AN INTRODUCTION TO VOLTAIRE'S
DISCOURS EN VERS SUR L'HOMME

A Thesis Presented for the
Degree of Master of Arts

By

Mary Kathryn Selby, B.A., B.Sc. in Educ.

The Ohio State University
1946

Approved by:

George R. Stevens
# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Composition</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Intellectual Background of the <em>Discours en vers sur l'homme</em></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Voltaire's Attitude toward Happiness</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Publication and Revision of the <em>Discours en vers sur l'homme</em></td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. The Seven Discourses</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. <em>Premier Discours en vers sur l'homme</em></td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <em>Deuxième Discours en vers sur l'homme</em></td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <em>Troisième Discours en vers sur l'homme</em></td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. <em>Quatrième Discours en vers sur l'homme</em></td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. <em>Cinquième Discours en vers sur l'homme</em></td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. <em>Sixième Discours en vers sur l'homme</em></td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. <em>Septième Discours en vers sur l'homme</em></td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. Voltaire and Frederick</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. Style of the <em>Discours en vers sur l'homme</em></td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII. Vogue and Influence of the Poem, Conclusions</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bibliography | 101

715178
CHAPTER I
COMPOSITION

The Discours en vers sur l'homme serve as a window to Voltaire's mind and enable us to see and understand his philosophy and his attitudes toward his contemporaries in 1738. The changes made in the text prior to the final draft indicate the genesis and development of Voltaire's ideas between 1738 and 1756. This group of philosophical poems was composed while Voltaire was residing at Cirey with Madame du Châtelet. He transferred the life of Paris and the court to this old château located in eastern France. Le Mondain, written in 1736, described the luxury and pleasure of their existence at Cirey.

Voltaire was undoubtedly happy to remove to Cirey, even though he had been granted permission to live in Paris. After the appearance of the Lettres philosophiques and the bits of La Fucelle, which would circulate in spite of his care, Voltaire found life more tenable away from the center of governmental and ecclesiastical control.

The author of the Discours amused himself by rebuilding and refurnishing the old château. The things he ordered from his Paris agent, the Abbé Moussinot, give us a clue as to the splendour surrounding him and "divine Émilie" at Cirey. He was interested in securing some beautiful rugs,¹ a marble

mantel, marble tables, and other expensive furniture. Statues and objects of art were often requested. This luxury also extended to personal items. Voltaire asked Moussinot to buy perfume for Madame du Châtelet, and diamond shoe buckles for himself.

In this pleasant atmosphere, Voltaire composed the *Discours en vers*. The optimistic tone of the poem reflects the enjoyable life Voltaire led at the Châtelet estate. Madame de Graffigny’s description of Cirey and its inhabitants helps us to visualize both the sumptuousness and the intellectual activity at the château. The beauty and luxury of Voltaire’s and Madame du Châtelet’s suites particularly impressed Madame de Graffigny.

Pleasure in itself, however, was not the goal at Cirey. Both Voltaire and Madame du Châtelet were busily engaged studying and writing. Madame du Châtelet fostered Voltaire’s interest in metaphysics, and to her goes much of the credit for the

---

2 *XXXIV*, 317.
3 *XXXIV*, 540.
4 *XXXIV*, 317.
5 *XXXIV*, 169.
6 *XXXIV*, 165.
philosophical works of the Cirey period. Professor Ira O. Wade explains the importance of this influence on Voltaire.

Since he had no inherent sense of proportion in his intellectual pursuits, the best thing which could happen to him was to meet someone having the power to control and to organize rather than to unify his intellectual energies. That rôle was filled by Madame du Châtelet.

This milieu, both intellectual and luxurious, was the scene of the birth and development of the *Discours en vers sur l'homme*. No precise dates can be given for the composition of the seven parts, but the dates can be approximated from the references to them found in the correspondence. The first mention of the Discourses, then known as the *Épitres sur le bonheur*, is in a letter to Duclos, dated April 3, 1737. Voltaire denies that he is responsible for the "Épitre sur le bonheur qu'on m'attribue." This is a reference to the first Discours. In October of the same year, Voltaire wrote to Frederick, and included in the letter a treatise on philosophical liberty. This discussion of the question of freedom of the will utilizes the same arguments as does the Deuxième Discours. The first two *Épitres* were sent to Frederick in January of 1738. Voltaire described the work he was undertaking thus:

---

10XXXIV, 242.
...je vais transcrire deux épîtres qui sont le commencement d'une espèce de morale que j'avais commencement il y a un an.\textsuperscript{11}

This information seems to justify our dating these two Discourses from 1737.

The Troisième Discours was composed previous to March 8, 1736, since on that date Voltaire wrote to Frederick and included a copy of this part of the Discours en vers.

Puisque vous daignez, monseigneur, amuser votre loisir par des vers, voici donc la troisième Épître sur le bonheur, que je prends la liberté de vous envoyer. Le sujet de cette troisième Épître est l'Envie, passion que je voudrais bien que Votre Altesse royale inspirât à tous les rois.\textsuperscript{12}

The Quatrième Épître similarly found its way to Frederick in April of the same year. Its composition can, then, probably be placed between March 8 and the latter part of April. The letter containing the poem carries the date-line April, without any indication as to the day.

J'envoie la quatrième Épître par ce paquet; je corrige la troisième.\textsuperscript{13}

After Voltaire sent the fourth Épître to Frederick, he does not mention the Discours en vers in his correspondence until June 1, except for his denials of authorship of the first three Discours. The Cinquième Discours which Frederick received in June is evidently not the fifth, but the seventh. Beuchot's

\textsuperscript{11}XXXIV, 393.
\textsuperscript{12}XXXIV, 431.
\textsuperscript{13}XXXIV, 460.
note regarding Frederick's reference to "l'Homme-Dieu," fables, and Jesuits reads thus:

Je n'ai vu aucune édition où le passage dont parle Frédéric se trouve dans la cinquième épître; il est dans le septième.\footnote{XXXIV, 492.}

This indicates that the seventh Discours was written before June 3, 1738, and was first intended to follow immediately the Quatrième, de la modération en tout. It was not published until 1742, then as a separate poem, not as the Septième Discours.\footnote{Georges Bengesco in his Voltaire, Bibliographie des ses œuvres, (4 vols, Émile Perrin, Paris, 1832-1835, t. I) states that the Septième Discours did not appear until 1745. However, Professor George R. Havens examined the 1742 Geneva edition, and found the Septième Discours following the other six, but not as a part of the Épîtres.}

The early composition of this section of the poem is further substantiated by a letter to D'Argental, of July 14, 1738, in which Voltaire justifies his attack on the convulsionnaires, a topic considered in the Septième Discours.\footnote{XXXIV, 502.}

It is very reasonable to assume that Voltaire would have sent this Épître to D'Argental, since the early versions contained a section honoring D'Argental.\footnote{Georges Ascoli, Voltaire, Poèmes philosophiques, Centre de Documentation Universitaire, Paris, n.d., p. 174; IX, 427.}

Another Discours sent to Frederick in June is identified by Moland as the sixth. Voltaire seemed to consider this Épître good, describing it as assez ferme. He helps the reader...
establish the identity of this section of the poem by including the statement: "Je serais curieux de savoir ce qu'un Wolff en penserait..."18 The Sixième Discours discusses the nature of man, a question which would be of interest to the German philosopher.

The Cinquième Discours was enclosed in a letter also dated June. It is, however, in answer to a later letter from Frederick. Voltaire asked the Prince's permission to dedicate this épître sur le plaisir, "à celui que Dieu a fait pour rendre heureux les hommes, à celui dont les bontés font mon bonheur et ma gloire?"19

This evidence places the composition of the seven Discours en vers between the late spring of 1737, and July 1, 1738. The first six Épitres sur le bonheur were published together in 174020 (edition dated 1740, appeared in 1739), and in 1742 the Seventh was printed following the other six, but not as a part.21 The poem was published as the Discours en vers sur l'homme, composed of seven Discours, in 1752.22

18 XXXIV, 502.
19 XXXIV, 512.
21 See note 16, above.
CHAPTER II
INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND OF THE DISCOURS EN VERS

Eighteenth-century Europe was teeming with new ideas and new ways of thinking which were to lead to an overthrow of the accepted mode of living of the preceding century. Voltaire's seven Discours en vers sur l'homme reflect some of these trends, and show the influence exerted upon the author by both his contemporaries and his predecessors.

An important part of Voltaire's background was furnished by the seventeenth-century Frenchmen, Fontenelle, Bayle, and Descartes, who transcended their own epoch by the very nature of their works. Fontenelle, whom Voltaire satirized in Micromégas, was an influential precursor of the age of enlightenment because of his insistence upon methodical and careful reasoning. He followed Descartes in some of the latter's errors, but did a great deal to arouse men against false superstition and to popularize science.\footnote{Otis E. Fellows and Norman L. Torrey, The Age of Enlightenment, F. S. Crofts and Co., New York, 1942, pp. 39-40.} Descartes was still considered the leader in the field of scientific methodology. Voltaire esteemed Descartes highly because of the latter's dependence upon reason and his overthrow of authority, based upon the tenet: "de ne recevoir jamais aucune chose pour vraie que je ne la connusse évidemment être telle."\footnote{René Descartes, Discours de la méthode, Nouvelle Édition, Paris, Librairie Hachette et Cie., 1910, p. 63.}
Descartes' Traité des passions may possibly have furnished Voltaire with material for the Cinquième Discours. Faguet sums up the thought of that work, showing the similarities between it and the Cinquième Discours.

Lui aussi s'attache à cette idée, que les passions en elles-mêmes sont bonnes et susceptibles d'être utilisées par la morale.\(^3\)

In the dedicatory letter of La Henriade, addressed to the Queen of England, Voltaire praised Descartes, "le plus grand philosophe de l'Europe, avant que le chevalier Newton parût..."\(^4\) This did not prevent his attacking Descartes later, however. Being a firm follower of Newton, he wished to destroy Cartesianism in France, and enlisted the aid of Maupertuis in the project.\(^5\)

Bayle's works are well represented in Voltaire's library, with eight titles, including the Dictionnaire historique et critique.\(^6\) Voltaire was keenly aware of society's debt to the man who pleaded for humanity against the tyranny of Church and state, and who suffered because of his boldness.

