

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS



Voltaire, in His Relation to the Study of General History, from a Philosophical Point of View

Author(s): G. G. Zerffi

Source: *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Vol. 10 (1882), pp. 344-370

Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Royal Historical Society

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3678028>

Accessed: 26-06-2016 20:29 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://about.jstor.org/terms>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Cambridge University Press, Royal Historical Society are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*

VOLTAIRE, IN HIS RELATION TO THE STUDY OF GENERAL HISTORY, FROM A PHILOSOPHICAL POINT OF VIEW.

BY DR. G. G. ZERFFI, F.R.S.L., F.R. HIST. SOC.,
CHAIRMAN OF COUNCIL, ROYAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

(Read 21st July, 1881.)

THE XCVth volume of the Transactions of the Philosophico-Historical Section of the Imperial Academy of Sciences at Vienna contains a paper under the title of "Studies on Voltaire," by Dr. Richard Mayr, in which is recorded a statement, made by some French writers to the effect that Kant's philosophy was merely a compilation in unintelligible and scholastic verbiage of those principles and theories which Voltaire had long before enunciated in intelligible and popular language. This assertion appeared to me so gross an outrage on historical truth that I felt bound to contradict it.

With Kant I have dealt in a former paper (1875). He was in general as thoroughly misunderstood as Voltaire. The former was looked upon as a metaphysical dreamer, whilst the latter was condemned as a realistic atheist.

I have shown Kant to have been an entirely practical philosopher, who succeeded in demonstrating the uselessness of all metaphysical researches, made beyond the limited power of our reason. As a complement to my former paper I will endeavour to assign to Voltaire his relation to general history from an entirely objective and philosophical point of view, and in conclusion I will draw a parallel between the *Teuton* Kant and the *French* Voltaire.

Voltaire's works were criticised and translated into nearly every important European language. There are no less than 765 entries on Voltaire in the catalogue of the British Museum,

under the heading "Arouet." Voltaire's works have become a kind of gospel to French, German, Italian, English, and Russian Free-thinkers, Radicals, Communists, and Socialists. He was praised and abused, worshipped and cursed, idolised and condemned. He was called an atheistic scoffer, an infidel blasphemer, a scurrilous mountebank, and a superficial buffoon.

This abused atheist, if studied properly, proves to have been a stern Deist, believing in eternal rewards and punishments ("Il faut reconnaître un Dieu *rémunérateur et vengeur*, ou n'en point reconnaître du tout. . . . Ou il n'y a point de Dieu, ou Dieu est juste" (Homélie sur l'Athéisme, 1767).

In his letters addressed to H.R.H. the Prince of Wales, Voltaire says, referring to Pope Alexander VI., who caused all those he robbed of their goods to perish by the stiletto, by the rope, or by poison, after having granted them indulgences "in articulo mortis," that is, "remission of sins at the last moment,"—"Alas! my Prince, what does all this prove? That the curb of a pure religion, disengaged and cleared from all the superstitions which dishonour and render it incredible, was absolutely necessary to those great criminals. If religion had been more purified, there would have been less incredulity and fewer crimes. Whoever firmly believes in a God recompenser of virtue and avenger of guilt, will tremble on the point of assassinating the innocent, the dagger will drop out of his hands. But the Italians, knowing nothing of Christianity but from ridiculous legends, from the follies and frauds of the monks, imagined there was no religion, because their religion, so dishonoured, appeared to them absurd. From Savonarola's being a false prophet, they inferred that there was *no God*, which is but a bad argument. The execrable politics of those times made them commit a thousand crimes, and their not less horrid philosophy stifled their remorse; they wished to annihilate the God that was to punish them."

Only a few years before he finished his earthly pilgrimage Voltaire threw down the gauntlet of controversy to the author of the "Système de la nature." That he was all his life an opponent of atheism is amply confirmed in his articles under

the headings "Athée, Athéisme, Dieu." There are further proofs in his

Traité de Metaphysique (1734).

Dialogue entre Lucrèce et Posidonius (1758).

Homélie prononcée à Londres : "Sur l'Athéisme" (1767).

A Villevielle (1768).

Correspondence (1770).

Histoire de Jenni (1775).

Lettres de Memmius à Ciceron (1776).

Dialogue d'Evhemère (1777).

These writings spread over forty-three years of his life, during which period he must have formed some settled notion as to his belief in the existence of the Deity. As we have, however, pre-eminently to deal with Voltaire as an historian, his subjective dogmatic principles are of secondary importance.

Voltaire was induced to devote himself to the study of history by the Marquise du Châtelet, who felt that there was still a vacuum in her mind after having mastered mathematics, Newton's "Principia," and Leibnitz's philosophy. She felt the need of learning something concerning man, and the part which he played on earth. Did man act by chance, under the guidance of a superior power, or according to certain laws, like the universe itself of which man is but a completing particle?

She began to study history, and at the outset felt herself beset by two difficulties. Either she found nothing but a chaotic mass of isolated facts, or a collection of apparent falsehoods, improbabilities, and impossibilities, so that in despair she gave up the study of history.

Voltaire knew that in Le Long's "Bibliothèque," published in 1719, there were no less than 17,487 works exclusively treating of the history of France; but he consoled himself with the thought that "happily the vast majority of these books was not worth reading." This prodigious number had increased (according to the folio edition in five volumes, 1768-1778) to 42,000 works. It makes one shudder to think what the number may now be after the lapse of a century. The

historical works on France from the reign of Francis I. (1515 to 1725) were so numerous that Voltaire exclaimed, "*Il faudroit vivre cent ans, pour lire seulement toutes les histoires depuis François I.*" (A Belle Isle, August 4, 1752). And yet Voltaire was not discouraged, and endeavoured to persuade the Marquise du Châtelet and himself that there might be a way to study history from a scientific point of view. He began to wade through the most important ancient and mediæval historical works, full of dates and assertions of facts, but furnishing no means of understanding the harmony or discord of human actions, or rather giving no insight into the causes of which historical phenomena were the necessary effects. Voltaire's great merit lay in his earnest attempt to place the study of history on a sounder, more scientific basis than had been customary up to his own times.

