

Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary*

The Frenchman François-Marie Arouet de Voltaire (1694-1778) was one of the leading writers and philosophers of the Enlightenment period. These excerpts are from his *Philosophical Dictionary*, which was burned by authorities in France after its publication in 1764.¹ As these excerpts show, each section is actually a short, witty, philosophical essay rather than a normal dictionary entry.

Democracy²

Ordinarily there is no comparison between the crimes of the great who are always ambitious, and the crimes of the people who always want, and can want only liberty and equality. These two sentiments, Liberty and Equality, do not lead direct to calumny, rapine, assassination, poisoning, the devastation of one's neighbours' lands, etc.; but ambitious might and the mania for power plunge into all these crimes whatever be the time, whatever be the place.

Popular government is in itself, therefore, less iniquitous, less abominable than despotic power. The great vice of democracy is certainly not tyranny and cruelty: there have been mountain-dwelling republicans, savage, ferocious; but it is not the republican spirit that made them so, it is nature. The real vice of a civilized republic is in the Turkish fable of the dragon with many heads and the dragon with many tails. The many heads hurt each other, and the many tails obey a single head which wants to devour everything.

¹ Lynn Hunt, *The Making of the West: Peoples and Cultures: A Concise History: Volume II: Since 1340* 2nd edition (Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007), 613.

² Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary*, ed. and trans. H.I. Woolf (New York: Knopf, 1924). Available online at the Hanover Project, Accessed Dec. 1, 2010. <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/voltaire/volindex.html>

Democracy seems suitable only to a very little country, and further it must be happily situated. Small though it be, it will make many mistakes, because it will be composed of men. Discord will reign there as in a monastery; but there will be no St. Bartholomew, no Irish massacres, no Sicilian vespers,³ no inquisition, no condemnation to the galleys for having taken some water from the sea without paying for it, unless one supposes this republic composed of devils in a corner of hell.

One questions every day whether a republican government is preferable to a king's government. The dispute ends always by agreeing that to govern men is very difficult. The Jews had God Himself for master; see what has happened to them on that account: nearly always have they been beaten and slaves, and to-day do you not find that they cut a pretty figure?

Power, Omnipotence

I suppose that the man who reads this article is convinced that this world is formed with intelligence, and that a little astronomy and anatomy suffices to make this universal and supreme intelligence admired.

Can he know by himself if this 'intelligence' is omnipotent, that is to say, infinitely powerful? Has he the least notion of the infinite, to understand what is an infinite power? The celebrated historian philosopher, David Hume, says in "Particular Providence," "A weight of ten ounces is lifted in a balance by another weight; therefore this other

³ These three terms refer to riots and massacres in European history.

weight is of more than ten ounces; but one can adduce no reason why it should weigh a hundred ounces.”

One can say likewise: You recognize a supreme intelligence strong enough to form you, to preserve you for a limited time, to reward you, to punish you. Do you know enough of this power to demonstrate that it can do still more? How can you prove by your reason that this being can do more than he has done?

The life of all animals is short. Could he make it longer?

All animals are the prey of each other: everything is born to be devoured. Could he form without destroying?

You do not know what nature is. You cannot therefore know if nature has not forced him to do only the things he has done.

This globe is only a vast field of destruction and carnage. Either the great Being has been able to make of it an eternal abode of delight for all sentient beings, or He has not been able. If He has been able and if He has not done so, fear to regard Him as malevolent; but if He has not been able, fear not to look on Him as a very great power, circumscribed by nature in His limits.

Whether or no His power is infinite does not regard you. It is a matter of indifference to a subject whether his master possesses five hundred leagues of land or five thousand; he is subject neither more nor less.

Which would be the greater insult to this ineffable Being, to say: “He has made miserable men without being able to dispense with them, or He has made them for His pleasure?”

Many sects represent Him as cruel; others, for fear of admitting a wicked God, have the audacity to deny His existence. Is it not better to say that probably the necessity of His nature and the necessity of things have determined everything?

The world is the theatre of moral ill and physical ill; one is only too aware of it: and the “ All is good “ of Shaftesbury, Bolingbroke and Pope, is only a witty paradox, a poor joke.

