice.

B. On a deeper level, the tale poses a number of central philosophical questions:

1. What are the ethics (not the form) of good government? What matters under any form of government are the morals, civic virtues, and compassion of whoever rules and the ruler’s capacity to remain above flattery.
2. Why does so much human injustice exist in the world?
3. What might be remedies of human injustice?
4. What is the role of chance in human justice?
5. Why does chance seem so opposed to divine providence?
6. Can one look at the human condition and find divine justice?

C. *Zadig* raises these questions in contexts in which the reader must confront the ambiguities and dilemmas of the human condition, but the story offers no disquisitions on these subjects.

D. Injustice dominates *Zadig* even though at the end, Zadig triumphs over envy and injustice. Readers must wonder what the remedies for human injustice might be.

1. The first possible remedy is the ability to recognize merit and understand that the merit of others might be useful to one’s own self-interest.
2. The second remedy is to become aware of (and take precautions against) how deep and systemic in human nature injustice truly is.

E. The question of how to reconcile divine justice and providence with the injustice of the human condition remains unanswered.

III. *Micromégas* is a philosophical tale of “science fiction” that attempts to play out the implications of Locke’s theory of knowledge.

A. In the tale, Micromégas and a companion from Saturn travel to earth. Micromégas is a giant who has 1,000 senses and is almost a million years old. The Saturnian has 72 senses and is 15,000 years old. Voltaire addresses Locke’s question in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*: What would our experience of the world be if we had more than five senses or if our perspective of the world was changed in some other profound way?

B. On earth, one visitor rushes quickly to judgment, at first believing that the planet is uninhabited. He then sees a whale and believes that these creatures must make up the population. Ultimately, using a microscope, the two travelers discover a ship carrying French scientists, and they learn to communicate with the scientists.

C. The visitors and the earthlings learn that they share universal, natural scientific knowledge, but the visitors are astonished over some aspects of human nature, such as the fact that humans slaughter one another over miniscule parcels of mud.

D. The earthlings ask Micromégas to tell them the ultimate essence of the world, and he promises to write it for them in a book. When the scientists return to France and open the book, they find that all the pages are blank. The Lockean says, “That’s just what I expected.”

E. Again, this tale emphasizes a number of central Voltairean themes:

1. The relativity of experience and knowledge;
2. The limitations of human knowledge;
3. The folly of pure metaphysics;
4. The scope of scientific knowledge;
5. The human implications of Lockean philosophy;
6. The arrogance of human nature.
IV. Voltaire uses the philosophical tale to portray the inconsistencies and paradoxes of the human condition and the lived reality of philosophical positions.

A. *The Tale of the Good Brahmin* portrays the core paradox of the eighteenth-century philosopher.
   1. Every philosopher agrees that the goal of human life is to seek happiness and to avoid pain.
   2. For the Good Brahmin, however, the more he thinks, the more he suffers from his inability to answer the most fundamental questions. He sees a simple, uneducated woman who washes clothes in the river and is happy, and he realizes that, logically, he should want to trade places with her, but he does not.
   3. The philosopher would not trade wise sadness for ignorant happiness, yet it is madness, by their very systems, to prefer reason to happiness.

B. The philosophical tales often show us what it would be like to live according to a given philosophy.

C. The tales are stern satires of the constants of human nature:
   1. Those with power abuse it.
   2. Humans have a propensity to deceive and to self-deceive.
   3. Human greed and cupidity are universal.
   4. When superstition and fanaticism are joined to self-interest, the result is misery and suffering.

V. The philosophical tales sustain the essential Voltairean themes:

A. Deism—the belief that there is one religion of nature and that all the sectarian religions are a corruption of that.

B. Anticlericalism—the recurrence of priests who abuse power, dupe the multitudes, and curry favor for their own financial or political ends.

C. Pacifism—war casts a shadow almost as dark as religious intolerance. We see brutal depictions of war and are left to contemplate the destruction and suffering it brings and the pettiness of the causes over which it is fought.

D. The critique of arbitrary and abusive authority—kings, ministers of states, leaders of all religions always engage in arbitrary acts and abuses of power.

E. The pleas for religious toleration—intolerance is the darkest cloud over the human world.

Essential Reading:
Voltaire, *Zadig*,
Voltaire, *Micromégas*.

Supplementary Reading:
Voltaire, *The Tale of the Good Brahmin*,
Voltaire, *The Ingénu*.

Questions to Consider:
1. In what ways do the philosophical tales permit Voltaire to address issues more powerfully than formal treatises would permit?
2. Which tensions in the major philosophical tales are tactical, and which seem to represent actual dilemmas in Voltaire’s own mind?
Lecture Eight
Voltaire at Ferney

Scope: At the end of Candide, Voltaire had called for the cultivation of the human garden as the only antidote to despair; at his estate at Ferney, he took his own advice both literally and metaphorically. He became the model of a progressive, tolerant, and enlightened landlord (providing Catholic and Protestant worship for his French and Swiss peasant tenants respectively). Ferney became a mecca of the Enlightenment, and Voltaire hosted the leading lights of intellectual, political, and social Europe. Although in his sixties, Voltaire now began the single most influential period of his life’s work, campaigning, with a pen that had become mightier than many a sword, on behalf of the vital causes of the Enlightenment: toleration; freedom of thought; the abolition of slavery and serfdom; an end to colonial and dynastic wars; free trade and peaceful commerce; the application of knowledge to the improvement of the quality of life; and reforms in the fiscal, judicial, and administrative systems of Europe. He combatively took on the enemies of the Enlightenment and set the terms of the debates for much of later eighteenth-century life.

Voltaire wrote in a great variety of genres until the end of his life, producing, among so many diverse works, a Philosophical Dictionary (1769). The tone and content of the Dictionary were much more pointed and explicit in their criticisms and demands than his celebrated Philosophical Letters of the 1730s. His impatience with remediable suffering and injustice was greater than it ever had been, but a peace had settled on him and, while enjoying the life he had made, he became the gadfly and conscience of a civilization.

Outline

I. Voltaire became the seigneur of Ferney.
   A. The personal and financial aspects of his life were quite comfortable.
      1. Mme. Denis, Voltaire’s widowed niece and a former lover, was the hostess at Ferney. There was a stabilizing domesticity to their relationship, and she helped to create a supportive, stimulating atmosphere. Conversation dominated life at the estate, and Voltaire enjoyed the time, peace, and circumstances for productive work.
      2. Voltaire was quite wealthy and famous by this time in his life.
      3. Ferney saw an endless stream of visitors from all over Europe, including political leaders, major intellectuals, liberal aristocrats, and even theologians.
   B. Voltaire also took to the seigneurial life.
      1. He hired a full-time priest and constructed a church on the property with a stone inscription that read, “Built for God, by Voltaire.” The church was filled with beautiful Christian artwork for both the peasants that worked Ferney and its Catholic visitors.
      2. Voltaire became a model landlord. He cared about the well-being of his tenants and worked to free them from the burdens of taxes, and tithes. He brought industry to the area and made improvements in agriculture and animal husbandry. Above all, he sought to secure justice for his tenants when they had problems with the authorities.