À l'égard de Bayle, ce serait une grande erreur de penser que je voulusse le rabaisser. On sait assez en France comment je pense sur ce génie facile, sur ce savant universel, sur ce dialecticien aussi profond qu'ingenieux.\(^7\)

---


\(^4\)VIII, 15.

\(^5\)Ascoli, op. cit., p. 102.


\(^7\)XXXy, 287.
Following this paragraph, from a letter to the Marquis d'Argens, Voltaire quoted the quatrain defending Bayle against his persecutors, found also in the Troisième Discours.

Par le fougueux Jurieu, Bayle persécuté,
Sera des bons esprits a jamais respecté;
Et le nom de Jurieu, son rival fanatique
N'est aujourd'hui connu que par l'horreur publique.

A discussion of the Discours en vers or any poetry of the eighteenth century would be incomplete unless some attention were given to Boileau, the seventeenth-century satirist whose rules for composing poetry influence France for several centuries. Voltaire mentions Boileau in the Troisième and the Sixième Discours, and criticizes the satirist in the former. The author of the Discours admired Boileau's ability in this genre, but disliked the poet as a man because he made his readers laugh at the expense of others. Although Voltaire did not always agree with Boileau, he esteemed Boileau's literary technique. In the Siècle de Louis XIV, Voltaire clearly indicated which aspect of Boileau-Despréaux' work he considered the most significant.

Despréaux s'élève au niveau de fant de grands hommes, non point par ses premières satires, car les regards de la postérité ne s'arrêteront point sur les Embarras de Paris, et sur les noms des Cassaign, et des Cotins, mais il instruisait cette postérité par ses belles épîtres et surtout son Art poétique, où Corneille eût trouvé beaucoup à apprendre.  

---

8 Ascoli, op. cit., p. 115.
9 XIV, 550.
Émile Faguet, in his Histoire de la poésie française, compares the genius of the two poets, and shows Voltaire's debt to Boileau.

Pour le dire tout de suite, c'est un disciple respectueux et presque téméraire de Boileau, un Boileau moins large d'idées, moins capables de ces échappées d'admiration que le vrai Boileau eut pourfois, dans sa querelle avec Ferrault, en face des beautés poétiques des Livres saints.10

Blaise Pascal, whose philosophy Voltaire disliked intensely, must also be considered in a portrayal of the background of the Discours en vers sur l'homme. The entire poem, optimistic in tone, is a reaction against the austere life preached by Pascal, the other Jansenists, and the Calvinists. In a poem published by the Mercure de France in 1732, Voltaire made his first emphatic public statement about Pascal.

J'examine avec soin les informes écrits,
Les monuments éparas, et le style énergique
De ce fameux Pascal, ce devoù satirique
Je combats ses rigueurs extrêmes.
Il enseigne aux humains à se hainer eux-mêmes:
Je voudrais malgré lui, leur apprendre à s'aime.11

This poem summarizes well Voltaire's attitude toward the Jansenist writer. He recognized Pascal's excellent literary values, and considered him a genius.12 This made him all the more dangerous from Voltaire's point of view. The clarity of his style


and the wit of the Lettres Provinciales were too likely to convert others to Jansenism. In the introduction to the Remarques sur les pensées de Pascal, Voltaire wrote:

J'ose prendre le parti de l'humanité contre ce misanthrope sublime: j'ose assurer que nous ne sommes ni si méchant ni si malheureux qu'il le dit.  

Miss Waterman discusses Voltaire's dread of Pascal's influence, and observes:

It is clear that Voltaire was thinking of Pascal when he said: "Vous serez escuté de la multitude." This is what he most feared and hoped to avoid by means of his attacks on this powerful apologist.

Voltaire opposed Pascal's rejection of reason, based upon the order and harmony of the universe, as a proof of the existence of Christianity. On the other hand, he criticized Pascal for trying to rationalize the dogma and superstition of the Church, fearing that might lead to the perpetration of crimes in the name of religion or God.

Another question which caused difficulties between the two great men was: Of what does Christianity consist? Pascal said:

---


14 Waterman, op. cit., p. 31.

15 Ibid., p. 11.

16 Ibid., p. 99.
S'il y a un Dieu, il ne faut aimer que lui, et non les créatures.\textsuperscript{17}

This was anathema to Voltaire who was an early advocate of the social significance of Christianity. He answered:

Il faut aimer très tendrement les créatures, il faut aimer sa patrie, sa femme, son père, ses enfants, et il faut si bien les aimer que Dieu nous les fait aimer malgré nous. Les principes contraires ne sont propres qu'à faire des barbares raisonneurs.\textsuperscript{18}

Voltaire replied to Pascal on the same subject in these terms, showing his humanitarianism

Le christianisme n'enseigne que la simplicité, l'humanité, la charité; vouloir le reduire à la métaphysique, c'est vouloir en faire une source d'erreurs.\textsuperscript{19}

Pascal found the world an evil place, beyond all redemption except by means of personal salvation, through withdrawal, contemplation, and God's mercy. Voltaire saw the evil abroad in the world, but he believed man should do all he could to alleviate suffering and misery, a difficult task. He was not optimistic about reforming human nature, yet through his criticism, he hoped to stimulate practical reforms.\textsuperscript{20}

It must also be remembered that Voltaire had been educated

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17}Pensees de Pascal sur la religion et sur quelques autres sujets, Garnier, Paris, 1866, p. 196.
\item \textsuperscript{18}Lettres philosophiques, Édition Lanson, Vol. II, 196; XXII, 36.
\item \textsuperscript{19}Ibid., p. 186.
\item \textsuperscript{20}Waterman, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 34.
\end{itemize}
by the Jesuits, and was only too aware of the heresy of the Port Royalist group. His own brother had embraced the Jansenist doctrine, which made him still more hostile to Jansenism. Voltaire tried to steer a middle course between the fanaticism of Pascal and that of a Sybarite.

Pourquoi nous faire horreur de notre être? Notre existence n'est point si malheureux qu'on veut le faire croire. Regarder l'univers comme un cachot et tous les hommes comme des criminels qu'on va exécuter, est l'idée d'un fanatique; croire que le monde est un lieu de délices où l'on ne doit avoir que du plaisir, c'est la rêverie d'un Sibarite. Penser que la terre, les hommes et les animaux sont ce qu'ils doivent être dans l'ordre de la Providence, est, je crois, d'un homme sage. 21

Pascal preached a philosophy based upon the supernatural, and Voltaire one based upon reason.

The final rise of Pagan naturalism and of science in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries dealt powerful blows to supernaturalism. Pascal made a last great effort to revive it, but it was too late. Before the eighteenth century was ushered in it had died and been buried. The time had come for a new orientation. In its formation and development, Voltaire was the leader, populizer, and publicizer. 22

Next we turn to Pope, whom Voltaire visited while he was in England, and whose works Voltaire admired. In the Discours en vers sur l'homme, the poet considers many of the ideas discussed by Pope in his Essay on Man. The Sixième Discours shows

---

21 Lettres philosophiques, Édition Lanson, Vol. II, 193; XXII, 34.

the strongest influence of the English poet. Voltaire spoke of the similarities between the *Sixième Discours* and Pope's work in a letter to Fermont.

> Vous y verrez un peu le système de Pope, mais vous verrez aussi que c'est aux Anglais plutôt qu'à nous qu'il faut reprocher le ton éternellement didactique et les raisonnements abstraits soutenus de comparaisons forcées.²³

At this time Voltaire was in agreement with Pope on most questions, excepting the latter's determinism and his treatment of happiness in the *Essay on Man*. Voltaire speaks favorably of the poem in the correspondence of the period.

> Avez-vous lu la traduction de l'*Essai* de Pope sur l'homme? C'est un beau poème en anglais, quoique mêlé d'idées bien fausses sur le bonheur.²⁴

A few days previous to this letter, Voltaire had become poetic in refuting the Englishman's ideas on happiness.

> Pope, l'Anglais, ce sage si vanté, Dans sa morale au Parnasse embellie, Dit que les biens, les seuls biens de la vie, Sont le repos, l'aisance, et la santé. Il s'est mépris; quoi! dans l'heureux partage Des dons du ciel faits à l'humain séjour, Ce triste Anglais n'a pas compté l'amour! Que je le plains! il n'est heureux ni sage.²⁵

A brief comparison of the two poems would lead one to believe that Voltaire did receive a large part of his inspiration for the *Discours* from Pope. Both agree that man cannot

²³XXXV, 76.

²⁴XXXIV, 29-40.

²⁵XXXIV, 27.
adequately judge the world since he is incapable of comprehending the whole. Metaphysics is not a suitable means of understanding the universe. Man cannot know all. Happiness is found in all estates since it is not commensurate with material goods. Pope was a determinist, believing that the whole universe operated according to God's plan, while Voltaire at this time gave man at least a modified freedom of the will. Envy is criticized by Pope in an *Essay on Criticism*, and is the subject of Voltaire's *Troisième Discours*. Voltaire treats the question of moderation in the fourth *Discours*, and Pope seems to imply that man is happiest while following a temperate life. The passions are considered by both the English and the French poet to be of great value to man, and to be the means of man's obtaining happiness and virtue. Neither Pope nor Voltaire thought the earth was made for man. Pope believed in Plato's great chain of being, but the author of the *Discours en vers* discusses this idea without commenting upon its veracity. Voltaire is somewhat more specific as to what constitutes virtue than is Pope, who merely opposes it to vice. The latter, however, praises charity, and makes a plea for benevolence and humanity towards mankind, as does Voltaire. Perhaps the most significant similarity between the two works is the optimistic outlook on the world, and the belief that man is unable to know how evil fits into the general scheme of the universe and produces good. Pope stated it concisely:
"Whatever is, is right."26 The two poets counseled man to be happy and to submit himself to the eternal order and not to try to play God's rôle.