In Italy and Germany humanitarian and religious, or theological tendencies prevailed ; whilst in England and France rationalism and practical realism swayed the minds of the most important historical writers. England produced Bolingbroke, Robertson, and Hume ; Italy, Vico, Muratori, and Cesare Cantu ; whilst Germany could boast of Griesbach, Wegelin, Chladenius, and Lessing ; in France there were Bodin, Popelinière, Hotman, &c., who utilized the glories of the past, looked upon the variety of historical events as outgrowths of some ruling master-mind, specially chosen for that purpose, and made reflections on the close connection between an earthly monarch and a heavenly monotheos, in order to support and strengthen the power of the French autocrat under whom the study of history, for politico-social reasons, was suddenly considered a necessity. The victorious despotism of the mighty ruler soon checked all independent inquiry, and permitted only such facts to be stated and printed, as served to glorify the omnipotent central power. What had been done in other countries from a sectarian or theological point of view with the composition of history, was done in France for exclusively political reasons.

The clergy undertook to officiate as the mediators between

ruler and people, and the supernatural and the natural. This made "general history" during the reign of Louis XIV., the so-called golden age of French literature, so extremely humble loyal, and submissive in principle, and refined in style. No attempt was made to critically discriminate between what might be probable or improbable, possible or impossible.

Bossuet often indulged in admirable analytical reflections. He even spoke of "the concatenation of human affairs;" but he was always anxious to prove what had been taken for granted by the Church and the court.

Daniel, the Jesuit, was next in importance to Bossuet. He was unjustly attacked by Voltaire, "who said of him that he who did not know that he was a Jesuit would take him for a colour-sergeant. This man speaks of nothing but of the right wing and the left wing." But though Daniel may have given undue prominence to military matters—then the favourite topic at court—he possessed some of the good qualities of an historian, and the present Republican writers of France admit that Daniel's "History of France" is a master-work, of course from an exclusively French national point of view.

Abbé Fleury's "Church History" ("Histoire Ecclesiastique," 20 vols. Paris, 1691-1720) obtained praise even from the critical mind of Voltaire; but it was after all a one-sided history, omitting everything controversial, smoothing down incongruities, passing over in silence well-founded objections and extolling whatever the Church had done.

The fault of all these works was that they were composed without any critical discernment. Unhappily "the historians were no critics, and the critics were no historians," until Voltaire, the philosophical critic, began raising the method of writing history to a science.

The clergy were the first to enter on the path of freer criticism, and they were soon divided into different schools, according to the orders to which they belonged. The secular priests played a very inferior part in this movement, but the Jesuits were powerful and indefatigable. Amongst them were Sirmond, the collector of dry facts; Labbé, the critic; Bol-

land, the compiler ; Petau, one of the most reliable chronologists ; and Hardouin, the terrible sceptic, who endeavoured to prove that the works of Quintilianus and Gregory of Tours were written as late as the fourteenth century A.D., and that Charles Martel, who was praised for having killed 250,000 infidels with his small army, whilst he lost only 1,007 men, was, after all, a mere myth. Hardouin admitted the reliability and trustworthiness of no historical records, but that of coins and medals.

Opposed to the secular priests and Jesuits were the Benedictines, who formed a deeply-learned body, having but one aim, to free history from all incongruities and impossibilities, and whose bold and critical spirit is very little dreamt of in some of our learned societies. The names of Mabillon and Montfaucon will suffice to illustrate the direction in which the Benedictines worked.

Among the members of the Oratory were Le Long, Le Cointe, and Richard Simon. They all to a certain degree opposed the ruling despotism, and criticised the often assumed historical facts, by means of which the court historians endeavoured to excuse and palliate the growing tyranny of Louis XIV. No less important to the development of a higher critical spirit in history were the Jansenists, with Tillemont at their head, as a most conscientious Church historian, of whose works Voltaire ungraciously said : " Son histoire des Empires et ses seize volumes de l'histoire Ecclesiastique sont écrits avec autant de verité que peuvent l'être des compilations d'anciens historiens " (Siècle de Louis XIV.).

More important than Tillemont was Pascal. In his "Lettres Provinciales et Pensées" there are many original suggestions for historical philosophers, which are valuable to all who seek to treat history from a higher scientific point of view.

The brilliant despotism of Louis XIV. happily began to fade away under his successor, Louis XV., and a phalanx of thinking men of the future sprang up. These *men of the future* had no other basis to stand upon but the *past*. In endeavouring to anticipate coming events they turned their eyes back,

searching for analogies, and by this means were necessarily driven to the study of history. Fontenelle, with his "*Histoire des Oracles*," and St. Evremont's historical works, were the direct outgrowths of this greatly changed spirit of the times.