II. The scope of Voltaire’s influence increased throughout this period. His pen truly became mightier than the sword.
   A. Voltaire became a crusader for the causes of the Enlightenment.
      1. He published more than 100 major works and many brochures and pamphlets. He flooded Europe with his work, almost none of which appeared under his own name.
      2. He had over 1,700 correspondents, from peasants to kings, and he used his letters to incite people to his causes, rail against injustice, propose reforms, and encourage young authors. In addition, he used the correspondence to reveal which of the works that he had published anonymously or pseudonymously actually belonged to him.
      3. He always promoted his own causes, fighting against religious intolerance, torture in the judicial system, residual serfdom in France and serfdom and slavery elsewhere, inequality in the justice system, and war. He also defended and celebrated those in authority who acted with humanity.
B. Voltaire was the cosmopolitan model of the Enlightenment.
   1. He had a worldwide audience that included political leaders of Europe.
   2. He used his power to shame, before his vast audience, those who had affronted justice and humanity.

C. Voltaire was now truly the “patriarch” of the Enlightenment.
   1. He acted as a patron to young authors and as a critic, telling Europe who was worth reading and who was not. To receive Voltaire’s patronage or praise could make an author’s reputation.
   2. Voltaire had a remarkable relationship with his audience. If he believed, for example, that some of his work was being misunderstood, he would publish commentaries on it, again under a pseudonym.
   3. Voltaire also set the causes for the Parisian philosophes, with whom he was in constant communication.
   4. At the same time, Voltaire experienced the limits of his power. In Paris, for example, a younger generation of philosophers was becoming more independent; they viewed Voltaire as too moderate. Enemies at court and in the Church also continued to make his life difficult.

III. During this time, he wrote an influential and revealing work, *The Philosophical Dictionary*, which serves as a window into Voltaire’s mind at Ferney.

A. In the *Dictionary*, Voltaire made his peace with philosophy.
   1. The problem of evil, he finds, is insoluble.
   2. He takes satisfaction in the thought that while human knowledge is limited it does bring us remarkable accomplishments.
   3. He emphasizes the need for free thought and skepticism to struggle against prejudice and overcome the presumptive authority of the past.

B. *The Philosophical Dictionary* embodied a new voice for Voltaire, one of radical outrage.
   1. Although some articles are written with calm, detached humanity, the new tone is more direct, angry, and honest.
   2. The *Dictionary* reveals the intensification of Voltaire’s antisectarian thought and anticlericalism.

C. The *Dictionary* is divided into a wide range of subjects, including:
   1. Arts and letters;
   2. Theology and philosophy;
   3. Religion and clergy;

D. Readers devoured the many revisions and reprintings of the *Dictionary*; Voltaire’s new sharpness on religious power and abuse captured their attention.

IV. The paradox of Voltaire’s life at Ferney is that he was filled with both indignation and peace.

A. Voltaire had never been angrier; he had lost patience with unnecessary suffering and death, persecution, and war.

B. Voltaire had also never been more at peace.
   1. For the first time, he experienced self-acceptance.
   2. He felt a certain optimism about his role and influence, knowing that he did not have the ear of the king, but he did have the attention of a powerful readership that could bring about reform.
   3. He also had the consolations of living well—good food, good company, and friendship.

**Essential Reading:**

**Supplementary Reading:**
Questions to Consider:

1. From your knowledge of other periods, including our own, in what ways can the pen be mightier than the sword?

2. Is Voltaire’s voice in the *Philosophical Dictionary* in fact sharper than the voice of his earlier years?
Lecture Nine
Voltaire and God

Scope: Throughout his intellectual life, Voltaire wrestled with the problem of knowledge of God. A convinced deist, he believed with certainty that the design of the universe announced an intelligent Supreme Being who was the world’s author. Beyond that, however, his works on the issue reveal that Voltaire was tentative and uncertain about what we knew of this God, and he could not reconcile to his own satisfaction God’s existence, of which he was certain, with God’s providence. He found atheism a wholly untenable position, and when such ultimate disbelief began to be expressed by Parisian philosophes from 1770 on, Voltaire actively defended belief in God and assailed the atheists for both their errors and the danger they posed to the Enlightenment and its acceptance.

Voltaire was convinced that whatever we know about God, we know from nature alone, and he warred ceaselessly—if sometimes indirectly—against the claims of supernatural knowledge, including both scriptural revelation and private inspiration. Voltaire found self-contradiction in the belief that a universal God had revealed himself in particular fashion to this or that time and place. He saw all sectarian religions as a combination of corrupted natural knowledge and as human fabrication, serving, above all in his view, the interests of the world’s various clergy. His deism and anticlericalism were among the most fervent aspects of his work.

Outline

I. Deism in eighteenth-century thought had two sides.

A. The first is positive deism, the belief that we have natural knowledge of the existence and general providence of God.
   1. Deists supported this position using the argument from design: If we look at the world, it reflects ordered choice incompatible with chance, or chaos. The systems and order of the world obviously illustrate that it is the product of intelligence. From like effects, we infer like causes.
   2. Deists also used the argument from final causes, or purposes: Every living creature is endowed with exactly what it needs to survive and procreate; that could not be by chance.

B. The other aspect of this philosophy is critical deism, which is the critique of claims of supernatural knowledge. Deists make a twofold case against particular revelation.
   1. First, for deists, we all can know God through nature; in contrast, supernatural religions are based on particular revelations from God to particular people in certain times and places. Deists believe that God would not choose a particular time and place to give knowledge to selected people beyond that which is available to all human beings through nature.
   2. Second, deists also engage in critical scholarship of each particular set of claims of particular revelation, examining the chronology, historical and scientific accuracy, voices, and moral claims of Scripture. They find these aspects of Scripture incompatible with the view that these revelations were given by God; instead, deists see these as the products of human minds.
   3. Ultimately, for the deists, one of the differences between natural and supernatural knowledge is that when scientists disagree, they can eventually persuade one another by appeal to evidence. When religious people disagree, such appeal to evidence cannot occur, and the inevitable result is coercion, monopoly of education, or outright force.