Voltaire later, however, became disillusioned and more pessimistic. He saw the evils of the world more clearly and did not find them consistent with a philosophy which declares all to be as God designed it. Nor was this outlook in accordance with a belief in a loving God. Voltaire revised the Lettres philosophiques in 1756, but the letter "Sur Mr. Pope" still praised the Essay as an outstanding didactic poem, in spite of the fact that at that time Voltaire took exception to some of his philosophy. This letter read (in part):

L'Essai sur l'homme de Pope me paraît le plus beau Poème didactique, le plus utile, le plus sublime qu'on ait jamais fait dans aucune langue. Il est vrai que le fonds s'en trouve tout entier dans les Caractéristiques du Lord Shaftesbury; et je ne sais pourquoi Mr. Pope en fait uniquement honneur à M. de Bolingbroke, sans dire un mot du célèbre Shaftesbury, élève de Locke.27

Since Voltaire thought Pope's philosophy came from Shaftesbury and Bolingbroke, the influence of these two men on the author of the Discours en vera should be considered. Voltaire first made Bolingbroke's acquaintance when he visited the English lord, who had sought refuge in France, at La Source. Voltaire met him again in England, and stayed with him there for some time.28 According to Professor Norman L. Torrey,


Bolingbroke's influence on Voltaire cannot have been great, in spite of Voltaire's frequent references to him, because of his misrepresentations and false quotations of the well-known English Tory.\footnote{Norman L. Torrey, \textit{Voltaire and the English Deists}, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1930, p. 135; "Bolingbroke and Voltaire," \textit{Publications of the Modern Language Association}, 42: 788-798, 1927, p. 797.} Bolingbroke's works were not published until after his death in 1751. Torrey thinks it unlikely that the politic English noble would have confided in the erratic young Frenchman, "whose integrity he had long before suspected, and who had such influential friends in the opposing political party."\footnote{Ibid., p. 137; \textit{PMLA}, p. 789.}


How long he (Voltaire) remained under Bolingbroke's roof it is now impossible to say, but he evidently remained long enough to become impregnated with his ideas. The intimacy thus commenced in France was afterwards renewed in England, where for upwards of two years the friends lived within a few miles of each other.\footnote{John Churton Collins, \textit{Bolingbroke, a Historical Study, and Voltaire in England}, John Murray, London, 1886, p. 139.}

Baldensberger is in agreement with Torrey. Bolingbroke's
importance in the shaping of Voltaire's ideas cannot have been as great as many have considered it. Baldensberger points out the personal differences the two men had, which would have doubtless excluded the possibility of the intimacy Churton Collins suggests.\textsuperscript{33} Any resemblances between the ideas of the two men shows merely the reflection of the philosophical and religious development of the time.\textsuperscript{34} Torrey reaches this conclusion after considering Hurn's study of the works of Bolingbroke and Voltaire, which found that there were neither textual borrowings nor direct influences.\textsuperscript{35} Voltaire's indebtedness to Bolingbroke is summed up this way by Professor Torrey:

\begin{quote}
His greatest gift to Voltaire, both in his lifetime and after his death was his name.\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

Shaftesbury's \textit{Characteristics} (in three volumes) are listed in the eighteenth-century manuscript catalogue of Voltaire's library.\textsuperscript{37} The \textit{Characteristics} were published in three volumes for the first time in 1711, and again in 1714, 1723, 1727, 1732, 1737, etc. This is as far as Bateson traces


\textsuperscript{35}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 150; p. 795.

\textsuperscript{36}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 153; p. 795.

the publication before a new edition of the nineteenth century. Thus it is quite possible that Voltaire read Shaftesbury's works before he composed the Discours en vers. He never mentions Shaftesbury as a source for the thought of the poem, however. Voltaire never misquoted Shaftesbury, as he did Bolingbroke, and interpreted his moral philosophy correctly. Shaftesbury was an advocate of the harmony of the universe, which he believed emanated from God. Like Pope, he thought one should start with man in studying the nature of the universe, and that all was best in respect to the whole. He realized the efficacy of ridicule for eliminating preconceived prejudice, and found philosophical systems "the most ingenious ways of becoming foolish." There is yet another idea found repeatedly in Shaftesbury's Characteristics which coincides with one of Voltaire's frequently expressed thoughts, namely, that goodness and virtue consist of humanitarianism and benevolence. Thus Shaftesbury is an integral part of the


42 Ibid., Vol. I, 239.


whole background reflected by the Discours en vers. Shaftesbury stated what he considered to be the hypothesis of perfect theism: "that whatever the order of the world produces is in the main both just and good." 45 Robertson shows the contradiction implicit in Shaftesbury's and the other optimists' philosophies, which was doubtless an important factor in Voltaire's later turn against it.

Spinoza and Shaftesbury like their predecessors affirm in one breath the universal harmony of things, and in the next denounce the discord. 46

One other of the English deists had a minor part in the intellectual setting of the Discours en vers, Anthony Collins. Voltaire's library as preserved at Leningrad contains two of this deist's works, both published before 1738. 47 Torrey says, however, that these books could not have come into Voltaire's hands until somewhat later. 48 Nevertheless, Collins was read during Voltaire's visit to England, "chiefly in connection with Clarke, Locke, and Newton." 49 Torrey summed up Collins' influence on Voltaire thus:

Not until a decade later (about 1738, Cirey period) did the force of Collins' arguments begin to make themselves felt, and it was only some forty years

46 Ibid., Vol. I, xxxv.
47 Havens and Torrey, op. cit., p. 8.
48 Torrey, op. cit., p. 4.
49 Ibid., p. 57.
later that Voltaire declared himself definitely and finally convinced. Yet the Collins' influence was extremely important in the shaping of Voltaire's attitude toward the metaphysical and moral problems of life. Through this influence he denied the freedom of the will and finally admitted that this problem had no bearing on the question of morality.50

Professor Ira O. Wade also indicates the continuity of the so-called English influence, which would include that of Collins.

Voltaire, who certainly was not responsible for dividing his life into the five periods which critics ordinarily assign to it, was undoubtedly merging, during this period of his life, which he spent in and around Cirey, influences of the two preceding periods.51

Collins was an advocate of the theory that pleasure and pain determine man's will, and from it come man's ideas of morality.52 This is Voltaire's thesis in the Cinquième Discours. Possibly his acquaintance with the Englishman's ideas during his exile and at Cirey helped him to evolve this conception of man's morality.

The Englishmen whose influence on Voltaire was greatest during this period are Sir Isaac Newton, Dr. Samuel Clarke, and John Locke. Clarke was the "theological lieutenant of Newton."53 His position was between orthodoxy and deism, but

50Ibid., pp. 57-58.
51Ibid., p. 34.
52Wade, op. cit., p. 8.
he used the deistic method "on behalf of the colorless doctrine which was in his mind identified with Christianity."\textsuperscript{54}

The Éléments de la Philosophie de Newton give a clue as to which of Newton's metaphysical ideas pleased Voltaire most. The section of the Éléments discussing the moral and religious philosophy of the English genius was not published until 1740, and probably not written until after the composition of the Discours en vers.\textsuperscript{55} It is reasonable to assume, however, that the ideas treated in that work are the same ones which Voltaire lauded in his correspondence of 1737 and 1738, when he and Madame du Châtelet were studying Newton. Voltaire's interest in science made him appreciate and recognize the exceptional merit of Newton. It was Newton's method and attitude toward life which contributed most heavily to Voltaire's intellectual formation. Scientific research had led to Newton's belief in a natural harmonious order, and a religion based upon it, with God as the prime motive force.\textsuperscript{56} Newton's hatred of metaphysical systems and his "sentiment d'humanité" also were ideas coinciding with those of Voltaire.\textsuperscript{57}

Newton expressed his method in his "Rules of Reasoning in Philosophy," which show his dependence upon analysis and

\textsuperscript{54}Ibid., Vol. I, 129.
\textsuperscript{55}XXII, 398.
\textsuperscript{56}XXII, 403, 419, 420-421.
\textsuperscript{57}XXII, 423, 421.
scientific inquiry alone, throwing aside all preconceived prejudice and intuition. Man cannot be sure he has truth, and must revise any hypothesis which is proven false. Newton found simplicity in nature and desired it in scientific and metaphysical reasoning. No superfluous causes of natural phenomena were admitted, since anything is in vain when "less will serve." Voltaire tried to follow these same principles, and decried any reasoning not based upon fact.

Sir Isaac Newton took the final step. Descartes relied upon analysis and careful reasoning, but still believed in intuition and innate ideas, thus destroying the efficacy of his method.

The English seer thought man had a free will, but was not troubled as was Voltaire by the apparent contradiction between God's omniscience and man's liberty. He had conceived liberty as more than the "puissance d'agir."

Selon Newton et Clarke, l'Être infiniment libre a communiqué à l'homme, sa créature, une portion limitée de cette liberté; et on n'entend pas ici par liberté la simple puissance d'appliquer sa pensée à tel ou tel objet, ou de commencer le mouvement; on n'entend pas seulement la faculté de vouloir, mais celle de vouloir très-librement avec une volonté pleine et efficace, et de vouloir même quelquefois sans autre raison que sa volonté.


59 Ibid., Rule I, p. 398.

60 XXII, 415.

61 XXII, 413.
John Locke was Voltaire's immediate source for his conception of philosophical liberty. After 1756, the Deuxième Discours was prefaced with the following definition of liberté:

On entend par ce mot Liberté le pouvoir de faire ce qu'on veut. Il n'y a et ne peut y avoir d'autre Liberté. C'est pourquoi Locke l'a si bien définie Puissance.62

Locke had been read by Voltaire previous to the composition of this poem. His library contains a volume of An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, published in 1710. Voltaire began his letter "Sur Mr Locke" by pointing out what he believed to be Locke's most outstanding qualities.