...I admit that I have not been enlightened by all that Bayle says about the Manichaeans and the Paulicians. That is controversy; I would have preferred pure philosophy. Why discuss our mysteries beside Zarathustra’s? As soon as you dare to treat of our mysteries, which need only faith and no reasoning, you open precipices for yourself. The trash in our scholastic theology has nothing to do with the trash in Zarathustra’s reveries. Why debate original sin with Zarathustra? There was never any question of it save in St. Augustine’s time. Neither Zarathustra nor any legislator of antiquity had ever heard speak of it. If you dispute with Zarathustra, put under lock and key the old and the new Testaments which he did not know, and which one must revere without desiring to explain them...

What then should I have said to Zarathustra? My reason cannot admit two gods who fight; that is good only in a poem where Minerva quarrels with Mars. My feeble reason is much more content with a single great Being, whose essence was to make, and who has made all that nature has permitted Him, than it is satisfied with two great Beings, one of whom spoils the works of the other...

(4) It is not to disparage God to say that He could not form man without giving him self-esteem; that this self-esteem could not lead him without misguiding him almost always; that his passions are necessary, but that they are disastrous; that propagation cannot be executed without desire; that desire cannot animate man without quarrels; that these quarrels necessarily bring wars in their train, etc.

(5) When he sees part of the combinations of the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms, and this globe pierced everywhere like a sieve, from which escape in crowds so many exhalations, what philosopher will be bold enough, what scholastic foolish enough to see clearly that nature could stop the effects of volcanoes, the inelemencies of the atmosphere, the violence of the winds, the plagues, and all the destructive scourges?

(6) One must be very powerful, very strong, very industrious, to have formed lions which devour bulls, and to have produced men who invent arms to kill at one blow, not only bulls and lions, but even each other. One must be very powerful to have caused to be born spiders which spin webs to catch flies; but that is not to be omnipotent, infinitely powerful.

(7) If the great Being had been infinitely powerful, there is no reason why He should not have made sentient animals infinitely happy; He has not done so, therefore He was not able.

(8) All the sects of the philosophers have stranded on the reef of moral and physical ill. It only remains to avow that God having acted for the best has not been able to act better.

(9) This necessity settles all the difficulties and finishes all the disputes. We have not the impudence to say--" All is good." We say--" All is the least bad that is possible."

(10) Why does a child often die in its mother's womb? Why is another who has had the misfortune to be born, reserved for torments as long as his life, terminated by a frightful death?

Why has the source of life been poisoned all over the world since the discovery of America? why since the seventh century of our era does smallpox carry off the eighth part of the human race? why since all time have bladders been subject to being stone quarries? why the plague, war, famine, the inquisition? Turn in every direction, you will find no other solution than that everything has been necessary.

I speak here to philosophers only and not to theologians. We know well that faith is the thread in the labyrinth. We know that the fall of Adam and Eve, original sin, the immense power given to the devil, the predilection accorded by the great Being to the Jewish people, and the baptism substituted for the amputation of the prepuce, are the answers which explain everything...

Sect⁴

Every sect, in whatever sphere, is the rallying-point of doubt and error. Scotist, Thomist, Realist, Nominalist, Papist, Calvinist, Molinist, Jansenist, are only pseudonyms. There are no sects in geometry; one does not speak of a Euclidian, an Archimedean. When the truth is evident, it is impossible for parties and factions to arise. Never has there been a dispute as to whether there is daylight at noon. The branch of astronomy which determines the course of the stars and the return of

⁴ Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary*, ed. and trans. H.I. Woolf (New York: Knopf, 1924). Available online at the Hanover Project, Accessed Dec. 1, 2010. <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/voltaire/volindex.html>

eclipses being once known, there is no more dispute among astronomers. In England one does not say--" I am a Newtonian, a Lockian, a Halleyan." Why? Those who have read cannot refuse their assent to the truths taught by these three great men. The more Newton is revered, the less do people style themselves Newtonians; this word supposes that there are anti-Newtonians in England. Maybe we still have a few Cartesians in France; that is solely because Descartes' system is a tissue of erroneous and ridiculous imaginings.⁵

It is likewise with the small number of truths of fact which are well established. The records of the Tower of London having been authentically gathered by Rymer, there are no Rymerians, because if occurs to no one to combat this collection. In it one finds neither contradictions, absurdities nor prodigies; nothing which revolts the reason, consequently, which sectarians strive to maintain or upset by absurd arguments. Everyone agrees, therefore, that Rymer 's records are worthy of belief.

