

Voltaire and Enlightenment



"If this is the best of all possible worlds, then what must the others be like?"

Voltaire was an 18th-century French Enlightenment writer and philosopher known for his wit, criticism of authority, and advocacy of freedom of thought, religion, and expression.

In this session we will be uncovering the ideas of Voltaire, with the help of other great thinkers and their ideas to discuss topics such as the Enlightenment, knowledge, culture & civilization.

Please read the following pages in this document to prepare for the meeting.

Voltaire was a central and a prominent figure of the Enlightenment. He was a lifelong protagonist of a secular faith. He sought to supplant the christian religion but his new idea of secular faith inherited a good deal from the religion he meant to supplant.

The enlightenment shared with christianity vast hopes for the emancipation of humankind - and deep intolerance towards anything that stood in the way of their universal ambitions. Believes of both sides had a great focus on the principles of morality, giving them a reason to be intimate enemies.

For Voltaire philosophy was an instrument of emancipation. Freedom from superstition, the growth of wealth and knowledge, progress towards a universal civilization - this enlightenment project animated Voltaire throughout his adult life.

It inspired his timeless campaigns against injustice and his unending ridicule of the authorities of his age.

Voltaire was only too aware of the difficulties that stood in the way of the universal, rational civilization he and the other philosophers followed.

On Civilization

Voltaire imagined that universal education could temper the natural stupidity and savage of the species. So for Voltaire education was a big part of progress, meaning that to fully understand the capacity of the human mind, homo sapiens needed to stretch out the extent of knowledge, possibly in different forms.

Voltaire shared the expectation of his age that the growth of knowledge would render less savage in their treatment of their own and other species. However although this can be said to be true we cannot see the full potential become a reality in modern times.

We still wage war on one another, we consume and create hateful and resentful media, and we also treat other species that we share the planet with in cruel ways that might be considered almost barbaric in the not so distant future.

The view of history, adopted by Gibbon, Hume, Voltaire and other enlightenment historians does not support the belief that civilization is the natural cause of human beings. To think that we are sitting on hundreds and thousands of years of progress which is mere spec of dust in the history of the planet and of the universe we can see no reason why any civilization can and will collapse given enough time.

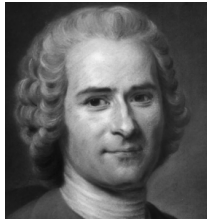
Confronted with the record of our species, an impartial observer might reasonably conclude that barbarism is the natural state. [Freud](#) confessed that consolation was not something he could offer mankind. [Russell](#) doubted that reason would ever be strong enough to withstand the force of destructive emotion.

Throughout history we have seen great empires rise and crumble but the ingredients that made up most of these civilizations have been similar, as their main driving force and motivation has been unity, and that unity has dominantly been a belief system such as religion or in its other forms culture.

Voltaire held that human beings cleave naturally to a reasonable worship of a Supreme Being, but, as he himself constantly reminds us, their history shows them exchanging one fanatical religion for another.

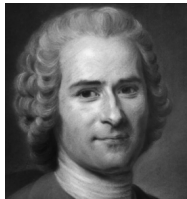
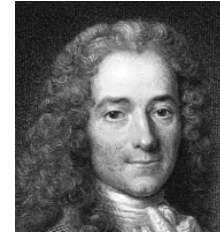
Rousseau

genevan philosopher, philosophe, writer and composer)



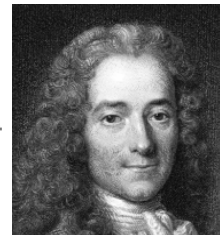
Human beings are corrupted by social institutions. The institution of property is primary cause of corruption, oppression and privation.

The institution of property is an emblem of civilization, a mark of individual freedom and a precondition of creation of wealth.



“natural man” is simple, authentic and sincere.

“natural men” lacks in refinement. I do not deny the existence of natural men, however civilization is to make something of him.



For Voltaire, civilization might be rare, and difficult to maintain for long; but its peaks are recognizably the same wherever they are climbed.

When nature is emptied of ethical norms, no way of life can claim nature’s authority, for there is none that nature forbids. In that case, civilization is no better than barbarism. Voltaire’s Enlightenment ideals are then just one way in which humans can live – if they wish.