Jamais il ne fut peut-être un esprit plus sage, plus méthodique, un Logicien plus exact que Mr Loke.63

Voltaire's esteem for Locke was largely based upon the latter's destruction of the concept of innate ideas and his solution to the problem of matter and thought.64 Professor Becker summed up well Locke's contribution to the eighteenth century, and hence to Voltaire.

This was Locke's great title to glory, that he made it possible for the eighteenth century to believe with a clear conscience what it wanted to believe, namely that since man and the mind of man were shaped by the nature which God had created, it was possible for men 'barely by the use of their natural faculties' to bring their

62IX, 388; Ascoli, op. cit., p. 92.
63Lettres philosophiques, Édition Lanson, Vol. I, 166; XXII, 121.
64XXII, 423-424.
ideas and their conduct, and hence their institutions by which they lived, into harmony with the universal order.\textsuperscript{65}

This brief consideration of the English influences which Voltaire underwent indicates that his method of reasoning was substantially the same as that of the English deists. Lanson presents this system in two rules.

1° Séparation et indépendance de la raison et de la foi.
2° Extension de la méthode expérimentale à la métaphysique.\textsuperscript{66}

Leibnitzian optimism is also a possible source for the Discours sur l'homme. Voltaire's first introduction to Leibnitz came as did some of his early acquaintance with Newton, Collins, and Clarke, through a two volume work published in 1720, entitled: Recueil de diverses pièces sur la philosophie, la religion naturelle, l'histoire, et les mathématiques, etc.\textsuperscript{67}

In 1736, Frederick of Prussia wrote to Voltaire, and thus began a long correspondence with the French writer. He also sent him Wolff's works. Wolff, a Leibnitzian, systematized his teacher's philosophy. Voltaire was not very critical of Wolff at first, possibly not caring to offend Frederick. Later, however, he took exception to pre-established harmony

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{65}Carl S. Becker, The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1932, p. 65.
\item \textsuperscript{66}Gustave Lanson, Voltaire, Librairie Hachette, Paris, 1906, p. 69.
\item \textsuperscript{67}Havens and Torrey, op. cit., p. 13.
\end{itemize}
and monadology, and gave a hint of the hostility which was to follow.

Neither Leibnitz nor Wolff should be given too significant a place in Voltaire's intellectual background in 1737 and 1738. Mr. Pettit's discussion of their influence on the *Discours en versa* concluded:

> From the nature of this poem, optimistic in tone and with one part devoted to the question of free will, one would expect Voltaire would have given more attention to Leibnitz, if he had been intimately familiar and interested in him.  

The intensive study of Leibnitz by Madame du Châtelet was not undertaken until 1739. Previous to that, Voltaire's ideas concerning Leibnitz were very general and his respect for him high, due in part to Fontenelle's *Éloge de Leibnitz*. Mr. Pettit summarizes his study of Leibnitz's influence through 1738 thus:

> To sum up we may say that by the end of 1738, Voltaire's firsthand knowledge of Leibnitz's metaphysics was of a general nature, that he had read 'avec grande attention' this metaphysics as interpreted by Wolff, that he was familiar with certain principles of Leibnitzian physics and mathematics and the dispute between Clarke and Leibnitz on the question of time and space being relative or absolute. His interest in Leibnitzian ideas appears as yet relatively small, excepting those related to principles

---

68XXXIV, 219.


70Ibid., p. 73.

71Ibid., p. 73.
of physics which were contradictory to Newtonian principles. Altho it is evident that in the main Voltaire is sceptical of Leibnizian ideas, he has not yet manifested aversion or open hostility toward them. His attitude toward Leibnitz as a man is favorable.72

Voltaire was an important part of the age of enlightenment. He along with these men and many others constituted what became the first cry of a new era. Voltaire's part in this has been well expressed by Professor Whitehead in his Science and the Modern World.

The common sense of the eighteenth century, its grasp of the obvious demands of human nature, acted on the world like a bath of moral cleansing. Voltaire must have the credit, that he hated injustice, he hated cruelty, he hated senseless repression, and he hated hocus-pocus. Furthermore, when he saw them, he knew them. In these supreme virtues, he was typical of his century on its better side.73

---

72 Ibid., pp. 19-20.
CHAPTER III

VOLTAIRE'S ATTITUDE TOWARD HAPPINESS

The Discours en ver sur l'homme, as already noted, were published first under the title, Épitres sur le bonheur. Happiness is the unifying theme of the series of poems. Voltaire's thesis in the Premier Discours is that happiness is not necessarily an accompaniment of wealth or high position, but that it exists for the commoner and the peasant as well. His first conclusion (1737) was:

Où donc trouver, dis-tu, cet être si vanté, 
Fugitif, inconnu, qu'on croit imaginaire?
Où? chez toi, dans ton coeur, et dans ton caractère.
Quelque soit ton état, quelque soit ton destin,
Sois sage, il te suffit, ton bonheur est certain.¹

Thus Voltaire seems to be optimistic about man's ability to have happiness, provided he makes the necessary effort. In later works he brings out even more clearly that man's attitude is an important factor in determining whether or not he can be happy. The ending of the Premier Discours went through several stages, however, and took on a less optimistic tone. The final version (after 1756) found life a mixture of many elements, of which one is happiness. Therefore we shall each have our share, since:

...Dieu nous pesa tous dans la même balance.²

¹IX, 387, Ascoli: op. cit., p. 87.
²IX, 383-384; Ascoli, op. cit., p. 89.
The Deuxième Discours in which philosophical liberty is made a prerequisite for happiness, closes with the angel telling man to be happy, after refusing him knowledge he had requested about the universe. The angel does not tell man how to achieve happiness, however. Voltaire evidently believed that there was no secret or path which led infallibly to happiness.

The Troisième Discours warns against envy, which causes unhappiness. The moderation which Voltaire preached in the fourth Discours is his recommendation for man, if he is to be happy. One of the well-known lines of the Quatrième Discours gives an additional source for man's happiness.

O divine amitié! félicité parfaite,

Pleasure, the subject of the Cinquième Discours, is often the most evident manifestation of happiness. Voltaire's aim in this discourse was to prove the existence of God through the pleasures man enjoys, and to show the value of the passions. This indicates how important Voltaire considered the question of felicity, and his desire to show that man can have a good time and be virtuous. He need not live the austere life the Jansenists advocated in order to be good.

The Sixth Discours advises man to seek his own happiness in what he has and not always be looking for it elsewhere.

---

3 IX, 392; Ascoli, op. cit., p. 103.
4 IX, 405; Ascoli, op. cit., p. 130.
This section of the Discours says that pure happiness was never permitted to man. Voltaire described his own situation and his mode of living, concluding:

Et sachant qu'ici-bas la félicité pure
Ne fut jamais permise à l'humaine nature.  

The last of the Discours suggests another method of finding happiness. Man can be happy if he is benevolent and tries to ameliorate the world. The first reading of the Premier Discours gave similar advice to the young Herman.

Et ce Bernard qu'on vante est heureux en effet,
Non par le bien qu'il a, mais par le bien qu'il fait.  

A survey of Voltaire's attitude toward happiness in his other works and in his correspondence will indicate whether Voltaire's philosophy as expressed in the Discours remained the same.

In April of 1737, Voltaire wrote to Frederick the Great, and suggested once more that man's happiness came from helping others.

Tout ce que je sais, c'est que soit que la matière soit éternelle, ... soit qu'elle ait été créée dans le temps, ... soit que notre âme périsse avec nous, soit qu'elle jouisse de l'immortalité, on ne peut dans ces incertitudes prendre un parti plus sage, plus digne de vous, que celui que vous prenez de donner à votre âme, permissible ou non, toutes les vertues, tous les plaisirs, et toutes les instructions dont elle est capable, de vivre en prince, en homme, et en sage, d'être heureux, et de rendre les autres heureux.  

5IX, 420; Ascoli, op. cit., p. 161.
6IX, 386; Ascoli, op. cit., p. 79.
7XXXIV, 250.
Voltaire was too preoccupied with the evils of this world to believe that happiness was a goal for which man could set sail with a perfect chart showing the way. It is somewhat relative, and can be found under different circumstances. However, not everyone recognizes or knows when he has happiness. In the *Supplement aux oeuvres en prose*, article, "Juifs," Voltaire wrote:

Nous cherchons tous le bonheur, mais sans savoir où, comme des âvrognes qui cherchent leur maison, sachant confusion qu'ils en ont une.8

Shortly after Voltaire's return from England, in a letter to Thieriot, he defined happiness:

Croyez-moi, il n'y a de bonheur dans ce monde pour notre corps que d'avoir ses cinq sens en bon état, et, pour notre âme que d'avoir un ami: tout le reste n'est que chimères.9

In *La Pucelle* (1724–1730), Voltaire is pessimistic about man's ability to find happiness.

Mais que la joie est trompeuse et légère!
Que le bonheur est chose passagère!10

Writing to Mademoiselle de Guise on the occasion of her marriage, in April of 1737, Voltaire concluded:

Je vous souhaite un vrai bonheur:
Mais voila la chose impossible.11

Voltaire expresses the same idea in some of his later works.

8XXXII, 559.
9XXXII, 187.
10IX, 165.
11X, 290.
Le bonheur ressemble à l'île d'Ithaque qui fuyait toujours devant Ulysse.\textsuperscript{12}

Le bonheur nous appelle et fuit devant nos pas.\textsuperscript{13}

The experiences of Candide and Cacambo who searched for happiness all over the world further exemplify the negative side of Voltaire's concept of felicity. Even during Candide's stay at El Dorado, he was not happy, and left hoping to find his happiness elsewhere.\textsuperscript{14}

Micromégas who had nearly a thousand senses and lived almost fifteen thousand years was not happy, realizing that life could be more perfect. After having traveled a great deal, he had not found the place where man is satisfied with his lot, and where he does not sense a feeling of unhappiness and frustration.