Voltaire promoted the continuity of this movement, and we cannot properly appreciate his mode of thinking unless we take into consideration the writings of the English Deists ; the terrible quarrels raging between Jesuits and Jansenists on "free will" and "grace"; the intolerance of Lutherans and Calvinists ; the depraved state of the French court, and succeed in grasping the general spirit of his times. Voltaire asserted that "passion for history is but a child of leisure," that only after long periods of their existence and many vicissitudes people begin to collect materials for the purpose of writing chronicles. The more ancient the times the more mythical are their records. The mythic survives, is next mixed with the fabulous and miraculous, and only here and there some reliable and possible traditions are interwoven. Historians of later periods accept these mixtures, hallowed by repetition, as indisputable facts ; they do not dare to detach the mythical and fabulous from the traditional, the allegorical and metaphorical from really possible occurrences. This confusion is assiduously kept up even in circles boasting of civilization and learning, of honesty and truthfulness. When Voltaire devoted himself to the study of history, he at once attacked the ancient fallacies. He often went too far in his trenchant criticism, but his main object was to shake the existing uncritical spirit of an obstructive and unconditional admiration for everything written in olden times. He opposed all useless details. He wished that historians should devote more attention to the customs, laws, morals, commerce, finances and population of a country ; that only indisputable facts and events should be recorded with their causes and effects ; that the details should serve to illustrate some general principle, and not to obscure the correct understanding of the connection between historical events ; that any written history should have some resemblance to the drama, there ought to

be an *introduction* (exposition), a *plot* (nœud), and a *conclusion* (dénouement).

That Voltaire should not have been popular in certain circles, it is not difficult to understand ; that he should have been accused of revolutionary tendencies, is quite natural ; that he should have been found guilty of heresy, infidelity, and atheism is the lot he had to share with all those who do not choose to walk on the high road of a traditional conventionalism.

Voltaire found that history was made up of court intrigues, minutely described wars, of apparent coincidences, of accounts of family quarrels about provinces no longer in existence. Single individuals, insignificant tribes, towns and villages, bishoprics and abbeys, monasteries and nunneries, corporations and guilds, had in all their pettiness detailed histories "like Alexander the Great." He complained that the annals of one single cloister were more voluminous than the history of the Roman Empire (*Essais et Avant-propos*).

Voltaire went even farther, he dared to reproach the historians of his time with want of courage and critical insight, and too much credulity. He despised their rage for compiling, and their senseless veneration for everything ancient. He objected to their childish attempts to solve insoluble questions, and their inordinate love for indifferent details. He blamed their incapacity for distinguishing important from unimportant, influential and lasting, from insignificant and fleeting events. He laughed at their love of anecdotes, their ignorance of the true aim and lofty tendency of history, and the real moving elements in humanity. He advised them to trace the general character of the different nations, and above all the causes of their obstinate worship of the political and social prejudices of the past.

On the other hand, he praised the Benedictines for their assiduity in compiling facts, and their love of truth ; he extolled Muratori as an honest and fearless critic ; he hurled the most terrible invectives against the Bollandists (who derived their name from John Bolland—1596—1665—mentioned above

amongst the Jesuits) and their eulogist, Dom Ruinart, who took everything asserted in their "*Acta Martyrum*" and "*Vitæ Sanctorum*" for indisputable facts. He was not indifferent to the "*Académie des belles lettres*" when it recognised history as some kind of science. He praised St. Réal's "*Conjuration de Venise*," and pronounced Rayon de Thoiras's "*History of England*" the best work written before Hume. He sympathized with St. Evremont, though he found fault with his undue flightiness (*Lettres sur les Français*). He agreed with Fontenelle, though he ventured to assert that his celebrated "*Histoire des Oracles*" was merely a clever abridgment of the Dutch van Dale's great and learned "*History of Oracles*." But he at once was in arms to defend Fontenelle when he was persecuted by Tellier (the King's confessor), who solicited a "*Lettre de cachet*" against the author of the "*Histoire des Oracles*," which d'Argenson, Keeper of the Great Seal, refused, and thus saved Fontenelle. Voltaire said, "This incident is more important than all the literary bagatelles put together, of which the Abbé Trublet has frothed up a great volume concerning Fontenelle. It shows the danger to which philosophy is exposed when a fanatic or a rascal, or a monk who is both, has unhappily the ear of the Prince."

He warmly supported La Mothe-le-Vayer, the author of a "*Treatise on the Virtue of the Pagans*," against the Jansenists, who propounded with Augustine the idea "that the virtues of the heathens were but brilliant crimes." He stigmatized this notion as "the highest pitch of fanatic insolence." Should none have virtues but those belonging to a certain sect? "That Sokrates, Confucius, Marcus Aurelius, and Epictetus were reprobates, because they were not of our communion," was calmly asserted in the circles of the bigoted of those times. Voltaire relates that he read the following incident in a very curious work about La Mothe-le-Vayer. "One day one of those intolerant demoniacs, seeing le-Vayer pass in the gallery of the Louvre, said aloud: 'There goes a man without religion.' Le-Vayer quietly turned round and said, '*My*

friend, I have so much religion that I am not of your religion;” reminding us of Schiller’s “*Mein Glaube*,”

“Welche Religion ich bekenne? Keine von allen,
Die du mir nennst :—Und warum Keine?”—*Aus Religion*.

Voltaire had, from a French point of view, the bad taste to praise Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, and Newton.

Of *Hobbes* he said that the great English philosopher acknowledged no other religion but that to which the Government gave its sanction.

Lord Shaftesbury he praised for having surpassed both Lord Herbert and Hobbes in boldness of thought and beauty of style.

Toland he excused on the ground that he had been exasperated by persecution, and that he wrote against Christianity out of hatred and revenge.

Of *Locke* Voltaire says “that he had been wrongfully reckoned among the enemies of the Christian religion.”

Bishop Taylor he defends for having “with equal injustice been ranked among infidels.”

Dr. Tyndal is to him the most intrepid maintainer of true religion.

Collins was, according to Voltaire, “a good metaphysician and a man of great learning.”