1. Are we always in desperate need of a belief system to create a form of unity and structure?
2. If the human species is by nature rational, what accounts for its history? Does that history not show Voltaire’s conception of human nature to be itself unreasonable.
3. Could we prevent this cycle by creating a virtual country where all policy shall be based on the weight of evidence?

Rationalia

An idea introduced in Neil DeGrasse Tysons book titled "Starry Messenger: Cosmic Perspectives on Civilization".



All policy shall be based on the weight of evidence. Earth needs a virtual country: #Rationalia, with a one-line Constitution: All policy shall be based on the weight of evidence.

Neil deGrasse Tyson's idea of **Rationalia** is a thought experiment he first floated on Twitter in 2016. He suggested that society could be governed by one simple principle:

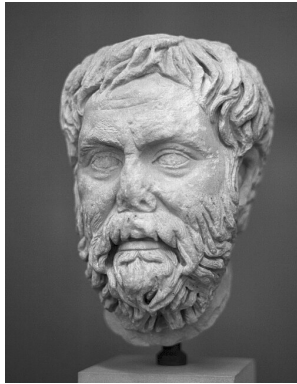
"All policy shall be based on the weight of evidence."

"Earth needs a virtual country: #Rationalia, with a one-line Constitution: All policy shall be based on the weight of evidence."

That one line is essentially Tyson's own description of Rationalia. He imagined it as a "virtual country" where decisions, laws, and policies would be guided not by ideology, tradition, or belief, but by the best available evidence and scientific reasoning.

This is somewhat close to Voltaire's vision of future civilization during the enlightenment and universal emancipation & universal civilization.

Pyrrhonism



'The things themselves are equally indifferent, and unstable, and indeterminate, and therefore neither our senses nor our opinions are either true or false. For this reason then we must not trust them, but be without opinions, and without bias, and without wavering, saying of every single thing that it no more is than is not, or both is and is not, or neither is nor is not.'

We could say that the idea of “Rationalia” in a smaller and personal scale is uncoincidentally related to the simple idea of “attraxia”. And this is echoed to us from the past, when we revisit the ancient Philosophy of Pyrrhonism, founded by **Pyrrho of Elis**, an ancient Greek philosopher who was credited as being the first Greek skeptic philosopher.

Pyrrho's philosophy aimed at achieving ataraxia, or freedom from mental disturbance, which he thought could be reached by rejecting dogmatic beliefs about thoughts and perceptions. While Pyrrho himself may have held that reality is inherently indeterminate—a view later Pyrrhonists would regard as dogmatic—his followers developed Pyrrhonism as a way of life centered on suspending judgment (epoché). By weighing arguments of equal strength (isostheneia) on both sides of disputes, Pyrrhonists cultivated the habit of withholding judgment, which ultimately led to the tranquility of ataraxia.

Universal emancipation

In a time where globalization of culture and language is happening at a mass scale at rapid speeds, we ought to think about the value of different cultures and of their use in the near future. The universal civilization for which philosophes worked is a civilization of a definite type. Its foundations are the growth of knowledge and the domination of nature. It is hostile not only to cultures in which a transcendental faith is central, but also those that seek harmony with the earth. And its most candid partisans have always admitted or boasted, such an ideal of civilization can be achieved only at the cost of uprooting nearly all the cultural traditions that human beings have contrived for themselves.

Voltaire shared the hope of universal emancipation that christianity had introduced into European life. But unlike many enlightenment thinkers of his own day and later he did not value knowledge for its own sake. He viewed it instrumentally, as a means to greater human happiness. This shows us that Voltaire was deeply influenced by Epicurean thought.

Voltaire found much that was valuable in many other cultures, modern and ancient. But ultimately he valued them not as ends in themselves, but as stepping stones to a universal civilization.

With many cultures sharing many similarities but also differences, not just in thought patterns but also in intellectual thinking, can we (or should be) consider the possibility of ever a universal culture or a universal civilization where values and knowledge is shared commonly among the many in a peaceful way? Of course there are universal human values Manifestly there are genetically human evils. Hunger, pain and violent death are misfortunes for all human beings whatever their cultural differences. Equally there are universally human goods - food, peace, sexual and familial love and friendship, among others. But these universal values are found in many moralities. They do not dictate a single way of life as the best for all humanity. Still less they do show the enlightenment ideal of civilization to be the one way of life.