C. Deists also make a case against particular providence.
   1. Deists believe in the general providence of God, which can be found in the laws of nature.
   2. Particular providence is the idea that God wills particular acts to occur at given times and places. Judaism, Christianity and other revealed religions depend on claims of particular providence, which is opposed to general providence.
   3. For deists, God would not will an act to occur that contravenes general providence and the laws of nature. To say that God would act against God is absurd.

II. Voltaire’s deism reflected that of the Enlightenment but had its own particular stamp.

A. Voltaire had his own interpretation of positive deism.
1. For Voltaire, nature proves a creator. The design and systems around us are absolute evidence of God.  
2. Voltaire also saw that final causes prove God’s natural providence, although he is often mistakenly cited as a critic of arguments from final causes.  
3. Voltaire objected to that science of final causes in philosophical theology which infers the divine purpose of things from the use made of them. It is absurd to look at the purposes to which we have put natural things and infer divine intention. God did not create noses so that we could rest eye-glasses upon them.  
4. However, we can see final cause when the effects are always the same in all times and places and when the effects are independent of the beings who possess them. Final causes are evident when the purpose of things in the world is given by nature.  
5. What differentiates Voltaire’s positive deism is his insistence on the insolubility of the problem of evil. The operation of physical laws and the use of the faculties that God gave us inevitably lead to suffering that cannot be reconciled with the omnipotence and infinite love of God. Deistic attempts to deny the problem of evil are a perversion of human reason and compassion.  
6. Finally, Voltaire finds that our knowledge of God’s nature is severely limited. We can know God’s work, which is a source of wonder, but we cannot know the essence and reasons of God.  

B. Voltaire also embodied aspects of critical deism, especially in his attacks on particular revelation and providence.  
1. Voltaire saw the theological arrogance of sectarian claims. He had studied the Bible intensively and found more than enough fable and error, chronological inconsistencies, and so on to understand that the Bible is a human product.  
2. Voltaire also saw the moral problem in the Judeo-Christian conception of God; that is, the notion that God did not love humanity equally but singled out one people to receive his revelation. For Voltaire, this idea contradicts the concept of God as the universal author of nature and the father of mankind.  
3. Voltaire pinpointed the moral problem of supernatural judgment. When humans are called to justify their actions in terms of their effects on other creatures, then a moral standard exists. When humans justify their actions by claiming that God commanded those actions, then moral judgment becomes wholly arbitrary.  

III. Voltaire vehemently rejected atheism.  

A. He first saw the pragmatic problems of atheism.  
1. Clerics had been saying that deism and religious toleration would lead to atheism and now they were being proved right. Atheism thus threatened the triumph of the Enlightenment.  
2. Atheism was also a threat to society. It is dangerous for people, especially those in power, to believe that no one judges their actions.  

B. Voltaire also found intellectual problems in atheism.  
1. Atheism manifests dogmatic arrogance. Atheism posits the spontaneous generation of life from decaying matter as the origin of the world. To do so is to engage in the same abstract speculation that the theologians do.  
2. Atheism also brings about the destruction of ethical philosophy. If a natural law of brotherhood and peace does not exist, where then will we ground morals and ethics?  

C. Voltaire confronted Parisian atheism early.  
1. As early as 1749, he warned Diderot against atheism.  
2. He assailed the appearance of Parisian atheism after 1770, attacking its science, ethics, tactics, and metaphysical and philosophical incoherence.  
3. He engaged in intense debates with the defenders of Parisian atheism.  

IV. Voltaire’s search for God was unsettled.  

A. His theology was ambiguous.  
B. His intentions in wrestling with theology remain elusive.  
C. Ultimately, Voltaire seemed to be at war with the God in whom he intensely believed.
Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:
Voltaire, *The Sermon of the Fifty*.

Questions to Consider:
1. What is the nature of the God in whom Voltaire appears to believe?
2. What, for Voltaire, are the main conflicts between the God known from nature and the God proclaimed in Judeo-Christian Scripture?
Lecture Ten  
Voltaire and History

Scope: General and particular histories, from a history of the world (1756) to a history of the reign of King Charles XII of Sweden (1731), were among the most significant and influential Voltairean contributions to the Enlightenment. He sought to avoid mere chronicle and to narrate history both in terms of its truly significant events and trends and in terms of a philosophical understanding of the permanencies and variations of human life and civilizations over time. He engaged in important critical study of original sources and texts, tried to give appropriate agency to both human plans and contingencies beyond human control, and brought thought, culture, and mores to the center of historical concern.

In his universal history, the *Essai sur les moeurs* (1756), he began his study not with the events of the Old Testament, but with the ancient civilization of China, signaling a profound rejection of traditional European historical narrative. In *The Century of Louis XIV* (1751 and 1756), he strove for a balanced account of that monarch’s reign, acknowledging his successes and praising the culture that emerged under his patronage, but ending with an account of the suffering induced by Louis’s policy of religious persecution. As was true of all of Voltaire’s work, his histories had a profound influence on the genre, but reflected his broad critical concerns as well.

Outline

I. Voltaire’s historical interests, substantive and methodological, lasted throughout most of his lifetime and covered a wide array of historical genres, topics, and periods.
   A. Voltaire’s interests ranged from the history of recent events, reigns, and kingdoms to a “universal history.” He strongly believed that ancient history was lost in fable and myth. Only more recent periods could be examined with accuracy.
      1. His concern for narrative history produced his history of the reign of King Charles XII of Sweden; of France in the early chapters of *The Century of Louis XIV*; and of the Russian Empire under Peter the Great.
      2. His search for a “universal history” that would disclose the human spirit and mores of an age produced the *Essai sur les moeurs*.
   B. Voltaire applied the critical spirit of the Enlightenment to historical study.
      1. He consulted original documents and interviewed leading figures who had lived through the periods about which he wrote.
      2. He emphasized critical interpretation of history. We should not focus on the great battles or conquests without asking what effect these have on nations and people. The task for the critical historian is to go beyond myth to establish factual reality, including an honest narrative history.
      3. He was always searching for a universal history that would disclose the human spirit and mores of an age.
   C. Astonishingly, Voltaire began his universal history with China, not with Adam and Eve. He was, in essence, displacing Christianity and Europe. Up to that time, history had followed the biblical account of events, but Voltaire departed from that tradition.
      1. For most of Europe at the time, history was providential, that is, written by God. Voltaire argued that history indeed was written by God, but that He used natural human factors to accomplish His will. All we can do is study those natural human factors in the record of human behavior.
      2. Voltaire asserted that while Europe was still barbaric, China had an advanced civilization with science, agriculture, industry, and an organized civic life. While Europe was lost in superstition, China had a religion that promoted the cultivation of virtue and submission to justice.
      3. Several shadows over this Chinese civilization prevented it from advancing further: excessive filial respect for custom, tradition, and received authority; the absence of a Western alphabet, which slowed the spread of learning; and the emergence in India of Buddhism and its superstitions, which spread to China.
II. Voltaire’s philosophical concerns are visible in his histories.
   A. He seeks to understand the role of chance and contingency in history. Humans are, in many ways, the playthings of fate.
   B. He believes that the influence of culture is more important than that of power.
   C. Because of this influence, we should search for a new history.
      1. We should seek to understand institutions, morals, religion, and thought.
      2. We should seek to understand the spirit of a civilization.