Bolingbroke he blamed for not having confined himself to condemning the body of divines, but for having also attacked “the Christian religion from which every true statesman may draw the greatest advantages by bringing it back to its bounds, if it has gone beyond them.” Voltaire further says, “It is a pity that so sublime a genius was for tearing up by the root a tree, he might have made very useful, by pruning its branches and clearing it of the moss with which it was overgrown.”

That Voltaire, when hunted down and persecuted at a later period of his life, should have done that which he had blamed in Toland and Bolingbroke is one of the clearest proofs of the law of causation in history, according to which “the same cause must produce the same effect.”

He extolled the English in general for their profound knowledge of classic literature. He saw in Marsham's "Ancient Egypt," in Hyde's work "On the Persians," and in Sale's "Koran," the dawn of brighter days for the much-neglected, or only one-sidedly cultivated study of history. Hume was to Voltaire the very model of an historian. "Never," he says, "had the public been more convinced that only a philosopher ought to write history." On the other hand, he blamed Burnet and Clarendon for their partiality, and says: "*Mais un Anglais veut qu'on soit toujours partial, ou tout Whig, ou tout Tory, et la raison, qui est impartiale, ne l'accomode pas*" (A Frederic II., 1751). (But an Englishman wishes that one should be partial, either all Whig or all Tory, and reason which is impartial, does not suit him.)

All that I have stated proves that Voltaire had some correct notions of what history ought to be, and how it ought to be written and read— notions that now, more than a century after him, deserve our most earnest consideration.

Who could indiscriminately praise Voltaire? He hated Christianity because he mistook clericalism, sectarianism, and despotism for Christianity; because he never troubled himself to draw a distinction between the simple, pure, and divine teachings of Christ, and the additions and distortions His teaching had to undergo in the course of the historical development of dogmatism.

Voltaire was full of vanity, because vanity was the very atmosphere which pervaded the times in which he lived. The title Historiographer to the King turned his brain, as it did that of many another historiographer after him, and he became an intolerant dogmatist. He was equally idolized by kings, courtiers, the people, and autocratic empresses. Mme. la Marquise de Pompadour made him an academician; the great Frederick II. of Prussia treated him as his friend and equal; and Catherine and Elizabeth of Russia admired him unconditionally.

When eighty-four years old, he went to Paris and made a triumphal entry into the city. An Englishman who was at

Ferney, and read the inscription on the church which Voltaire built, "*Deo erexit Voltaire*," exclaimed, with great emphasis, "*Je vois, qu'il n'y a qu'un mot entre Dieu et vous*." Everyone hastened to see the prince of poets, the chief of prophets, the king of philosophers. Actors and nobles, working men, priests, and monks were anxious to catch a glimpse of his bust solemnly crowned at the "*Theatre Français*," when the celebrated hero exclaimed: "*They are suffocating me with roses*" ("*On m'étouffe avec des roses*"). The immortal and venerable Franklin introduced his grandson to him, and the boy knelt before the great man, whilst Voltaire placed his hands on the head of the child, and exclaimed, "*God and Liberty!*" The patriarch of learning was looked upon as the universal theologian of humanity, the adviser of princes, the Titanic slayer of priests and fanatics, the apostle of common-sense, and the redeemer of pure reason. Voltaire was, however, sometimes coarse, sometimes refined, alternately vicious and virtuous, frivolous and pious, superficial and profound. He was often as blinded by prejudices as those whose prejudices he opposed. It cannot be denied that Voltaire was a literary "*Alexander the Great*," who set out to conquer one stronghold of superstition and one empire of prejudices after the other. He had to trample under foot whole legions of antiquated illusions, and it is perhaps natural that he should have destroyed many a beautiful and possibly inoffensive one at the same time. It is not surprising that he should have been impatient, irritable, and that he should not have waited for a broader spread of culture and knowledge to produce on the regular path of progress what he wished to see accomplished over-night. To this feverish eagerness the many poisonous mushrooms of satire, the suffocating creepers of brilliant wit, and the fleeting ephemera of thought that abound in his writings may be ascribed. In every idea that did not exactly please him he saw formidable obstacles to progress, a mighty Chinese wall of obstruction, and he knocked down everything indiscriminately.

Plato was to him a writer of trash and nonsense.

Dante, a gloomy fool.

Petrarch, a monotonous sentimentalist.

Calderon, a mad dreamer.

Spinoza, a dry pedant, "who himself did not understand what he wrote, and naturally could not be understood by any one else."

In a letter addressed to Walpole he speaks of the tragedies of Æschylus and Sophokles as the works of schoolboys when compared with those of the French classics (!). His misfortune was that his mighty imaginative genius was not counter-balanced by firm intellectual principles of logic. When he found that abuse, and not arguments were employed to refute him, he paid back his antagonists and revilers in their own coin, and as he was so much wealthier in wit and satire, he paid them back their capital with compound interest.

Voltaire was accused of having had no heart. On the contrary, he had too sensitive a circulation of the blood. He took offence at every word and line written in opposition to his general principles, and every letter of injustice quivered, like burning lightning, through his excitable brain.

John Morley, in his valuable book on "Voltaire," has given us in a few lines a deep insight into the moving force which actuated Voltaire, and the terrible antagonists with whom he entered into a deadly struggle :—

"The coarse cruelty of the inquisitor or politician, who wrought iniquity by aid of the arm of flesh, was not the only kind of injury to the world which stirred Voltaire's passion. He had imagination enough and intelligence enough to perceive that they are the most pestilent of all the enemies of mankind—the sombre hierarchs of misology, who take away the keys of knowledge, thrusting truth down to the second place, and discrowning sovereign reason to be the serving drudge of superstition or social usage. The system which threw obstacles into the way of publishing an exposition of Newton's discoveries and ideas was as mischievous and hateful to him as the darker bigotry which broke Calas on the wheel because he was a Protestant."