J'arriverai peut-être un jour au pays où il ne manque rien; mais jusqu'à présent personne ne m'a donné de nouvelles positives de ce pays-là.\textsuperscript{15}

Zadig (1747) similarly sought happiness from one country to another. He found that it came to the wicked rather than to the virtuous.

Si j'eusse été méchant comme tant d'autres, je serais heureux comme eux.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{12}XXXII, 604.

\textsuperscript{13}X, 207.


After gaining a position which he thought must inevitably lead to the life for which he hoped, Zadig said:

Je suis donc enfin heureux,...

Voltaire concluded Zadig's statement pessimistically:

...mais il se trompais.17

The problem is attacked in a little different manner in the short work, Histoire d'un bon Bramin. Here the author talks with a wealthy learned Brahmin who is unhappy in spite of all he has because there are so many things he does not know about man and the universe. In contrast, there is a poor woman living nearby who is always happy, though very ignorant. Voltaire speaks then of the relationship between reason and happiness, and decides that Wisdom is really not worth having if it excludes happiness.

De là je conclus que, si nous faisons cas du bonheur, nous faisons encore plus de cas de la raison.

Mais après y avoir réfléchi, il paraît que de préférer la raison à la félicité, c'est être très insensé.18

Similarly Pococurante, the wealthy Venetian whom Candide visited, although he had all material riches, was unhappy and found fault with everything.19

Considering only these expressions of Voltaire's attitudes

18XXI, 221.
19Candide, Édition Morize, pp. 183-196; XXI, 201-205.
toward happiness, and discounting the conclusions found in the *Discours en vers*, one would almost despair of man's ability to ever be happy. If happiness is incompatible with reason, then anyone with any intelligence would be unable to gain it. Fortunately Voltaire carried the question further and enabled the reader to assume a little more optimism. He himself was happy, and said in a letter to Thierict (27 mai, 1756) that he was ashamed of being happier than other people.\(^{20}\) The philosophy of *Le Mondain* is assuredly not that of a pessimist who found happiness unattainable.

Voltaire realized that much unhappiness was the result of a misconception of the true meaning of the term. In the *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*, he implies that everyone speaks of *le bonheur*, but without knowing exactly what it is.

*Ce monde, ce théâtre, et d'orgueil et d'erreurs,*
*Est plein d'infortunés qui parlent de bonheur.*\(^{21}\)

*Candide, Micromégas,* and *Zadig* all conclude with the advice that man's happiness lies within himself and in his attitude toward God, the universe, and his fellow man. *Candide* stated it concisely: "Il faut cultiver notre jardin."\(^{22}\) Voltaire expressed the same idea poetically in a letter to M. de Cideville in September of 1758.

\(^{20}\)XXXIX, 47.

\(^{21}\)IX, 477.

\(^{22}\)Candide, Édition Morize, p. 223; XXI, 213.
Vous savez mon cher Cideville,
Que ce fantôme ailé qu'on nomme le bonheur,
N'habite ni les champs, ni la cour, ni la ville.
Il faudrait, nous dit-on, le trouver dans son coeur.
C'est un fort beau secret qu'on chercha d'âge en âge.  

The article "Bien" of the Dictionnaire philosophique,
which appeared for the first time in 1765, gives us the best
summary of Voltaire's ideas concerning happiness, and helps to
clear up some possible misconceptions of the author's intentions.

Voltaire here reiterates the idea of the Premier Discours,
that man's estate does not determine his happiness. Man is
incapable of judging whether or not he is happy. Only God can
give a conclusive answer to that question.  

Voltaire continues by showing the fallacy implicit in the most widely ac-
cepted idea of what happiness really is.

Si on donne le nom de bonheur à quelques plaisirs
repartis dans cette vie, il y a du bonheur en effet; si on ne donne ce nom qu'à un plaisir tou-
jours permanent, ou à une file continue et variée
de sensations délicieuses, le bonheur n'est pas fait pour ce globe terrestre: cherchez ailleurs.

Le bonheur qu'on imagine serait une suite non
interrompue de plaisirs: une telle série est in-
compatible avec nos organes et avec notre desti-
nation.

In the article, "Heureux, heureuse, heureusement," Vol-
taire returns to the question of happiness, and discusses the

---

23 XXXIX, 485.
24 XVII, 573.
25 XVII, 573.
26 XVII, 572-573.
type of person who enjoys the most felicity on this earth. Here, however, he attributes the degree of man's happiness partly to his physical condition.

Mais on veut savoir quel est le plus heureux de deux hommes également sains, également riches, et d'une condition égale. Il est clair que c'est leur humeur qui en décide. Le plus modéré, le moins inquiet, et en même temps le plus sensible, est le plus heureux; mais malheureusement le plus sensible est presque toujours le moins modéré. Ce n'est pas notre condition, c'est la trempe de notre âme qui nous rend heureux. Cette disposition de notre âme dépend de nos organes, et nos organes ont été arrangés sans que nous y ayons la moindre part.27

A brief consideration of Voltaire's treatment of happiness in his works thus seems to show that the ideas expressed about it in the Discours en vers were substantially those he held throughout his life. His general philosophy became less optimistic, the earthquake at Lisbon in 1756 being an important factor in his ultimate pessimistic turn, but he continued to believe that man could enjoy life if he held the right attitude toward it. Lanson summed up Voltaire's views on happiness in this way:

L'expérience a révélé qu'il y a pour les hommes des conditions générales de bonheur et de malheur. Les conditions les plus certaines de malheur, parmi celles qui ne viennent pas de la nature, mais de l'homme, sont la guerre et le fanatisme.28

The student of Voltaire must say with Pelissier that the

27XIX, 345.
28Lanson, op. cit., pp. 127-128.
author of the *Discours sur l'homme* was:

Ni pessimiste, ni optimiste, il est, si l'on peut dire, melioriste.\(^{29}\)

CHAPTER IV

PUBLICATION AND REVISION OF THE DISCOURS EN VERS SUR L'HOMME

The first two Discours were published in 1738, in plaquette form, with the title: Épitres sur le bonheur, and the subtitles: De l'inégalité des conditions, and De la liberté. Later the same year the third Épitre appeared, entitled: De l'envie. The censor's approvals are dated March 1 and April 28. The three were reprinted in 1738 under Voltaire's name, as Épitres sur le bonheur, la liberté, et l'envie, par M. Voltaire, Amsterdam, Et. Ledet.

The fourth Discours, Épitre de la modération en tout, dans l'étude, dans l'ambition, dans les plaisirs, composed in 1738, was brought forth in August. All four were gathered together and printed with one of Rousseau's Épitres, at Amsterdam later the same year. The first six were published in a volume entitled: Recueil de pièces fugitives en prose et en vers, dated 1740, but actually appearing in 1739. This edition gave the group of poems the title Discours en vers sur l'homme for the first time.¹ The poem was republished in 1742, 1745, 1746, 1748, 1750, 1751, and 1752, in the collected works of Voltaire. The Septième Discours was printed in 1742 and in the next editions following the other six, but was not incorporated as a part of the Discours until the Dresden edition of 1752.²

²See note 15, p. 5.
The 1756 seventeen-volume edition of Voltaire's works, published by the Cramer Brothers in Geneva, is important, since Voltaire corrected for it all of what he called his "pièces fugitives." Inasmuch as the text of the Discours included in it differs in several respects from previous versions, we may assume that this remark refers to it among the other works. The publication of 1757 followed these corrections, and appears to have been a pirated edition. However, in 1764, an edition was presented at Amsterdam which was based upon copies of Voltaire's works made before the corrections of 1756. The Geneva edition of 1768 was the last in which it is certain that Voltaire participated. In 1775, a new edition appeared, and Bengesco states that it was published: "avec la participation ou du moins, avec l'assentiment de Voltaire." The Kehl edition of 1784-1789, in ninety-two volumes, was the source for the Beuchot edition of 1828-1840, and the Moland of 1877-1885.

Voltaire revised all of his works several times. There are passages and annotations in the Discours en vers dated from 1738, 1740, 1742, 1745, 1748, 1752, 1756, and even later. Any changes in the text after 1756 were of little significance.

---

3Bengesco, op. cit., t. IV, 54.
4Ascoli, op. cit., p. 73.
5Ibid., p. 73.
6Bengesco, op. cit., t. IV, 98.
7Ascoli, op. cit., p. 74.
Ascoli in his work, *Voltaire, Poèmes philosophiques*, considers all of the versions of the seven *Discours*, and suggests in many cases why Voltaire might have made the changes. Although his treatment of personalities, Desfontaines, Maupertuis, and Frederick is revised, on the whole, the fundamental philosophy remains the same. Many changes show an attempt to strengthen the quality of the poetry, or to remove passages which tend to date the work, such as references to contemporary events, no longer well known. Voltaire achieved better transitions in some of the later readings. The revisions of the different years do not seem to have any general distinguishing characteristics.

It has long been an established fact that Voltaire's philosophy took a pessimistic turn as he grew older. Observing more and more evil, he came to realize that the world could not be the best possible. The earthquake at Lisbon was the event which brought him to a final denial of the perfection of the world. As we have noted, the attitude of the *Discours* is optimistic. Voltaire does not state categorically that: "Whatever is, is right," but he does look out upon the world and finds it a pleasant place, and sees happiness within everyone's reach, providing a man lives the kind of life and holds those points of view which Voltaire believed led to it. In the *Éléments de la philosophie de Newton* (1740), Voltaire said:

> Ce qui est mauvais par rapport à vous est bon dans l'arrangement général.⁸

⁸*XXII, 406.*
On November 24, 1755, three weeks after the disaster at Lisbon, Voltaire wrote:

Quel triste jeu de hasard que le jeu de la vie humaine.

In speaking of another earthquake in January of 1756, Voltaire summed up the effect of such demonstrations on man.

Quel optimisme que tout cela!  