You are Mohammedan, therefore there are people who are not, therefore you might well be wrong. What would be the true religion if Christianity did not exist? the religion in which there were no sects; the religion in which all minds were necessarily in agreement.

Well, to what dogma do all minds agree? to the worship of a God and to integrity. All the philosophers of the world who have had a religion have said in all time, "There is a God, and one must be just." There, then, is the universal religion established in all time and throughout mankind.

⁵ Rene Descartes (1596—1650) was a French philosopher.

The point in which they all agree is therefore true, and the systems through which they differ are therefore false.

"My sect is the best," says a Brahmin to me. But, my friend, if your sect is good, it is necessary; for if it were not absolutely necessary you would admit to me that it was useless: if it is absolutely necessary, it is for all men; how then can it be that all men have not what is absolutely necessary to them? How is it possible for the rest of the world to laugh at you and your Brahma?

When Zarathustra, Hermes, Orpheus, Minos and all the great men say, "Let us worship God, and let us be just," nobody laughs; but everyone hisses the man who claims that one cannot please God unless one dies while one is holding a cow's tail, and the man who wants one to have the end of one's prepuce⁶ cut off, and the man who consecrates crocodiles and onions, and the man who attaches eternal salvation to the dead men's bones one carries under one's shirt, or to a plenary indulgence which one buys at Rome for two and a half sous. Whence comes this universal competition in hisses and derision from one end of the world to the other? It is clear that the things at which everyone sneers are not of a very evident truth...

"What my sect teaches is obscure, I admit it," says a fanatic; " and it is because of this obscurity that it must be believed; for the sect itself says it is full of obscurities. My sect is extravagant, therefore it is divine; for how should what appears so mad have been embraced by so many peoples, if it were not divine?" It is precisely like the Al-coran⁷ which

⁶ Prepuce: foreskin. Voltaire refers to circumcision.

⁷ the Quran

the Sonnites⁸ say has an angel's face and an animal's face; be not scandalized by the animal's snout, and worship the angel's face. Thus speaks this insensate fellow. But a fanatic of another sect answers, "It is you who are the animal, and I who am the angel."

Well, who shall judge the case? who shall decide between these two fanatics? The reasonable, impartial man learned in a knowledge that is not that of words; the man free from prejudice and lover of truth and justice; in short, the man who is not the foolish animal, and who does not think he is the angel.

Torture⁹

Though there are few articles of jurisprudence in these honest alphabetical reflections, we must, however, say a word or two on torture, otherwise called "putting the question"; which is a strange manner of questioning men. They were not, however, the simply curious who invented it; there is every appearance, that this part of our legislation owes its first origin to a highwayman. Most of these gentlemen are still in the habit of screwing thumbs, burning feet, and questioning, by various torments, those who refuse to tell them where they have put their money.

Conquerors, having succeeded these thieves, found the invention very useful to their interests; they made use of it when they suspected that there were bad designs against them: as, for example, the desire to

be free—that was a crime of high treason, against God and man! The accomplices must be known; and to accomplish it, those who were suspected were made to suffer a thousand deaths, because, according to the jurisprudence of these primitive heroes, whoever was suspected of merely having a disrespectful opinion of them, was worthy of death. As soon as they have thus merited death, it signifies little whether they had frightful torments for several days, and even weeks previously—a practice which savors, I know not how, of the Divinity. Providence sometimes puts us to the torture by employing the [kidney-]stone, gravel, gout, scrofula, leprosy, smallpox; by tearing the entrails, by convulsions of the nerves, and other executors of the vengeance of Providence.