Voltaire saw above all, in a more scientific treatment of history, the only means to remedy the inherited abuses of past ages.

The very titles of his two principal works on history ushered in a new era for the treatment of the subject. The first was called "Philosophie de l'Histoire," and the second, "Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des Nations" (since 1769 published together, the first as "Introduction," or "Discours préliminaire"—not to be confounded with the "Avant-propos," which precede the first chapter of the Essay). Although before Voltaire, Pufendorf, Bolingbroke, and Vico had tried to treat history scientifically, the expression "Philosophy of History," which changed the whole method of reading, studying, and writing history, was first used by Voltaire.

Equally important were Voltaire's "Lettres Philosophiques," written in imitation of Montesquieu's "Lettres Persanes," introducing quite a new method of thinking and reasoning, borrowed from the English Free-thinkers and politicians. "The effect on France of Voltaire's letters can only be compared," says the celebrated Schlosser in his "Universal History" (vol. xiv., p. 120) "to that exercised by Mme. de Staël's book on Germany," and Voltaire's work under the *despotic* and *hierarchical* government of Fleury met the same fate as Mme. de Staël's under the *despotic* and *military* government of Napoleon. Voltaire's work was not only prohibited, but publicly burnt by the hangman. This did not deter him from writing with the utmost severity against the pedantic, vulgar, mechanical, and barren wisdom of the pompous scholastics whose principal aim in writing history was to obscure, to distort, and altogether to deaden man's reasoning faculty.

Voltaire wished to see history placed on a firmer foundation, and taught us to distinguish between myths, fables, and real facts. Our critical spirit, without a systematical philosophical training, must become, if one-sidedly practised, *destructive*; but if properly regulated by a thorough comprehension of the law of causation, it becomes *constructive*.

Voltaire did not altogether reach this higher phase, but he certainly contributed to make historical *construction* or *composition* a possibility, and therein lies his greatest merit.

The scientific treatment of any subject is only then possible when nothing is admitted that contradicts the eternal laws of God and Nature. If we try to trace laws in the universe, why should we not look for them in man?

Did Newton deprive Nature of its God, because he assigned to the phenomena of the moving and revolving planets and suns the law of *gravitation*? Must the Deity cease to exist if we assume forces working in humanity which have their fixed laws traceable in the complicated phenomena of history? Where does gravitation, and where do the forces working in humanity come from?

Never was a more unjust, and at the same time more common, calumny uttered than the accusation of infidelity and atheism against Newton or Voltaire, or any scientist who tried to trace uniformity and stability, and consequently, law in phenomena, whether produced by nature or by man's isolated and combined actions. Myths and fables cannot be the basis of history. Anything contrary to reason, the improbable, the monstrous, the exceptional, must be received with the greatest caution. On this ground Voltaire rejected the first five centuries of Roman history as fabulous.

Voltaire paved the path for Niebuhr and Mommen in clearing the historical ground of Rome of the ancient fable-rubbish, and Voltaire was at all events *indirectly*, if not *directly*, instrumental in enabling others to build up whole systems, tracing the gradual development in the progressive formation of the historical layers of humanity.

We have since learnt, what Voltaire was not then able to accomplish, to distinguish between myths, fables, sagas, folklore, legends, and fairy tales, and we have been enabled by means of induction to discover in these airy products of human imagination, emotion, and credulity, the law of oneness and sameness, producing through the impressions of nature in all the human races at certain stages of their primitive development the

same effects. That Voltaire often saw *intentional falsifications* was more the fault of his sceptical century, in which many ancient notions began to crumble into the dust, than his own. He was not yet able to admit that credulity, hatred, passion, and servility did not *voluntarily assert untruths*; he could not understand how inherited prejudices became brain-ossifications, and petrifications, or splendid crystallizations, totally incapacitating men from seeing facts in their right light, but only reflected through the prism of some crystallized prejudice. It has required, and will yet require, all the tenderness, patience, and skill of very many philosophical historians to remove certain incrustations from our brains for the benefit of truth. History, according to Voltaire, furnished politicians and citizens with the material for instituting comparisons between the present state of a country, and its relations to other times and nations, and thus produced a wholesome mental activity. As a compilation of mistakes and examples history exercised a beneficial influence, especially on those who stood at the head of a government. History was the high school of politics; it fostered the theory of "a proper balance," which had prevented Europe from becoming subject to one single power. "Anéantissez l'étude de l'histoire, vous verrez peut-être des St. Barthélemy en France et des Cromwell en Angleterre." That is, you will see fanatics increase, and disturb the normal progress of a nation. That Voltaire confounded blind sectarian murderers with the calm and determined Puritans who saw the balance of England's morals and intellect sadly disturbed, and determined to readjust it, is less Voltaire's fault than that of his times. History was then in its infancy, and historians were not able to reduce phenomena to the working of fixed forces in humanity, over which the individual had a relative, but no absolute, control. Voltaire was not capable of divesting himself of all pedantic fanaticism. He opposed the customary mode of writing history, and put forward his own, which he at once assumed to be infallible. He objected to the Pope, but proclaimed himself in all matters of literature and taste a Pope.