Recognizing the omnipotence of evil, and reacting strongly against Pope, Voltaire concluded pessimistically:

Le tout est bien me paraît ridicule quand le mal est sur terre et sur mer.

Zadig (1747) clearly indicated that a transformation was taking place in Voltaire's philosophy. The angel told Zadig that there was no evil which did not lead to some good. Zadig objected, and the angel advised him not to argue with God, whom he should adore. Zadig said "Mais..." but the angel departed and we do not learn what Zadig was going to ask. This takes us a step beyond the Sixième Discours where there is no question as to the truth of the assumption that all is for the general good.

Le Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne shows Voltaire's reaction to the presence of such manifestations of the evils of

---

9XXXVIII, 511.

10XXXVIII, 539.

11XXXVIII, 543.

this world, natural and human. Even in this poem, however, he suggests that man still can hope.\textsuperscript{13} This poem was written in the closing days of 1755, and was published shortly thereafter, according to a letter written to the Messieurs Cramer, December 16, 1755.\textsuperscript{14} This conclusion cannot be taken too literally. Voltaire changed it at the request of his publisher, Gabriel Cramer, and his friends who thought the ending was too pessimistic.

Hence it would be entirely unsafe to quote Voltaire's final lines as representing accurately his real opinion. In fact they appear very clearly as a sop thrown to the orthodox in order that the author's peace might not be too much disturbed.\textsuperscript{15}

There are two changes in the Discours en vers which do seem to reflect the more pessimistic outlook of Voltaire, the concluding lines of the first and second Discours. The Premier Discours closed (until 1756) by advising man to submit, to be happy, and to serve God, regardless of his estate.\textsuperscript{16} The previous editions (through 1745) ended on the note that happiness is within man's heart. This idea was retained along with the other conclusions.\textsuperscript{17} However, after 1756, Voltaire added the

\textsuperscript{13}IX, 478.
\textsuperscript{14}XXXVIII, 522.
\textsuperscript{15}George R. Havens, "Voltaire's Pessimistic Revision of His Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne," Modern Language Notes, XLIV, 489-493, December, 1929, p. 491.
\textsuperscript{16}Ascoli, op. cit., p. 88.
\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., pp. 88-89.
theme of the compensation of evil and good. Ascoli describes this revision thus:

Mais en 1756 la solution trop aisément satisfaite de Pope ne le contentait plus; il renonçait, après le désastre de Lisbonne, à cette acceptation trop soumise d'un optimisme qui lui paraissait dornavant inacceptable.18

We have already noted that the change in the last lines of the Deuxième Discours gives more positively the impression that Voltaire did not believe the angel could tell him the secret of being happy. This ending dates from 1748, and therefore is not the result of the earthquake at Lisbon. This conclusion is comparable to that of Zadig, in which the angel flew away when Zadig began to question him about man's fate.

It is difficult to say whether the change in the Premier Discours came as an aftermath of the earthquake or not. We have observed that this catastrophe was the determining factor in Voltaire's swing from optimism to a more pessimistic outlook. The second volume of the Geneva edition of 1756 appeared between April 15 and May 1, according to an observation of Grimm.19 This volume included the Discours en vers among other poetic works. In a supplement, following the table of contents, was the Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne.20 This indicates that the first part of the book had probably been set up before

18 Ibid., p. 89.
19 Bengesco, op. cit., t. IV, 58.
20 Ibid., t. IV, 51.
Cramer received the text of the *Poème* which Voltaire wanted him to include in this edition of his works. It might also be interpreted as meaning that the volume was prepared before the composition of the *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*. A letter written to the Cramer Brothers on December 16, 1755, about three weeks after Voltaire had learned of the earthquake, not only discusses the *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*, but shows that Cramer was at that time gathering all of Voltaire's works for the new edition. The author of the *Discours* closed facetiously:

*S'il vous manque encore quelque chapitre profane pour compléter quelques mélanges, vous n'avez qu'à écrire à un profane, à Monrion, et il sera votre manufacturier.*

However, from the available data, it is impossible to ascertain if this change in the first *Discours* was made before or after the catastrophe.

There is other evidence to show that Voltaire did not try to change the *Discours* to agree with his later philosophy. As early as 1749, in his correspondence, Voltaire denied the freedom of the will. He did not, however, rewrite the *Deuxième Discours* or remove the references in the other *Discours*es to the freedom of man's will.

To summarize, the different versions of the *Discours en

---

21 XXXVIII, 522.

22 XXXVI, 565.
vers sur l'homme do not show any general tendency toward pessimism. The changes which occur in a given year have no common theme. Most of the revisions were attempts to clarify the thought or to improve the quality of the poetry.
CHAPTER V

1. PREMIER DISCOURS EN VERS SUR L'HOMME

DE L'ÉGALITÉ DES CONDITIONS

Voltaire began his Discours, originally called Épitres sur le bonheur, with a consideration of the question of the equality of men. He thus gave evidence that he believed the idea to be fundamental to human happiness.

Undoubtedly some of Voltaire's own experiences were responsible for this beginning. He had early manifested an interest in social and political justice, which also may have influenced his taking this point of departure for his Discours en vers sur l'homme.

Although the son of a notary, a bourgeois, Voltaire had an unusual opportunity for making friends among the nobility while at Louis-le-Grand. He had made acquaintances too through his father's business associations. Voltaire enjoyed society and his noble friends. He hoped to retain the position he had acquired while a student at the famous school.¹

Following the beating given him by the lackeys of the Chevalier de Rohan, when he received little sympathy from the nobles he considered his friends, he was very much disillusioned.² This unfortunate incident showed Voltaire's legitimate


pride and the desire he had for social esteem.

The fact that Voltaire did cast aside his own name in 1718 and take the name of Voltaire, similarly illustrates his wish to forget his origins and to become a man of social rank. He admitted himself that he had been unhappy with his former name, and dared hope for more happiness in the future. 3

This background coupled with Voltaire's experiences in England where less importance was attached to nobility, is doubtless partly responsible for his treating the subject of equality in a work devoted to man's happiness.

Voltaire did not believe men were equal in all respects. His conclusion in the first Discours is that men can find happiness in all social levels and in all occupations. Man's equality lies in his having the same right to happiness as any other individual. He gives illustrations to show that those whose positions should automatically make them happy do not necessarily have happiness. 4 The basis for Voltaire's assumption that all men have this particular form of equality was expressed in a later work entitled: Remontrances du corps des pasteurs du Gévaudan, à Antoine-Jacques Rustan, Pasteur Suisse à Londres (1768).

Oui notre frère, tous les hommes sont égaux en ce qu'ils ont les mêmes membres et les mêmes besoins, les mêmes droits à la justice distributive, mais ils ne peuvent pas tous être à la même place. 5

---

4 IX, 379-384; Ascoli, pp. 77-89.
5 XXVII, 109.
This same idea is found in the article "Égalité" in the Dictionnaire philosophique (1765). Men are all equal physically, but cannot be socially. 6

This theme also occurs in several of Voltaire's plays. He asserts in both Mahomet (1741) and Éphyrphyle (1732), that birth has nothing to do with man's worth, only virtue determines that. 7 A similar passage in Olympie (1764) states the equality of man before God, as does the Premier Discours.

...Seigneur, qu'importe qui je sois? 
Le sang le plus objet, le sang des plus grands rois, 
Ne sont-ils pas égaux devant l'Etre suprême? 8

In spite of Voltaire's belief in the equality of men, and his battles for justice, he wanted to be an aristocrat himself. He undoubtedly justified this paradox as he does in the first Discours and in Le Mondaïn. The rustics, Colin and Pierrot are happy in their primitive life because they know nothing of the life of Paris, which has its suffering as does theirs. 9 Voltaire says that those who lived during the Golden Age are not to be praised for their lack of luxury, it was pure ignorance that kept them from it. 10

It is interesting to note how this discussion of equality

6 XVIII, 474-477.
7 II, 471; IV, 114.
8 VI, 113-114.
9 IX, 381-382; Ascoli, p. 83.
10 X, 84.
differs from that of Rousseau in the Discours sur les origines de l'inégalité parmi les hommes, written about eighteen years later. According to Rousseau, men are unequal physically and morally. By physical inequality, he meant the differences which exist in man's physical being. Moral inequality referred to those unequal restrictions and laws which come from society. He thought equality should exist among men, and that society could increase the amount of political and social equality which man enjoys.11 In the Contrat Social, Rousseau showed how he thought this might be accomplished.12 Rousseau would not find Voltaire's basis for the existence of equality sound, because he felt so keenly the irons which society placed upon man. Even though men might be happy in their positions, most of them were still the victims of oppression and the injustices of society. Voltaire, on the other hand, accepted the status quo in regard to man's equality. His thesis amounted only to saying that man can and should be happy in whatever station he found himself.

The Premier Discours had several versions between the year of its initial composition and that of its final form. The first edition (1738) began by Voltaire's answering a young man who had come to consult him about his future vocation. Hermotime wanted to find the occupation in which he might be

happy. Voltaire replied that happiness could be had in whatever he might do, since it is within man. Therefore Hermotimus should follow his own desires in choosing a vocation.\textsuperscript{13} This beginning borrowed heavily from Pope, using the same figure as does Pope in the Fourth Epistle of the Essay on Man. Happiness is the port for which all men set sail. The winds upset many of the frail crafts, whether they carry fishermen or kings.\textsuperscript{14} Voltaire's friends were not pleased with this beginning, and he himself saw its shortcomings.\textsuperscript{15} In the 1740 edition, he began by addressing a friend, and showing him how he could achieve happiness. The friend was Thieriot. Voltaire may have refrained from using the name in the poem because it did not fit the meter well. He had, however, intended to dedicate it to Thieriot. Madame du Châtelet in a letter to D'Argental expressed the hope that he would not even dedicate it to Thieriot, since it would be a positive clue as to the authorship. Furthermore she had little esteem for Voltaire's friend. This may explain the absence of the dedication. In this same edition, Voltaire recognized God as the guide of man's destiny. He no longer spoke of the king as also being in a frail craft, buffeted by life, following a suggestion of Thieriot, who

\textsuperscript{13}Lettres de Madame du Châtelet, Edited by Eugene Asse, Charpentier, Paris, 1882, p. 250.