III. Voltaire’s *Siècle de Louis XIV* and the *Essai sur les moeurs* led to new expectations for the historian.
   A. The *Siècle de Louis XIV* moves the reader from traditional to heterodox concerns.
      1. It seems odd that Voltaire would celebrate the reign of Louis XIV, but he was writing at a time when he had become alienated from Louis XV and his court.
      2. The work moves from political to cultural to religious history and offers differing judgments of Louis XIV’s reign.
         a. In one sense, Louis XIV brought stability to France when it was a nation of disorder and civil war. He was usually praised for his conquests and religious purification, but Voltaire believed that despite those, one could find glory in the reign of Louis XIV.
         b. The reign of Louis XIV saw a rebirth in science, philosophy, and the arts and letters. The age put in motion a dynamic that will persist in history long after the battles are forgotten.
         c. This period was also one of theological disputes that, Voltaire described as a “disgrace to human reason.” Christian factions always seek dominance over their opponents via the state. In France, the Catholics gained the ear of Louis XIV and convinced him to persecute the Protestants.
   B. The *Essai sur les moeurs* leads the reader from narrative to synthesis.
      1. The goal of history is the disclosure of human epochs, defined by advances and regressions of the human mind, not by politics, diplomacy, and war.
      2. History is always the story of the struggle between the philosophical spirit and the specter of fanaticism.

Essential Reading:
Voltaire, *The Century of Louis XIV*,
Voltaire, *Essai sur les moeurs*.

Supplementary Reading:
Voltaire, *History of Charles XII*.

Questions to Consider:
1. How could Voltaire judge the age of Louis XIV in France, marked by the wars and religious persecutions he so detested, to be one of the great ages of humankind?
2. In what ways does Voltaire’s conception of history bear the imprint of the Enlightenment?
Lecture Eleven
Voltaire and Toleration

Scope: No issue mattered more to Voltaire than the end of religious intolerance and persecution, and in no domain did he more affect and change the conscience and practice of European civilization. The transformation of “tolerance,” from a pejorative indicating “indifference” to a positive virtue, was his most enduring legacy. He used all of his weapons in this struggle: attacks on Christian belief and appeals to Christian values; warm portraits of the tolerant and fierce denunciation of the intolerant; wit and passion; encouragement of public figures and attempts to render defenders of intolerance the objects of his civilization’s opprobrium. In many ways an intolerant man in his personal (and often public) judgments—anti-Semitic, anticlerical, and contemptuous of religious enthusiasts—he nonetheless transformed the way that the culture thought about toleration of Jews, religious pluralism, and dissenting sects. For Voltaire, cruelty in the name of God was the ultimate blasphemy and usurpation of power.

In particular, Voltaire took up the cases and causes of specific victims of religious intolerance—the Calas and Sirvan families most famously—and shamed the consciousness of European intellectuals and leaders by his narratives and campaigns. His Treatise on Toleration (1763) and his articles on tolerance in the best-selling Philosophical Dictionary (1769) reveal his most successful themes: the unbearability of cruelty in the name of religion; the arrogance of persecution; the corruption of statecraft, politics, justice, and civic life by religious intolerance; and the costs to both human fellowship and society of our mutual religious hatreds.

Outline

I. For Voltaire, the issue of religious toleration was the meeting point and culmination of his religious, ethical, social, historical, and philosophical thought.
   A. Voltaire believed in Irenism, the idea that true religion is a source of peace and that intolerance is blasphemy.
   B. Voltaire also recognized no secular or religious appeal higher than humanism, the imperative of brotherhood.
   C. In addition, Voltaire valued the utility of toleration. As he wrote in the Philosophical Letters, religious toleration is indispensable to peace and prosperity.
   D. The lessons of history reveal intolerance as the shadow on the human condition.
   E. Toleration is the deepest meaning of the Enlightenment: it fosters freedom of the human mind, freedom of conscience, and respect for individuals and rights, and it can help mitigate human suffering and enhance the possibilities for human well being.

II. Voltaire’s deepest influence on Western civilization is the enshrining of toleration as a virtue.
   A. For more than a millennium, “toleration” had been seen as a vice. One could not “tolerate” the error or deception of one’s neighbor about God.
      1. Saint Augustine drew a distinction between those who have never known God’s truth—Jews and pagans—and those who had been in possession of the true Catholic faith and had rejected it. The first group should be restrained from spreading their poison but should not be punished. For the second group, pain and fear might make them reconsider their willful acts of rebellion against God.
      2. Saint Thomas agreed with this distinction and went a step further. He said that if men were executed for committing crimes against the majesty of an earthly king, heretics should surely be executed for committing crimes against the majesty of the divine king.
      3. Even after the Reformation, churches that briefly had permitted some mitigated toleration also called for the death penalty for heresy once they had become established.
      4. Underlying these traditions is the idea that toleration meant indifference to the word of God, to the spread of God’s truth, and to the eternal fate of the soul of one’s neighbor. Intolerance, not toleration, was love.
More than any other figure in Western history, Voltaire will transform “intolerance” into a vice and “toleration” into a virtue.

1. Voltaire’s voice was one among many Enlightenment voices.
2. Others knew how to argue and debate, but Voltaire knew how to touch his readers on this subject.

III. Voltaire used all his weapons in the cause of toleration.

A. He appealed simultaneously to Christian and deistic values.
   1. He gives Christians a Christian perspective on behalf of tolerance, arguing from Scripture and writing that Christ preached love and that the early church fathers preached tolerance.
   2. He also gives deists an anti-Christian perspective on behalf of tolerance. Of all religions, Christianity contributes most to intolerance in the world; intolerance is inseparable from Christian practice and belief.

B. He publicly exposes the heroes and villains of the drama of toleration.
   1. He praises religiously tolerant power whenever he finds it practiced by a monarch, a local ruler, or a magistrate.
   2. He offers bitter and mordant denunciation of intolerant power and practices.
   3. He encourages and offers patronage to all voices on behalf of toleration.

C. He marries wit and passion on behalf of toleration.
   1. Almost all his works include a portrait of toleration as a warm human trait.
   2. Almost all his works include a portrait of intolerance as a cruel human trait.