Whilst the stationary *obstructionists* were opposed by the

mighty *destructive* genius of Voltaire, a third group of *constructive* historians became possible. They may have much in common with Voltaire, but they need not be Voltarians. To assume, that whenever we are unable to assign a cause for an effect there must be a supernatural agent at work, is nothing but taking refuge in an "asylum ignorantiae." We must free man from a cowardly submission to fate, and fill him with a clear consciousness of his nature (through physiology), of his moral duties (through religion), and of his intellectual responsibility for his actions (through scientific history). God is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end of all things. Voltaire calls him the eternal Architect, the Ruler, Transformer, Preserver, Destroyer, and Reconstructor of all moral, intellectual and mechanical forces working in the universe. "He is a God of necessity," a God without whom nature had no sense, no intellect. Like everything else, man is but a creature of God. God gave man a body, and endowed the material elements forming it with the faculty of receiving, through *impressions, sensations*, the sources of his *conscious* power of *reasoning*. Man's very bodily organization forced him into social life, and to frame that life according to uniform moral laws. From one pole to the other the fundamental principles of man's nature are the same, but his general culture is differently developed both morally and intellectually, for man according to his mental training, is more or less capable of progress and perfection. This is the point at which the physiological treatment of man ceases, and philosophy and history step into their rights.

The single acts of individuals, and the collective acts of families, tribes, races, and nations are subject to immutable laws, the disturbances of which form the essence of the different historical phenomena. The statement that "every cause must have an effect," must not be misunderstood. Every incident in history must be the effect of a cause; but every effect need not in its turn be necessarily the cause of some new effect. There are effects that are sterile. We have all been children, but we need not all be again mothers or fathers. There are

causal phenomena that engender effects; but on the other hand there are phenomena that in their turn do not become causes of other phenomena. The more we advance in knowledge, the less we occupy ourselves with the incomprehensible and supernatural; and the more we seek in history for causes and effects that have a causal connection, the more we eliminate altogether the ephemeral and incomprehensible. This is not a denial of the mystic, which cannot be ignored in its wholesome or detrimental influences, but only an honest confession that the mystic can never form the basis of a scientific treatment of history.

Our advanced historical knowledge of the nineteenth century has for its foundation the ideas of the eighteenth century, and we could never have attained our own mode of thinking if we had ignored the works of those philosophical historians who preceded us.

Voltaire, with all his broad views, was often extremely one-sided. He hated the *optimists* (Shaftesbury, Pope, and Leibnitz), and he must be looked upon as the forerunner of our philosophical and historical *pessimists* (Schopenhauer, and Hartmann). But optimism and pessimism are simply phenomenal outgrowths of the acting and counteracting forces working in humanity.

All nature, according to Voltaire, is engaged in a continuous struggle, producing pain and misery. Animal eats animal, all of them living by murder. To reduce this remark to a comprehensible scientific theory was left in our own times to the great Darwin, who, under the formula of "the survival of the fittest," as an easily traceable law throughout unconscious and conscious nature, made an end of all sentimental assumptions of mere chance. Voltaire calls history "un tableau de cruautés et de malheurs des hommes, une suite presque continue des crimes et des désastres," and he wishes, like d'Alembert, to see all lay and ecclesiastical histories thrown into the fire. Voltaire complains of everlasting surprises in history, of sudden unexpected changes, the influences of ignorance and wickedness, of selfishness and arbitrariness, as

if these phenomena had not their natural causes in the disturbed state of the forces working in humanity—disturbed through despotic laws, and artificially kept up ignorance, fostering credulity and blind submission.

A philosophical historian has to teach humanity how to diminish and finally altogether remove these evils; but Voltaire never was constructive. The worst of exceptionally witty and impulsive authors is, that they frequently use a two-edged sword. On one side Voltaire saw in history alone a remedy for all the evils we inherited from the past, and then again, history was to him merely a useless catalogue of unaccountable crimes. Unconsciously he worked into the hands of the bigoted, who were only too delighted to dispense with a study that checked the influence of authority, stimulated inquiry, and disturbed the happy sleep and sluggish inactivity of the credulous masses. History teaches us that evil is a merely relative entity, and vanishes in the physical, as well as the moral sphere, so soon as we are taught to use the divine gift of our intellect in order to become masters of it. The conviction that this is in our power can alone give comfort. Error and delusion make man wicked and miserable. Man's true happiness can only be found in the highest possible development of his reasoning faculty, thoroughly well balanced by his moral consciousness.

Voltaire's was an excitable and perceptive character. His keen sensations were stimulated into action by the most contradictory impressions, which he at once formulated into terse sentences and telling periods, and dispatched them into prose and poetry, dramas and essays, to the printer, and thence into the world. We must here consider Voltaire only as an historian, and as such the sensitive poet, the reviling satirist, the prattler of vain things, the writer of lampoons or indiscriminate eulogies, altogether vanishes, and we find him to have been, in spite of all his faults, a *master-mind*, ready to free the study of history from all antiquated lumber, eager in his search for some kind of law pervading all generous hearts, opposing egotism and wild passion, and inspiring the wise and the good, the true and the reflective of all nations.

The immortal Goethe considered not less than forty-six distinguishing qualities necessary to a great writer :—"Depth, genius, conception, sublimity, naturalness, ability, merit, dignity, intellect, sense of beauty, morals, feeling, sensitive-ness, taste, judgment, reason, accuracy, propriety, manners, method, polish, variety, generalization, richness, productiveness, sentiment, charm, loveliness, grace, pleasantness, ease, vivacity, refinement, brilliancy, sharpness, sprightliness, piquancy, delicacy, ingenuity, style, rhythm, harmony, purity, correctness, elegance, and finish," and adds that of these Voltaire might be said to have been deficient in the first and the last only (depth and finish), but he possessed all the others in the highest possible degree.