\textsuperscript{14}Alexander Pope, Essay on Man, Epistle IV.

\textsuperscript{15}Ascoli, op. cit., pp. 75-76.
thought this idea was too contrary to the usual conception. 16

In 1756, the definitive form was given to the poem. The person with whom Voltaire discusses equality is fictitious. He omits the figure of Pope, and develops his idea with examples of why one would think such equality did not exist.

Other changes which were made were attempts to improve the work as poetry. Several different stages of the ending have already been discussed in relationship to Voltaire's conception of happiness. 17 Some mention should be made of the conclusion in the editions of 1740 and 1748. In 1740, Voltaire developed further the idea that happiness is fleeting and man has difficulty attaining it. This counsel was changed in 1748. Voltaire advised man to submit himself to God's will and to serve Him well. As we have already noted, the 1756 version retained the pessimism and warned that life is a mixture of the bitter and the sweet. 18

2. DEUXIÈME DISCOURS EN VERS SUR L'HOMME

DE LA LIBERTÉ

The second of the Discours treats the question of philosophical liberty. Voltaire found this a subject to be discussed in this series of poems on happiness, since it is important to know whether men directs his own life toward happiness,

16Ibid., pp. 76-77.
17See Chapter IV, p. 28.
or whether he is an automaton and is merely assigned a portion of the world's happiness.

This is not the first consideration of freedom of the will in Voltaire's work. He discussed it as early as 1723 in *La Ligue*. The *Traité de métaphysique* written in 1734 contains a presentation of the problem similar to that of the second *Discours*. Voltaire considered it a very important idea because of the moral and social implications of determinism. He sent Frederick a treatise, *Sur la liberté*, which opened thus:

La question de la liberté est la plus intéressante que nous puissions examiner, puisque l'on peut dire que de cette seule question dépend toute la morale.¹¹

Since Frederick was a determinist, many of Voltaire's reasons for believing in philosophical liberty are found in his letters to Frederick. In a letter of October 1737, Voltaire wrote that he could be wrong, but he believed there would be no vice or virtue, no punishment or reward, and that all would be wickedness and hypocrisy if man did not have "une liberté pleine et absolue."²² Voltaire's own attitude toward freedom of the will changed later, but he still saw the value to man

¹⁹VIII, 179, *La Henriade*, Chant VII.


²¹XXXIV, 324.

²²XXXIV, 321.
of thinking that he enjoyed spiritual liberty.

Voltaire's conception of free will is partly due, admittedly, to John Locke. The 1756 edition of the Discours, and all editions since, carries a definition of liberté which clearly indicates this influence.

On entend par ce mot Liberté le pouvoir de faire ce qu'on veut. Il n'y a et ne peut y avoir d'autre Liberté. C'est pourquoi Locke l'a si bien définie Puissance.23

Joseph Hahn states that Voltaire follows Locke almost literally in his early work on freedom of the will.24

Samuel Clarke and Isaac Newton also exercised influence on Voltaire in the consideration of philosophical liberty. They, however, believed that man was free not only to act, but also to will, an idea which we have just seen rejected by Voltaire, following Locke's metaphysics.25

The conflict between the apparent free will of man and the omniscience of God troubled Voltaire. He could not accept the Church's answer to the problem, believe both at the same time.26 Voltaire said that the problem was not one of harmonizing man's liberty and God's prescience, but one of our not

23IX, 368.
25XXII, 413, Éléments de la philosophie de Newton.
26Ascoli, op. cit., p. 90.
understanding what God really is, and what His omniscience means. 27

Voltaire also defended liberty against the attack advanced by the determinists, that since freedom did not always exist for man, it did not exist at all. No one has complete liberty, just as no one has all possible strength, all knowledge, or all health. 28 Liberty like all the rest of man's faculties has limits. 29 Since, however, man recognizes the times when he seems unable to act according to his own wishes, that is, at moments of high emotion, this proves that liberty does exist. Like health, freedom is most noticeable when it is absent. 30 The line of the Deuxième Discours found repeated in several other philosophical works, summarizes Voltaire's argument.

La liberté dans l'homme est la santé de l'âme. 31

He concluded his discussion of free will in the treatise Sur la liberté by showing the impossibility of man's always being free to act as he pleased. If he were, he would be God, and would be far beyond his place in nature. 32

However, as early as 1749, Voltaire wrote to Frederick

27: XXXIV, 332.
28: XXII, 219, Traité de métaphysique.
29: XXXIV, 326.
30: XXXIV, 325.
31: IX, 391; XXII, 218; XXXIV, 325.
32: XXXIV, 334.
that he had hoped and done all he could to believe that man was free, but experience and reason were convincing him that man was a little machine run at God's pleasure.\textsuperscript{33} From that time on, Voltaire's attitude toward man's power to control his own destiny became more and more negative. That did not prevent his fighting for reform and for the general improvement of society. In \textit{Le Philosophe ignorant} (1766) he pointed out that it would be a strange world if a little creature five feet tall could do as he pleased, ignoring the laws of nature, when the stars all followed the eternal order. He then admitted:

\begin{quote}
L'ignorant qui pense ainsi n'a pas toujours pensé de même, mais il est enfin contraint de se rendre.\textsuperscript{34}
\end{quote}

Lanson, after studying Voltaire's attitude toward philosophical liberty in the various periods of his life, says that there really was not too great a change in Voltaire's concept of man's freedom of action.

\begin{quote}
...il a surtout osé se mettre d'accord avec lui-même.\textsuperscript{35}
\end{quote}

This statement is justified, I believe, because Voltaire did understand the determinists' arguments and seemed to share their sentiments as to the contradiction between God's omniscience and man's free will, and the variable condition in which liberty exists for the individual. However, since he felt it essential

\textsuperscript{33}XXXVI, 57.
\textsuperscript{34}XXXVI, 57.
\textsuperscript{35}Lanson, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 67.
that man think he is free, he put forth arguments for the existence of liberty, possibly in order to convince himself.

The influence of the English determinist, Anthony Collins, was very important in leading Voltaire to a denial of free will.\textsuperscript{36} Undoubtedly Frederick's determinism also contributed to Voltaire's eventual negation of spiritual liberty.

The introduction of the omniscient, supernatural being in this Discours is a device used frequently by Voltaire. Such a creature appears in \textit{Zadig} and in the \textit{Sixième Discours}. In \textit{Micromégas}, inhabitants of another planet have similar truth. The narrator of the \textit{Traité de Métaphysique} also descends to the earth from another part of the universe.

The changes of this Discours from edition to edition are very few and not of any great significance. Voltaire altered the description of the angel, which originally compared Newton to Christ, raising the great scientist to the level of the Saviour. This was too bold a comparison to escape the Church's criticism. As has already been noted, the last line was revised. Voltaire apparently decided that man could not learn the secret of being happy, even from a supernatural being.

\textbf{3. TROISIÈME DISCOURS EN VERS SUR L'HOMME DE L'ENVIE}

The inclusion of a discourse on envy in a series of poems dealing with man's happiness seems rather strange.

\textsuperscript{36} Torrey, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 4.
Voltaire effectively justifies its existence, however. The second Discours concluded that man enjoys philosophical liberty. But man's life is dominated by vices, he is not completely free. Voltaire believed the most evil of these spiritual tyrants was envy. This was primarily the result of Voltaire's unpleasant quarrels with Jean-Baptiste Rousseau and the Abbé Desfontaines. He had seen the well-known poet do many very spiteful things because of his hatred of Voltaire and his jealousy of the latter's success.

In a letter written to the editors of the Bibliothèque Française, in which had been published a libellous attack of Voltaire by Rousseau and Desfontaines, Voltaire gave an account of the difficulties which had arisen between him and these two men. Voltaire had first met Rousseau while a student at Louis-le-Grand. Rousseau came to see the young boy, attracted by the many prizes he had won. For many years Rousseau's father had been shoemaker for Voltaire's father. The elder Arouet helped J.-B. Rousseau obtain a position with a notary, whom Rousseau was forced to leave because he had misrepresented himself.

Rousseau was considered an outstanding poet at that time, even by his enemies whom he slandered unmercifully. Voltaire had admired Rousseau in his youth, and visited him in Brussels after Rousseau's exile. Voltaire had taken the lyricist as his master in poetics, but following his visit with him, they parted bitter enemies because of their disagreement over Voltaire's treatment of Henri IV in La Henriade.37

37XXXIV, 128.
In the letter which Rousseau and Desfontaines had written, they had cited impious acts and words in Voltaire's life, which he denied in his response. In turn, he told how Rousseau had slandered and misrepresented everyone who had ever shown him any kindness, and attacked Desfontaines' ingratitude.\textsuperscript{38}

Voltaire never missed an opportunity to criticize Rousseau. In praising the poetry of others, he frequently did it by indicating Rousseau's degeneration and inferiority. He lauds La Chaussée's genius in a letter to Thieriot.

\begin{quote}
Les vers sont frappés sur l'enclume qu'avait Rousseau quand il était encore bon ouvrier...
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Lorsque sa muse courroucée
Quitta le coupable Rousseau
Elle te donna son pinceau,
Sage et modeste La Chaussée.\textsuperscript{39}
\end{quote}

The attack against Rousseau is found in other works written both before and after this section of the \textit{Discours en vers sur l'homme}. The \textit{Épître sur la calomnie} of 1783 (not published until 1736) assailed envy and calumny, clearly indicating Rousseau's guilt along these lines.\textsuperscript{40}

While Voltaire was in Holland after the disturbance caused by \textit{Le Mondain}, Rousseau started several stories about him. First he asserted that Voltaire had left France because he had been sentenced to life imprisonment. When this did not succeed