IV. One of the paradoxes of Voltaire is that he was an intolerant man who won the case for toleration.

A. Voltaire was an anti-Semite. His writings disparage Jews and his Jewish characters are almost always chauvinistic, fanatical, and anti-cosmopolitan.
   1. Voltaire’s defenders have failed in their attempts to deflect charges of anti-Semitism.
   2. The roots of this anti-Semitism can be found in the general culture of Voltaire’s time and in some of his personal experiences with Jews.
   3. The philosophical roots of Voltaire’s anti-Semitism lie in the absurdity he finds in the notion that God, who is universal, chose a certain people for a particular fate. This is anti-Judaism, perhaps, as opposed to his more personal anti-Semitism.
   4. Despite these personal beliefs, Voltaire still campaigned for toleration of the Jews and consistently stated that Christians had much to learn from the Jews concerning tolerance.

B. Voltaire, as we have seen, was also fiercely anticlerical.
   1. His public fury was directed toward priests who abused their power.
   2. Nonetheless, he showed private kindness to many priests; for example, to the Jesuits when they were expelled from France by Louis XIV.
   3. His ultimate goal was to make of religion a voluntary and private, not a public, affair; to leave it free but disestablished.

C. Voltaire defended Protestants, yet felt contempt for the mainstream Reformation.
   1. He believed that the Reformation had made Protestantism as intolerant, as persecutorial, and as superstitious as Catholicism.
   2. Nonetheless, his anguish over the persecution of Protestants in France was the defining moral quality of Voltaire’s life.

V. In the 1760s and 1770s, he became the champion in religious toleration.

A. Voltaire was profoundly shocked by specific acts of persecution in France, and he appealed these cases to the conscience of Europe.
   1. In the Calas affair, a Protestant family was accused of having hanged a son, who was depressed and suicidal, because the son was going to convert to Catholicism. The father was tortured and killed, and the daughters were sent to nunneries. Voltaire saw that this was a case of judicial murder and undertook to rehabilitate the family and to have the verdict overturned.
   2. In a similar case, the Protestant Sirvan family was accused of murdering a daughter who had actually committed suicide. Voltaire succeeded in having the case reexamined and used the matter to bring about revisions in the judicial process, while isolating religious intolerance as the cause of such abuse.
3. Finally, in the La Barre affair, Voltaire was appalled by the case of a nineteen-year-old, poor aristocrat with no family, who was tortured and burned for having allegedly mutilated a crucifix. Among the evidence against him was a copy of Voltaire’s *Philosophical Dictionary*, which had been found on the young man’s shelf.

B. Voltaire declared a war unto the death against religious intolerance.
   1. He began signing all his correspondence with “Ecrasez l’infame (Crush the infamy).”
   2. He wrote the *Treatise of Tolerance*.
   3. He included numerous articles on toleration in the *Philosophical Dictionary*.

C. For Voltaire, the actions of intolerance were the shame of his civilization, and he changed the way his culture thought about these things.

**Essential Reading:**
Voltaire, *Treatise on Tolerance*;

**Supplementary Reading:**

**Questions to Consider:**
1. What does it mean, for Voltaire, to appeal to “humanity” on behalf of toleration?
2. Is there, in fact, any paradox in a personally intolerant man becoming the great champion of toleration?
Lecture Twelve
Apotheosis

Scope: In 1778, in his eighty-fourth year, Voltaire was invited to return to Paris, where he received a hero’s welcome in the city from which he had been banished over forty years earlier. Feted by academies, the world of thought, and the Parisian elites, he was tumultuously celebrated by ordinary Parisians as well; crowds followed his carriage and sang his praises. Exhausted, he fell ill and died, surrounded by the admiration and love of his fellow citizens. The Church sought to resist his burial, but public pressure made that impossible. During the Revolution, his bones were transported to the Pantheon, the resting place of the heroes of republican France.

That apotheosis was repeated by a civilization that had come to see him as the embodiment and central force of Europe’s cultural and moral transformation in the eighteenth century. Though a few conservatives associated him with the excesses of the French Revolution that began over a decade after his death, a remarkable variety of thinkers came to celebrate his life and work, and he has been a cultural icon for three centuries of readers and commentators. The judgment of posterity has not been a constant, but few philosophers, if any, have so conquered the minds of a continent.

Outline

I. By 1776, Voltaire had achieved international celebrity. In 1778, he was invited back to Paris, and his return was triumphant.
   A. Officially, he was invited to attend the performance of one of his plays, but the real reason was that Paris wanted the great man back.
      1. He was honored by leaders in the world of politics at reception after reception.
      2. The world of thought also welcomed Voltaire, including an official ceremony at the Académie Française inviting him to take his rightful place there.
   B. His popular reception was unprecedented.
      1. As Voltaire’s carriage passed through the streets, he was hailed by crowds as “the savior of Calas” and the friend of humanity.
      2. The extraordinary hero’s welcome that Voltaire received was the first such welcome for a man of letters.
   C. The flood of visitors Voltaire received, including Benjamin Franklin, exhausted him and he fell ill.
      1. Because France had only two methods of burial, myths have grown surrounding what Voltaire said on his deathbed.
      2. At the time, one could be buried only in hallowed ground with permission of the Church or in a common grave outside the city reserved for criminals, heretics, prostitutes, and Protestants.
      3. The deathbed confession and conversion, therefore, were extremely important.
      4. It is not always possible to separate legend from truth in accounts of deathbed events in the Enlightenment, but the account that emerged as most widely believed reflects Voltaire’s thinking well. When a priest arrived to prepare Voltaire for his impending death, he asked Voltaire whether he believed in God the Father. Voltaire replied, “I do.” When the priest asked whether Voltaire believed in God the Son, it is said that Voltaire replied, “Oh, don’t talk to me about that man.”
      5. The Church first claimed that Voltaire signed a deathbed confession, but its attempts to deny him burial belie such claims.
      6. Several days after his death, the corpse of Voltaire was dressed, placed in a carriage, and buried on the road to Ferney. Even in death, Voltaire cheated his enemies and maintained his defiant deism.

II. A hero of the Old Regime, Voltaire’s reputation was ambiguous during the Revolution.
   A. Before the Revolution, many of his causes came to fruition. Louis XVI granted limited toleration to Protestants, abolished remaining serfdom, and secured major reforms.
B. The first wave of French revolutionaries saw Voltaire as a hero who stood against arbitrary power, called for the rule of law, advocated religious tolerance, and sought fiscal reform. In 1791, his bones were moved to the Pantheon of heroes to be held in national reverence.