Endowed with these varied intellectual accomplishments Voltaire endeavoured to trace laws in history which he called, according to Hume, "the laws of nature," but in doing so he did not deny the Deity ; for nature, according to him, was but the creation of the Deity—ever ready to reward the good and to confound the wicked. To prove that moral laws and intellectual powers were not to be detached from physical laws, Voltaire insisted that in writing history we ought to take into consideration the climate under which a nation lived, and the physico-geographical configuration surrounding it. Why should we find no *Æthiopian Venus* with classic forms ; no *Lapland Herkules* ; no *Newton* born and brought up at *Timbuctoo* ; no *Franklin* amongst the *Kaffirs* ; no *Schiller* or *Goethe* amongst *Hottentots* ; no sculptor amongst the *Chinese* ; no *Bach* or *Mozart* amongst *Sandwich Islanders* ; no *Shakespeare* amongst the *Japanese* ? Have these phenomena nothing to do with the climate and the tribal peculiarities of these races ? The combination of physical geography and ethnology with the study of history we owe to Voltaire, though he fell into some very grievous errors in his first attempts to make physical science the foundation of history. The enlargement of the range of historical studies is also, in great measure, due to Voltaire who, in his superficial and frivolous, but extremely charming way, understood to interest even the middle and

lower classes in Europe in the ignored histories of the Chinese, Indians, Persians and Egyptians.

The law of a systematic historical continuity was unknown to Voltaire. He was as little able to understand the Reformation as he was to grasp Christianity. He despised both Luther and Calvin. He expected from them in the sixteenth century the ideas of the eighteenth. He abhorred dogmatists and fanatics, and held that all religions must necessarily be obstructive and intolerant. He failed to realize that religions had their slow and gradual development like morals and science. Surrounded as he was by French, Spanish, Italian and South German Roman Catholics or Protestants, or by intolerant Hebrew bigots, Voltaire could not grasp the divine doctrine of love and forbearance, the corner-stone of Christianity which in its inner essence is nothing but the unconscious or conscious striving to establish a perfect balance between the moral and intellectual forces, pervading every man individually, and humanity collectively.

In spite of all his violence and mockery, Voltaire forced the thinkers of all nations in Europe to change their method of treating history. Many a ponderously learned professor would disdain to acknowledge the fact that a more systematic study of history took its origin in some apparently superficial hints, thrown out at random by the philosopher of Ferney, who had a broad heart, and yet was narrow-minded enough to assign the Reformation in Germany to the imppecuniosity of the nation. They changed their religion because it was cheaper—"On prit une religion à meilleur marché ;" and yet with all his pettiness Voltaire was great. He never wrote a line in which he sacrificed *unpractical* truth to *practical* superstition. If teachers and authors were to follow his example in this one respect alone, truth would illumine with electric swiftness the darkest recesses of humanity.

We must not be too hostile to Voltaire because he treated English and German Protestants so unjustly ; there is no doubt that the Protestants were, to a certain degree, more intolerant

than the wealthy Roman Catholic hierarchs and monks secure in the possession of their temporalities.

What must have been the feelings of Voltaire against the Protestant clergy who, the moment they had succeeded in shaking off the authority of the Pope, became themselves the most implacable religious and social tyrants. They forbade any one to go to a theatre, or even to witness the performance of private theatricals. They forbade dancing, and threatened dancing-masters with excommunication. They forbade women to paint, and declared, that if any woman persisted in painting, she should not receive the Holy Sacrament. The Greek language, containing the wisdom and philosophy of the ancient world, was to be excluded from all the educational establishments. Hebrew, as a sacred dialect, was to be permitted as uncontaminated by profane writers. They ordered that no person should go to a ball, even as a mere spectator; that no Christian should look at the tricks of conjurers, at the game of goblets, or at a puppet-show. The clergy regulated the length of the hair, "lascivious curls" were strictly forbidden. No tassels to women's dresses were permitted, gloves were to be without silk or ribands; women were to abstain from farthingales, and above all to beware of wide sleeves. (See Buckle, "History of Civilization in England," vol. i., pp. 520-524). Was Voltaire to treat a sect that arrogated to itself such powers seriously? Could he look on Protestantism with the same impartiality as the celebrated Father Curci, a hundred years after him, who, though a Jesuit, ventured to proclaim in his last work, "New Italy and the Old Fanatics;" that the Reformation which began in Germany had saved Christendom from destruction and rescued it from the ruin that threatened it through the corruption of the Catholic clergy. Even those provinces in Germany which remained Catholic, and which excel all Latin Christendom in scholarship and pure morals, can only be regarded as having been saved and purified by the Reformation."

Voltaire was persecuted and ostracised by the priests of all sects, and was accused of having offended against the *national*

and *religious feelings of the masses*. Science has nothing to do with feelings, or sentimental emotions (the domains of art); science has only to seek for truth. Whenever feelings, even the most sacred, rule supreme, science is an impossibility. For science can only live where passion is dead. Party-spirit and one-sided enthusiasm may be means of promoting science, but they are not science itself. Only where and when our intellect has acquired the faculty of admiring everything that is good, and rejecting everything that is bad, we may say that we have reached the sphere of a scientific treatment of history. In that lofty sphere considerations of usefulness or practicability ought never to enter. Were truth more harmful than error, we ought even then to have the courage of our opinions and proclaim truth—with caution—so as not to terrify the half-blinded, who hate nothing so intensely as light. Science may pass over with complete indifference the practical cases in which error may be more profitable than truth. Error, in time, acknowledges its own folly, becomes ashamed of its own ignorance and cruelty, and repentantly turns to truth.

All that Lessing, Herder, Gibbon, Schlosser, Rotteck Buckle, &c., worked out in proclaiming freedom of conscience and tolerance had its root in those principles which, though first laid down in England, were soon ignored and despised, but when adopted and amplified by Voltaire, were given as a common good, in a popular form, to the people all over the world. In seven years (1817–1824) not less than eleven editions of Voltaire's works, in more than 2,000,000 copies, were sold in Europe, and we may judge from this what an influence he must have had on the formation of modern thought.