Now, as the first despots were, in the eyes of their courtiers, images of the Divinity, they imitated it as much as they could. What is very singular is, that "putting the question," or torture, is never spoken of in the Jewish books. It is a great pity that so mild, honest, and compassionate a nation knew not this method of discovering the truth...The Romans inflicted torture on slaves alone, but slaves were not considered as men. Neither is there any appearance that a lawyer in the criminal court regards as one of his fellow-creatures a man who is brought to him wan, pale, distorted, with sunken eyes, long and dirty beard, covered with vermin with which he has been tormented in a dungeon. He gives himself the pleasure of applying to him the major and minor torture in the presence of a surgeon, who counts his pulse until he is in danger of death, after which they recommence; and as the comedy of the "Plaideurs" pleasantly says, "that serves to pass away an hour or two."

⁸ the Sunni

⁹ *The Works of Voltaire, A Contemporary Version, Critique and Biography* by John Morley, notes by Tobias Smollett, trans. William F. Fleming. Vol. 7 (New York: E.R. DuMont, 1901). From the Online Library of Liberty, Accessed Dec. 1, 2010. <http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/1660/202457>

The grave magistrate, who for money has bought the right of making these experiments on his neighbor, relates to his wife, at dinner, that which has passed in the morning. The first time, madam shudders at it; the second, she takes some pleasure in it, because, after all, women are curious; and afterwards, the first thing she says when he enters is: "My dear, have you tortured anybody to-day?" The French, who are considered, I know not why, a very humane people, are astonished that the English, who have had the inhumanity to take all Canada from us, have renounced the pleasure of "putting the question."

When the Chevalier de Barre, the grandson of a lieutenant-general of the army, a young man of much sense and great expectations, but possessing all the giddiness of unbridled youth, was convicted of having sung impious songs, and even of having dared to pass before a procession of Capuchins without taking his hat off, the judges of Abbeville, men comparable to Roman senators, ordered not only that his tongue should be torn out, that his hands should be torn off, and his body burned at a slow fire, but they further applied the torture, to know precisely how many songs he had sung, and how many processions he had seen with his hat on his head.

It was not in the thirteenth or fourteenth century that this affair happened; it was in the eighteenth. Foreign nations judge France by its spectacles, romances, and pretty verses; by opera girls who have very sweet manners, by opera dancers who possess grace; by Mademoiselle Clairon, who declaims delightfully. They know not that, under all, there is not a more cruel nation than the French. The Russians were considered barbarians in 1700; this is only the year 1769; yet an empress has just

given to this great state laws which would do honor to Minos, Numa, or Solon, if they had had intelligence enough to invent them. The most remarkable is universal tolerance; the second is the abolition of torture. Justice and humanity have guided her pen; she has reformed all. Woe to a nation which, being more civilized, is still led by ancient atrocious customs! "Why should we change our jurisprudence?" say we. "Europe is indebted to us for cooks, tailors, and wig-makers; therefore, our laws are good."

Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*, 1748¹⁰

Charles-Louis de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu (1689-1755) was a nobleman and judge who wrote *The Spirit of Laws* in 1748. It has exerted a great deal of influence on later thought, including the structure of the U.S. Constitution.

Better is it to say that the government most conformable to nature is that whose particular disposition best agrees with the humour and disposition of the people in whose favour it was established... They should be relative to the climate, whether hot or cold, of each country, to the quality of the soil, to its situation and bigness, to the manner of living of the natives, whether husbandmen, or shepherds; they should have a relation to the degree of liberty which the constitution will bear; to the religion of the inhabitants, to their inclinations, riches, number, commerce, manners, and customs...

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<http://web.archive.org/web/19990225170826/http://pluto.clinch.edu/history/wci/v2/civ2ref/esprit.html>; <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/montesquieu-spirit.html>

In every government there are three sorts of power; the legislative; the executive, in respect to things dependent on the law of nations; and the [judiciary], in regard to things that depend on the civil law...Most kingdoms in Europe enjoy a moderate government, because the prince, who is invested with the two first powers, leaves the third to his subjects. In Turkey, where these three powers are united in the sultan's person the subjects groan under the weight of a most frightful oppression.