C. Later in the Revolution, the radical Jacobins saw Voltaire as the moderate who was the enemy of their beloved Rousseau. Voltaire’s reputation fell into disfavor, which was intensified by the fact that many of his friends and followers turned against the Revolution because of its persecution of the Catholic Church.

D. Many Voltaireans died under the guillotine.

E. The paradox of Voltaire at this time was that conservative Europeans saw him as the very cause of the Revolution, yet he was treated with ambiguity during the Revolution, and many of his disciples found themselves in danger.

III. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Voltaire came to be seen as the very embodiment of the Enlightenment; he is either damned or, more commonly, praised as such.

A. For many scholars, the Enlightenment is “The Age of Voltaire.”

B. Scholarship and commentary on Voltaire are vast and rich.

C. Voltaire cannot be summed up, but his triumph was the transformation of the role of the intellectual and the transformation of European civilization.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. Looking at contemporary liberal societies, what do you consider to be Voltaire’s most enduring legacy?
2. What are the most ambiguous aspects of Voltaire’s cultural contributions?
Excerpts from *Poem on the Lisbon Earthquake*

Horror on horrors, griefs on griefs must show,
That man’s the victim of unceasing woe,
And lamentations which inspire my strain,
Prove that philosophy is false and vain,
Approach in crowds and meditate awhile
You shattered walls, and view each ruined pile,
Women and children heaped up mountain high,
Limbs crushed which under ponderous marble lie;
Wretches unnumbered in the pangs of death,
Who mangled, torn, and panting for their breath,
Buried beneath their sinking roofs expire,
And end their wretched lives in torments dire,
Say, when you hear their piteous, half-formed cries,
Or from their ashes see the smoke arise,
Say, will you then eternal laws maintain,
Which God to cruelties like these constrain? …

But when like us Fate’s rigors you have felt,
Become humane, like us you’ll learn to melt,
When the earth gapes my body to entomb,
I justly may complain of such a doom.

*Translated by Tobias Smollett (1721-1771)*
Timeline

1685................................................ Revocation of the Edict of Nantes; Protestantism outlawed in France
1694................................................ Birth of Voltaire
1715................................................ Death of Louis XIV
1717................................................ Voltaire imprisoned in the Bastille for almost a year
1718................................................ The success of Voltaire’s tragedy Oedipus
1726................................................ Voltaire’s exile to England after his dispute with Rohan and his imprisonment in the Bastille
1726–1729......................... Voltaire in England
1734................................................ The success and scandal of Voltaire’s Lettres philosophiques
1734–1744......................... Voltaire at Cirey with Mme. du Châtelet
1746................................................ Voltaire elected to the Académie Française
1747................................................ Publication of Zadig
1749................................................ Death of Mme. du Châtelet
1750–1753......................... Voltaire in Prussia at the court of King Frederick II
1751................................................ Publication of Le siécle de Louis XIV
1752................................................ Publication of Micromégas
1755................................................ Voltaire settles in Geneva
1756................................................ Publication of the Essai sur les moeurs et l’esprit des nations and the Poème sur le Désastre de Lisbon
1758................................................ Voltaire purchases his estate at Ferney on the French-Swiss border
1759................................................ Publication of Candide
1763–1766......................... The affairs and executions of Calas, Sirven, and La Barre
1763................................................ Publication of the Traité de tolérance
1769................................................ Publication of the Dictionnaire philosophique
1778................................................ Voltaire’s triumphant return to Paris and his death
Glossary

anthropomorphism: the attribution to God of the qualities of human beings.

anticlericalism: the belief that the religious, social, or political influence of the clergy is harmful and should be restrained.

apologetics: defense by argument, most often of the Christian faith.

Cartesian: pertaining to Descartes or to his followers.

corporeal: relating to matter and to physical properties.

deduction: reasoning from the general to the particular or from premises to what follows logically from those premises.

Deism: the belief in a universal God, whose existence and moral laws are known from nature by the natural faculties, combined with a rejection of particular religion, particular revelation, and particular providence.

determinism: the philosophical doctrine that all actions, including all human actions, are controlled absolutely by prior causes and are not subject either to chance or to free will.

disputatio: the model of teaching, examination, and argument that dominated medieval and early modern universities in Europe, based on authority and logical deduction from received authorities.

dualism: the philosophical opinion that reality and, in particular, the human being, is divided into two distinct and irreconcilable substances, body and soul.

empiricism: the philosophical doctrine that all knowledge arises from experience and that what cannot be confirmed by experience is not known (or naturally known).

epistemology: the theory or science of the origins, nature, limits, and validity of knowledge.

essence: the property or properties without which a thing would cease to be what it is.

fatalism: the belief that events are predetermined and that no human action can alter the course of things.

fideism: a religious form of philosophical skepticism that views the uncertainty and weakness of natural human knowledge as an indication of the necessity of faith.

giocentric: a system of astronomy in which the earth is the center of the cosmos.

heliocentric: a system of astronomy in which the sun is the center of the cosmos.

hyperbolic: excessive.

idealism: the philosophical doctrine that thought has as its object ideas rather than material objects.

immutable: not subject to, or incapable of, natural change.

induction: reasoning from the particular to the general or from a number of common facts to a general conclusion.

Jansenism: a movement in early modern European Catholicism that emphasized the texts of Saint Augustine that most stressed predestination and the need for personal and unmerited grace.

Latitudinarianism: a movement in the early modern Church of England that accepted the appropriateness of wide differences of belief, ritual, and scriptural interpretation within Christianity.

malleability: the quality of being changed in form or ways of being by external influences.

Manichean heresy: the belief that the universe is governed by opposing and equal forces of good and evil.

materialism: the philosophical theory that matter is the only (or only knowable) substance in the universe.

mechanism: in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the philosophical theory that the operations of the universe can be explained by matter-in-motion acting according to the laws of physics.
metaphysics: the branch of philosophy dealing with first principles and the real nature of things.

mutable: subject to, or capable of, natural change.

naturalism: in philosophy, the belief that there are no supernatural beings or causes in the world.

objective being: in Cartesian philosophy, that which is represented by an idea.

occult force: in certain systems of philosophy, and particularly in scholasticism, a natural cause (of a phenomenon) that is beyond the range of perception.

ontology: the theory or science of being and of the essence of things.

optics: the science of the nature and laws of light.

Pyrrhonism: named after the Greek skeptic Pyrrho, an extreme form of philosophical skepticism, best known for its doubt that even the proposition “Nothing can be known with certainty” could be known with certainty.

qualitative: pertaining to quality and, in early modern philosophy, essence.

quantitative: pertaining to quantity and measurement.

rationalism: the philosophical doctrine that all true knowledge is found by reason alone, independent of the senses.

relativism: the philosophical doctrine that what we know and believe about things is relative to time, place, and circumstance.