“Adorer Dieu ; laisser à chacun la liberté de le servir selon ses idées ; aimer ses semblables, les éclairer, si l'on peut ; les plaindre, s'ils sont dans l'erreur”—(To worship God ; to let everyone be free to serve Him according to his ideas ; to love one's fellow-creatures ; to enlighten them if one can ; to pity them if they are in error), was Voltaire's creed ; and though he abused Christianity, he proclaimed those eternal laws which form the very essence of true and unalloyed Christianity.

Our duty, as truth-loving historians, is not to repeat malicious calumnies hurled wholesale at individuals or nations, or to pass them over in silence, but to study with an unbiassed mind "groups of events, and the changes and movements that transform communities," and above all the causes that are at work in single individuals as well as in whole nations to effect these changes.

If we hear, then, "that history repeats itself," or that "the same cause produces the same effect," we shall but find the action of law in the different phenomena of history.

In conclusion, I may be permitted to dispel another fallacy chiefly current amongst those who have never read a line either of Voltaire or of Kant, that the latter took all his ideas from the former. In drawing a parallel between the two writers, it will be necessary at the outset to take into consideration the fact that the one had all the characteristics of a scientifically trained Teuton, and the other all the qualities of a witty Frenchman, who hated nothing so much as true profundity.

KANT, after a careful study of "Natural History and the Theory of the Heavens," on the principles of Newton, endeavoured to seek for law in the phenomena of history produced by a universal force.

VOLTAIRE attributed all agency in history to a God of his own creation.

KANT saw the Deity manifesting Himself in law, to study which was our duty. We were to grasp the finite phenomenal effects, and not to analyse the infinite first cause.

VOLTAIRE'S God was a Creator and Preserver of the visible and material world, which He guided according to certain moral laws.

KANT'S God was the "Harmonizer" of the material and spiritual order of the world, showering happiness on all those who made themselves worthy of His blessings through scientific consciousness.

VOLTAIRE advocated general culture, and opposed all authority as an outgrowth of past prejudices.

KANT sternly held up the law of continuity, and wished to

see civilization advanced on the principle of a progressive development of culture.

VOLTAIRE was dogmatic, though he hated dogmatism.

KANT was a correct reasoner, and saw in dogmas merely an attempt to explain the incomprehensible, and wished to supersede them by science.

VOLTAIRE held up the theory of retribution—the “lex talionis.”

KANT lays no stress on it, and adjures humanity to have faith in its own higher destiny.

VOLTAIRE was incapable of drawing a distinction between faith and science. All faith was contemptible superstition with him ; science only an understanding of reality.

KANT looked upon faith as an indispensable necessity, but he never admitted it as a force able to supplant science.

VOLTAIRE insisted upon a belief in a Deity, and co-ordinated to this belief the postulate : be good and just.

KANT demanded above all morals and justice, and subordinated faith to the fulfilment of our duties as self-conscious human beings.

VOLTAIRE assumed man to be of a double nature, good and evil, and looked for the eradication of evil through the superior collective force of individuals, combined into a special state organization.

KANT considered our animal nature the stronger, and asserted the necessity of the act of redemption and salvation through the divine gift of reason, developed *morally* through religion, and *intellectually* through science.

VOLTAIRE scouted this theory altogether, and attributed to *evil* the same force as to good.

KANT took *Christianity*, in its reformed phase, as the basis of modern history, and saw in the Church, progressing with the more enlightened spirit of the times, a necessary institution for the welfare of the masses. Kant enabled us to bring harmony into faith, as the element of our moral and emotional nature, and into science, as the element of our in-

tellectual and reasoning nature. Kant taught us that these two elements were not to be placed in destructive antagonism, but that they were to be combined, and that in completing one another they produced in individuals, and any number of individuals, the highest state of civilization.

VOLTAIRE detached his deity altogether from history. He saw only mischief in any organization of priests, discarded all dogmas, and in his negation went so far as to sever humanity from the foundation of Christianity which produced the whole of our slow but gradually progressive moral and intellectual evolution.

KANT was a *constructive*, philosophical scientist.

VOLTAIRE was a *destructive*, arguing satirist.

KANT, with his scientifically trained reason, devoted himself more to the development of *dynamics*—the *intellectual* force in humanity.

VOLTAIRE, with his uncontrolled power of imagination, in spite of all his apparently cold arguings, endeavoured to develop *statics*, the *moral* force which he assumed to be innate in man.

This paper will have fulfilled its purpose, if I have succeeded in stimulating some of you to consider Voltaire and Kant with unbiassed minds as thinkers who strove to find new solutions to the problems presented by history. Let us imitate the bees, capable of collecting honey even from poisonous plants, and let us extract wisdom from writings that, though not exactly alike, often pursue on different paths an analogous aim. The terrible thunderstorm and the mountain torrent, both devastating the old emotional world, are, in the economy of history, as necessary and beneficial as the calm and vivifying stream that winds its way through the shoals of prejudices, the whirlpools of passion, and gently sweeps them away into the ocean of oblivion.

VOLTAIRE was an emotional mountain torrent.

KANT the calm stream of bright reasoning.

They both took their origin in one mighty historical spring,

the genial philosopher, HUME, without whom neither Voltaire nor Kant could have followed the intellectual direction which they took, proving the oneness and solidarity of the thinkers of all nations who are earnestly engaged in endeavouring to understand the spirit of the times, and determined to advance the interests of historical truth.