In the republics of Italy, where these three powers are united, there is less liberty than in our monarchies. Hence their government is obliged to have recourse to as violent methods for its support, as even that of the Turks witness the state inquisitors, and the lion's mouth into which every informer may at all hours throw his written accusations. What a situation must the poor subject be in, under those republics! The same body of magistrates are possessed, as executors of the laws, of the whole power they have given themselves in quality of legislators. They may plunder the state by their general determinations; and as they have likewise the judiciary power in their hands, every private citizen may be ruined by their particular decisions. The whole power is here united in one body; and though there is no external pomp that indicates a despotic sway, yet the people feel the effects of it every moment.

Hence it is that many of the princes of Europe, whose aim has been levelled at arbitrary power, have constantly set out with

uniting in their own persons, all the branches of magistracy, and all the great offices of state.

... Whoever shall read the admirable treatise of Tacitus on the manners of the Germans, will find that it is from them the English have borrowed the idea of their political government. This beautiful system was invented first in the woods.

Frederick II, Political Testament (1752)¹¹

King Frederick II of Prussia (r. 1740-1786) was a devotee of the Enlightenment as well as an exemplary soldier and statesman. Frederick transformed Prussia into a leading European state during his reign. In his Political Testament of 1752, he outlines his political philosophy.

One must attempt, above all, to know the special genius of the people which one wants to govern in order to know if one must treat them leniently or severely, if they are inclined to revolt...to intrigue...

[The Prussian nobility] has sacrificed its life and goods for the service of the state, its loyalty and merit have earned it the protection of all its rulers, and it is one of the duties [of the ruler] to aid those [noble] families which have become impoverished in order to keep them in possession of their lands: for they are to be regarded as the pedestals and the pillars of the state. In such a state no factions or rebellions need be feared...it is one goal of the policy of this state to preserve the nobility. A well conducted government must have an underlying concept so well

¹¹ Katharine Lualdi, *Sources of the Making of the West, Vol 2* (3rd ed., Bedford St. Martins), 104-5. From George L. Mosse, Rondo E. Cameron, Henry Bertram Hill, and Michael B. Petrovich, eds., *Europe in Review* (Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1957), 111-12.

integrated that it could be likened to a system of philosophy. All actions taken must be well reasoned, and all financial, political and military matters must flow towards one goal: which is the strengthening of the state and the furthering of its power.

However, such a system can flow but from a single brain, and this must be that of the sovereign. Laziness, hedonism, and imbecility, these are the causes which restrain princes in working at the noble task of bringing happiness to their subjects... a sovereign is not elevated to his high position, supreme power has not been confined to him in order that he may live in lazy luxury, enriching himself by the labor of the people, being happy while everyone else suffers. The sovereign is the first servant of the state. He is well paid in order that he may sustain the dignity of his office, but one demands that he work efficiently for the good of the state, and that he, at the very least, pay personal attention to the most important problems...

You can see, without doubt, how important it is that the King of Prussia govern personally. Just as it would have been impossible for Newton to arrive at his system of attractions if he had worked in harness with Leibnitz and Descartes, so a system of politics cannot be arrived at and continued if it has not sprung from a single brain... All parts of the government are inexorably linked with each other. Finance, politics, and military affairs are inseparable; it does not suffice that one be well administered; they must all be... a Prince who governs personally, who has formed his [own] political system, will not be handicapped when occasions arise where he has to act swiftly: for he can guide all matters towards the end which he has set for himself...

Catholics, Lutherans, Reformed, Jews, and other Christian sects live in this state, and live together in peace: if the sovereign, actuated by a mistaken zeal, declares himself for one religion or another, parties will spring up, heated disputes ensue, little by little persecutions will commence, and, in the end, the religion persecuted will leave the fatherland and millions of subjects will enrich our neighbors by their skill and industry.

It is of no concern in politics whether the ruler has a religion or whether he has none. All religions, if one examines them, are founded on superstitious systems, more or less absurd. It is impossible for a man of good sense, who dissects their contents, not to see their error; but these prejudices, these errors and mysteries were made for men, and one must know enough to respect the public and not to outrage its faith, whatever religion be involved.