Scholasticism: a system of thought arising from the fusion of Aristotelian philosophy and Christian theology that dominated the schools of Europe from the late fourteenth century until the end of the seventeenth century.

sensationalism: the philosophical doctrine that all ideas (or all knowledge) are acquired by means of the senses.

skepticism: the philosophical theory that nothing can be known with certainty.

substance: the stuff or material of which a thing is made.

tabula rasa: a blank slate (the Lockean view of the human mind at birth).

teleology: the theory or science of “final causes,” that is, of purposes or ends served.

theodicy: philosophical justification of God’s goodness (and justice) in spite of the existence of evil and suffering.

utility: the moral criterion of the effect of actions or things on human happiness (and the reduction of suffering).
Biographical Notes

Francis Bacon (1561–1626). Statesman and philosopher, Bacon undertook a fundamental revision of human inquiry and knowledge. The son of a powerful Tudor politician, Bacon studied at Trinity College, Cambridge, became a barrister, and rose to the position of Lord Chancellor of the kingdom, becoming the Baron Verulam and the Viscount of St. Albans. He was dismissed from power in 1621 for bribery, a common charge in the perilous world of Tudor-Stuart politics, and he spent the final years of his life working on his great philosophical project, the *Instauratio Magna*, of which one vital part, the *Novum Organum*, became his most influential legacy.

Pierre Bayle (1647–1706). Erudite scholar, religious controversialist, and ardent Huguenot (French Calvinist), Bayle shook the learned world of the late seventeenth century with his critique of intellectual arrogance, superstition, and religious intolerance. After a brief conversion to Catholicism, Bayle returned to his Calvinist origins and taught philosophy at the Protestant Academy of Sedan. He also taught philosophy and history to the growing number of persecuted Huguenots who took refuge there. Bayle feuded with the Huguenot leader, Pierre Jurieu, on matters of political theology, and he was stripped of his professorship in 1693. He served as editor of a leading journal of the European learned world, wrote major works on tolerance and religious belief, and authored a celebrated *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697, the first of many editions).

Cesare Beccaria (1738–1794). A Milanese reformist nobleman, Beccaria, at the age of twenty-six, wrote *On Crimes and Punishments* (1764), one of the most influential texts of the European Enlightenment. Beccaria was part of an intellectual society in Milan that read authors of the French Enlightenment and that worked on plans of fiscal, administrative, and legal reform in northern Italy. *On Crimes and Punishments* earned Beccaria international fame. The work was translated into French (selling seven editions in the first six months), German, Dutch, Polish, Spanish, and English (in which form it deeply influenced Jeremy Bentham and the philosophical radicals). Beccaria remained a public official until his death, concerned with issues of economics and education and holding a chair in Public Economy at the Palatine School in Milan.

René Descartes (1596–1650). Descartes became the most influential Continental philosopher of the seventeenth century. Between 1618 and 1628, he traveled and studied throughout Europe while on military service, writing and publishing foundational works of mathematics and philosophy. In 1628, he moved to Holland, where censorship was far less severe than in his native France. He visited Paris in 1647 and 1648, however, meeting leading European philosophers of his age. A series of works published between 1637 and 1649—the *Discourse on Method*, the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, the *Principles of Philosophy*, and the *Treatise on the Passions*—earned him ardent disciples, and his system of philosophy soon challenged Aristotle’s for dominance among European thinkers. Posthumously published works only added to his fame. He was attacked bitterly for his challenges to the Aristotelian system, but his defenders and acolytes included both eminent theologians and eminent natural philosophers.

Emilie Le Tonnelier de Breteuil, marquise du Châtelet (1706-1749). A noblewoman in an aristocratic marriage of convenience, the talented Mme. du Châtelet became the friend, lover, patron, and intellectual partner of Voltaire in a remarkable collaboration that lasted from 1734 to 1749. At her estate at Cirey, where she offered Voltaire shelter and support after his exile from Paris in the wake of the *Philosophical Letters*, she equipped scientific laboratories, hosted the great Newtonians of the continent, studied mathematics, science, and natural philosophy, and wrote extensively, often with Voltaire, on Newtonian physics and metaphysics. Her premature death in 1749 devastated Voltaire, but her intellectual gifts to him were visible throughout his lifetime.

Denis Diderot (1713–1784). The son of a provincial artisan who came to Paris to study theology, Diderot became the foremost materialistic and atheistic thinker of the eighteenth century. He was best known, however, as the editor of the extraordinary publishing accomplishment of his age, the *Encyclopédie*, on which he worked from 1745 until 1772. He was a prolific author, writing novels (some quite experimental), art criticism, theater, natural philosophy, science, political theory, and a remarkably wide range of essays. In 1773, he received the patronage of Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia, who purchased his library and appointed him its librarian with an annual salary for life. After his death, the wide range of his interests became apparent from posthumous publications, and his reputation has grown steadily ever since.

Frederic II, called “the Great,” King of Prussia (1712-1786). Although best known as a statesman, administrator, and warrior king, Frederick was a learned man, with deep intellectual ties to the Enlightenment. As Crown Prince,
he had secured Voltaire’s friendship and, by correspondence, his role as informal tutor, and he welcomed Voltaire at the Prussian Court, at Potsdam, from 1750-1753, in an ever more strained relationship. Frederick wrote philosophical works on government, ethics, and religion. He was a deist and, from that perspective, a critic of atheism.

**Galileo Galilei** (1564–1642). Mathematician, astronomer, inventor, and physicist, Galileo both laid the foundations of the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century and polemicated with astute effectiveness against the prevailing Aristotelian scholastic philosophy. In 1589, he became a lecturer in mathematics at the University of Pisa, and in 1592, he was awarded a chair in mathematics at the University of Padua, a position that he held for eight years. His development of an effective astronomical telescope in 1609 and his telescopic discoveries, published in 1610, made him a European celebrity. An early defender of the Copernican heliocentric theory, he was charged with heresy and theological error in 1633, forced to recant his Copernicanism, and placed under house arrest on his own estate, where he died in 1642. Although forbidden from writing during his arrest, he completed and smuggled out to the public his foundational work on the new physics.

**Thomas Hobbes** (1588–1679). An Oxford graduate who became private tutor to the powerful Cavendish family, Hobbes elaborated a complex, controversial, and widely influential system of philosophy that embraced knowledge, physics, human nature, politics, and the state. Leading the sons of the Cavendish family on the “Grand Tour” of the Continent, Hobbes had conversations with Galileo and with leading Cartesians. He published three works of central philosophical importance between 1642 and 1658, *De Corpore (On Body)*, *De Homine (On Man)*, and *De Cive (On Society)*, the last of which grew into his monumental work of political philosophy, the *Leviathan*. Although his views on determinism and materialism earned him great enmity from the Church, his friendship with King Charles II (whose mathematics tutor he had been when the royal court was exiled in France during the English civil war) secured his safety. Nonetheless, after the House of Commons began investigating him in 1666, he ceased writing on human nature and devoted himself to translations from the Greek.