But if the values of different epochs and peoples cannot always be ranked on a single scale but may finally be divergent and incompatible, if human knowledge itself cannot be unified, but will remain always riddled with discontinuities and lacunae, then universal civilization, founded on reason in an impossibility.

Questions:

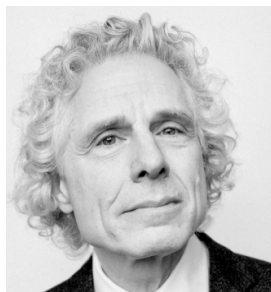
1. Could a universal culture where people share the same ideas and values work globally?
2. Can we achieve a better civilization by emancipating people from culture?

This way of thinking from the Enlightenment era paved the way to societal structures such as fascism, nationalism, postmodernism, fundamentalism and multiculturalist movements.

What's to come?

Twentieth-century history does not support Voltaire's expectations of how modernity was bound to develop. It is not only that science and technology have been deployed in the service of war and tyranny. That would hardly have surprised Voltaire. It is not even that the growth of human knowledge has enabled the unprecedented crimes against humanity such as the holocaust to be committed. It is that there is no detectable connection between the adoption of new technologies or the emergence of science-based economies and the spread of universal civilization of the kind the philosophes imagined.

Of course fluctuations of violence history are a part of human history and it is easy not to get pessimistic about the future when we recall not so distant events from the 20th century. But on the other hand we can say that we have come a long way.

“The Better angels of our nature”

If the past is a foreign country, it is a shockingly violent one. It is easy to forget how dangerous life used to be, how deeply brutality was once woven into the fabric of daily existence. Cultural memory pacifies the past, leaving us with pale souvenirs whose bloody origins have been bleached away.”

Steven Pinker, a well known psychologist and psycholinguist argues in his well known book “The Better Angels of Our Nature” that, despite the violence in history and the present, human societies have become far less violent over time. Pinker traces declines in war, homicide, cruelty, and other forms of violence, attributing this long-term trend to factors such as the rise of centralized states, commerce, literacy, cosmopolitanism, and reason. He highlights the roles of empathy, self-control, moral norms, and rational problem-solving—what he calls our “better angels”—in curbing our “inner demons.” He shares with us that humanity has steadily moved toward greater peace and cooperation.

Some key points of development that are mentioned in the book: decline of homicide rates, end of gruesome punishments, abolition of slavery, reduction in war deaths, decline in domestic violence, civil rights and woman rights, animal welfare.

Questions:

1. Is there a good life proper to human beings, however seemingly diverse their cultures or natures are?
2. Is progress in knowledge and technology bringing us closer globally or tearing us apart when we think about the quality of life and human connections?
3. Should we follow Voltaire in valuing the growth of scientific knowledge over a stable society? A cosmopolitan civilization over local ways of life?

Side notes

*The following are notes related to this meeting that may or may not be discussed.
Feel free to read it at your own will.*

Rootlessness

Carl Jung lamented our drift from the past and the "uprootedness" that led people to live "more in the future and its chimerical promises of a golden age than in the present, with which our whole evolutionary background has not yet caught up." Writing in his memoir, Memories, Dreams, Reflections, Jung couldn't have been clearer in lamenting our species' drift into future-fantasy: "We rush impetuously into novelty, driven by a mounting sense of insufficiency, dissatisfaction, and restlessness. We no longer live on what we have, but on promises, no longer in the light of the present day, but in the darkness of the future, which, we expect, will at last bring a proper sunrise. We refuse to recognize that everything better is purchased at the price of something worse."

The anticipated future

In a 1928 essay called "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren," the famous economist John Maynard Keynes imagined the world a century into the future. Things would be so good, he predicted, that no one would need to worry about making money. The principal problem people would face would be figuring out what to do with their overwhelming amount of free time: "For the first time since 10/249 his creation man will be faced with his real, his permanent problem," Keynes wrote, "how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares, how to occupy the leisure, which science and compound interest will have won."

Well, here we are in that much anticipated future, and the average American is as frazzled and desperate as ever, working as many hours today as he or she did in 1970 and lucky to get a couple of weeks off per year. It's technically true that measures of global wealth are up in the past few decades, but, at least in Europe and the United States, almost all the surplus wealth has gone to those who need it least, leaving the rest further behind than ever.

*“What is toleration? It is the appearance of humanity. We are all full of weakness and errors; let us mutually pardon each other our follies, – it is the first law of nature”. **Voltaire***