**David Hume** (1711–1776). Educated at the University of Edinburgh in his native Scotland, Hume became one of Europe’s most influential, controversial, and revered philosophers. During an extended stay in France from 1734 to 1737, he wrote *A Treatise of Human Nature*, which was published on his return to Britain in 1739–1740. Its reception disappointed Hume, and his systematic views did not receive the deep attention of his age until the publication of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* in 1748. His *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751) also earned him celebrity. Suspicions about Hume’s views on religion prevented him from obtaining the expected Chair of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh, but he was made Keeper of the Advocates Library at Edinburgh. From 1763 to 1766, he served as secretary to the British Embassy in Paris, where he became a welcome participant in French intellectual and salon life. He devoted himself increasingly to history in his later years, publishing a deeply influential *History of England*. He spent the final ten years of his life among friends and admirers in Edinburgh.

**Julien Offroy de La Mettrie** (1709–1751). Controversialist, naturalist, and philosopher, La Mettrie was persecuted both for his views of the French medical profession and for his anti-spiritualist philosophy. He studied at the University of Leiden with the great life scientist Herman Boerhaave, some of whose works he translated for the French public, and later served as a surgeon to the French army. Deeply dissatisfied with the “science of man” as he found it, La Mettrie undertook a series of works to ground both medicine and theories of human nature in a naturalistic materialism, writing of mind, will, and happiness without reference to an immaterial soul. Forced to flee France, he found temporary refuge in Holland, but he was called in 1748 to the court of Frederick the Great of Prussia, where he was appointed to the Academy of Science in Berlin. He died of ptomaine poisoning at Frederick’s court, giving rise in France to the story that he killed himself by his materialistic gluttony. An edition of his works was published very shortly after his death.

**John Locke** (1632–1704). A foundational thinker in modern theories of epistemology, political philosophy, education, scriptural interpretation, and religious toleration, Locke was educated at Christ Church College, Oxford, where he showed an early interest in the new experimental sciences. He spent a great deal of time abroad, first on diplomatic missions, then during a four-year stay in France (where he furthered his interest in the new empirical sciences), and finally in Holland during a difficult political period from 1683 until 1689. He returned to England in 1689, a leading political theorist of the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Locke was and is best known for his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Second Treatise on Government, The Reasonableness of Christianity, and A Third Letter Concerning Toleration*. ©2000 The Teaching Company Limited Partnership
Charles-Louis de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu (1689–1755). Son and heir of an aristocratic family of the parlement de Bordeaux (the supreme provincial law court) and educated first by the Oratorians and then in the law, Montesquieu became one of the most influential and widely read political theorists of the eighteenth century, with an international influence. Participating early in the academies of Bordeaux and then in the Académie Française, Montesquieu came to prominence with his satiric and probing Lettres Persanes in 1721, a work on the greatness and decline of Rome, published in 1734. His path-breaking work L’Esprit des lois (The Spirit of the Laws), published in 1748, earned him the widest range of criticism and admiration, and many believe laid the foundation of sociological thinking.

Isaac Newton (1643–1727). Originally destined to follow his father into commercial farming, Newton distinguished himself at Trinity College, Cambridge University, and he became the foremost scientific mind of the early modern era. When Cambridge was closed because of the plague in 1666–1668, Newton returned to Woolesthorpe, in Lincolnshire, where in eighteen months, he developed the foundations of the calculus, derived the inverse square law on which the theory of gravitation would be based, derived his laws of motion and planetary motion, and developed the modern theory of light. In 1669, he became Lucasian professor of mathematics at Trinity College, keeping almost all of his other discoveries to himself. His theory of the world, The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy, was published in Latin in 1687 (translated into English in 1729), and his Opticks in 1704. He was knighted for his contributions to knowledge and buried in Westminster Abbey.

Blaise Pascal (1623–1662). A child prodigy in mathematics, Pascal abandoned, with periods of activity interspersed, a breathtaking scientific career as a young man to devote himself primarily to the religious life, including religious controversies and apologetics. In mathematics and science, he won international acclaim for his work on cycloid curves, barometrics, geometry, hydrodynamics, and the mechanics of calculation. After an intense conversion to Jansenism, he lived a generally ascetic and devout life, writing an immensely successful Augustinian criticism of Jesuit casuistry, Les Provinciales (The Provincial Letters), and an unfinished apologia of Christianity, published posthumously as his Pensées, a work of immediate and enduring influence and popularity.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). A self-educated refugee in France from Geneva (from which he fled an unhappy apprenticeship to an engraver), Rousseau became one of the most beloved and one of the most hated thinkers of the eighteenth century and a thinker of immediate and ongoing importance. In Paris from the 1740s until 1756, he moved in Enlightenment circles, but he offered foundational criticism of the philosophes’ belief in progress and what he saw as their overreliance on reason. From 1756 to 1761, he lived outside of Paris, writing in a variety of genres with great success. In 1762, the year that his influential works Emile and The Social Contract were published, he was banished from Paris for his criticisms of Christianity in Emile, and he fled to Switzerland, where he was the subject of Protestant persecution. He spent an unhappy stretch in England, returning to France in 1767 and composing major works of self-examination, including his celebrated Confessions.

Voltaire [François-Marie Arouet] (1694–1778). Educated by the Jesuits and destined by his father for an administrative career, Voltaire became the most prolific and influential of all authors of the French Enlightenment. He earned early celebrity as a poet and dramatist, spent a period of exile in England (writing the Philosophical Letters, published in 1734), and became internationally renowned for (in addition to his theater and poetry) his histories, didactic and mordant philosophical tales, popularizations of natural philosophy and science, criticism, and with most influence, his campaign on behalf of religious toleration. The Philosophical Letters led to his banishment from Paris, and he worked from 1734 until 1749 at Cirey with Madame du Châtelet, writing on science, history, and religion. At the invitation of Frederick the Great, he spent a few unhappy years at the Prussian court and settled eventually on an estate at Ferney that straddled the French and Genevan borders. There, he wrote prolifically, intensifying his campaign for toleration, and he aided young Enlightenment authors. Ferney became a kind of intellectual court for the learned and even, at times, for the powerful. He was received and feted in 1778 in Paris, his banishment having been lifted, and he died in the midst of great official and unofficial celebrations in his honor. Perhaps more than even has been the case with any other author, his pen actually may have been mightier than most swords.
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