\textsuperscript{38}XXXIV, 126-134.
\textsuperscript{39}XXXIV, 55-56.
\textsuperscript{40}X, 282.
in greatly hurting Voltaire's reputation, he circulated the rumor in Paris that Voltaire was preaching atheism at Leyden. Voltaire did not deny these statements publicly, but wrote to his friends about the absurdity of such charges.\textsuperscript{41} He did, however, attack Rousseau and the Abbé Desfontaines, who supported Rousseau in these accusations, in the poem, \textit{Le Préservatif}, and two memoirs of 1739, \textit{Mémoire du Sieur de V…}, et \textit{Mémoire sur la satire}.\textsuperscript{42}

Desfontaines is also a victim of Voltaire's barbed pen in the \textit{Troisième Discours}. He had been imprisoned at Bicêtre for social misconduct, and after spending six months in prison, he was released largely through Voltaire's efforts. Later he had done a poor translation of some of Voltaire's works, and because of Voltaire's criticism, turned against him.\textsuperscript{43} The \textit{Ode sur l'Ingratitude} of 1736 was inspired by the Abbé's actions, and even included his name. Voltaire thought perhaps that was too bold, but finding that it would spoil the meter if he removed it, he left it there.\textsuperscript{44}

Voltaire, here as elsewhere, opposed his modesty to the envy and jealousy of other men of letters. In painting his own picture in the \textit{Sixième Discours}, he again mentions his lack of

\textsuperscript{41}XXXIV, 211.
\textsuperscript{42}Ascoli, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 108.
\textsuperscript{43}XXXIV, 133.
\textsuperscript{44}XXXIV, 134.
jealousy and his love of his enemies, which is an exaggeration. 45 It cannot be said that Voltaire was completely free from envy.

The attitude toward Boileau in this poem is one Voltaire frequently expressed. He believed that Boileau was an incomparable satirist who made people really enjoy that literary form. On the whole Voltaire followed Boileau's poetics. 46

Jurieu's persecution of Bayle is used as an example of calumny. Voltaire thought Bayle was an excellent thinker and considered him an important influence on the development of the thought of the eighteenth century. He defended him in the article, "Bayle" in the Dictionnaire philosophique, and speaks of him elsewhere as "le judicieux Bayle, l'éternel honneur de la raison humaine." 47

Voltaire had difficulty with the third of the Discours. His enemies circulated the story that the example of the envy held by an ugly woman of the court for the more beautiful members of the royal entourage, referred to Madame de Ruffec, widow of the Président des Maisons, and daughter of M. d'Angervilleurs and Marie Anne de Maupes. Madame de Ruffec learned of the rumor, and was very angry. Voltaire denied the charge in

45 IX, 420.


47 XVII, 555-555; VIII, 417.
vain. These lines were changed in the next edition, and the clamor died down after the intervention of Voltaire's friends.\textsuperscript{48}

The different versions of the Troisième Discours do not offer any great divergence in ideas. A contemporary example of the blindness envy gives one was substituted for the anecdote of Aristide. As noted above, the lines about the jealousy which beauty inspires were changed in the edition of 1740. The verses attacking Desfontaines were made less venomous in the same edition, following the advice of D'Argental.\textsuperscript{49} The reference to Boileau's satire became less flattering. First it read:

Despréaux quelquefois fit aimer la satire.

In 1740 Voltaire changed it.

On peut à Despréaux pardonner la satire.\textsuperscript{50}

The development of this Discours follows a logical pattern. He first explains why he thinks envy is a threat to happiness, and then discusses and illustrates political, literary, social, and artistic envy. His conclusion is that envy is a valuable sentiment only if it encourages one to try to surpass his rivals.\textsuperscript{51}

The first two lines of this Discours were inscribed on the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{48} Ascoli, op. cit., p. 65.
  \item \textsuperscript{49} Ibid., p. 114.
  \item \textsuperscript{50} IX, 400, 397; Ascoli, op. cit., pp. 114-115.
  \item \textsuperscript{51} IX, 395; Ascoli, op. cit., p. 110.
\end{itemize}
chariot which carried Voltaire's remains to Paris where they were placed in the Pantheon.52

4. QUATRIÈME DISCOURS EN VERS SUR L'HOMME
DE LA MODÉRATION EN TOUT

Happiness cannot be achieved, according to Voltaire, by amassing the honors, pleasures, and knowledge of this world. Voltaire was essentially a "tempered Epicurean."53 Here, as elsewhere in his works, he recommends moderation.54 It cannot be said that Voltaire himself was always moderate, considering the fury with which he worked and his intemperate use of language.

The discussion of moderation in study gives Voltaire an opportunity to show his knowledge of the sciences, physical and natural. It was at this time that Madame du Châtelet and he were making experiments trying to find the nature of fire. His conclusion in this Discours is that man cannot know everything about the universe; science is insufficient to deal with some problems. Therefore man should not be intemperate in his scientific interests and lose his life prying secrets from nature as did Empedocles.55

52IX, 394; Ascoli, op. cit., p. 104.
54XX Pelissier, op. cit., p. 206.
55IX, 403; Ascoli, op. cit., p. 127.
This section of the Discours, in which science plays an important part, praises the genius of Newton, and shows his superiority over the other scientists of the epoch. Voltaire leaves his subject of moderation temporarily in order to laud the accomplishments of another scientist, Maupertuis. At that time, Voltaire truly appreciated Maupertuis' work in undertaking a trip to the North Pole to prove that the earth was an oblate spheroid. Later, however, when both he and Maupertuis were in Germany, a rivalry developed between them, and Voltaire made several malicious references to Maupertuis in his works. The lines praising the French scientist were changed so as to ridicule his long voyage to find out something Newton already knew. The enmity of the two led to Voltaire's rupture with Frederick, whom Voltaire had persuaded to invite Maupertuis to Berlin.56

Voltaire follows his discussion of moderation in science with one concerning ambition. He admits that he had wanted to be with the nobility and the elite as their equals, but goes ahead to show his disillusionment. This is a result not only of his sojourn at the court of Frederick II of Prussia, but also of his residence at the French courts from 1744 to 1750. Desnoireterres reveals how little Voltaire enjoyed the royal pomp while he was at Fontainebleau. Each morning he intended to go to the king's lever, but invariably found himself in his

room at that hour writing. He finally left Fontainebleau after he had seen and become thoroughly disgusted with its dishonesty and fraud. He was well justified, if we may believe the description of court life given by Madame du Deffand.

The question of moderation involves Voltaire's attitude toward luxury. He had shown his approval of and liking for sumptuousness two years earlier in *Le Mondain*. His disfavor here comes only as a result of the excesses and abuses which sometimes accompany luxury. Life must have variety, and pleasures can come from work as well as from play.

This *Discours* concludes with a praise of friendship, the true source of happiness, the one thing in which Voltaire thought it right to indulge excessively. All during his lifetime he expressed his deep devotion to his friends, and his appreciation of friendship. In the second *Discours* he speaks of a friend as a gift from God, the true wealth of a person. Many of his other works similarly extol friendship.

The *Quatrième Discours* went through a number of versions before it reached the definitive form. The important changes deal with the passage concerning Maupertuis, as noted above.

58Ibid., III, 135-136.
59IX, 83-88.
60IX, 405; Ascoli, *op. cit.*, pp. 133-134.
61IX, 391; Ascoli, *op. cit.*, p. 135.
one discussing human passions, and that treating court life.

In the first edition (1738), the idea of moderation in ambition was introduced with a consideration of the value of the passions, almost identical to that of Pope, in the Second Epistle of the Essay on Man. Because of the heterodoxy of this passage, Voltaire removed it in the next edition. After 1748, he condensed the description of court life and of the various types who go there ambitious to succeed. The final version of the poem concluded the discussion with a passage recounting Voltaire's unfortunate voyage to Prussia and his experiences at the French court.

The original poem compared life to nature, warning that it too needed variety. Thus these lines indirectly praised infidelity in love. This passage was absent in the 1748 edition, but reappeared after 1752 in a slightly different form, suggesting the joy lovers find in returning to one another after a separation.

After 1740, this Discours was dedicated to Helvétius, the philosopher. He was still quite young, but Voltaire recognized in him the possibilities of a great future, and encouraged him in his literary work.

62 Ascoli, op. cit., p. 128.
63 Ibid., pp. 129-130.
64 Ibid., pp. 133-134.
65 Ibid., p. 118.
5. CINQUIÈME DISCOURS EN VERS SUR L'HOMME
SUR LE PLAISIR

The fifth of the Discours en vers begins with an attack on Pascal, upholding the classical theory of control of the passions against the more ascetic Christian theory of suppression of the passions advocated by the author of the Lettres provinciales. Voltaire believed that nature directed man to God by means of the passions, which are a gift from God, dangerous if abused, but salutary if used correctly. The value of the passions to man is also discussed by Pope in the Second Epistle of the Essay on Man, where we read that self-love is the motivation for all accomplishment. In the Remarques sur les pensées de Pascal, Voltaire presents the question in a similar way:

C'est l'amour de nous-mêmes qui assiste l'amour des autres; c'est par nos besoins mutuels que nous sommes utiles au genre humain; c'est le fondement de tout commerce; c'est l'éternel lien des hommes. Sans lui, il n'y aurait pas eu un art inventé, ni une société formée; c'est cet amour propre que chaque animal a reçu de la nature qui nous avertit de respecter celui des autres. La loi dirige cet amour propre et la religion le perfectionne.

Voltaire found pleasure frequently to be a gratification of the passions, the thing which literally made the world go around. God controls man largely by permitting him these

66 Torrey, op. cit., p. 61.
67 Ibid., p. 61.
68 Pope, op. cit., Epistle II.
69 Lettres philosophiques, Édition Lanson, II, 197; XXII, 36.
enjoyments. This is, of course, completely contrary to Pascal, who believed that man is essentially wicked, and must live a life of abstinence and asceticism in order to hope for the joys of an after life.\textsuperscript{70} Pascal’s heaven was supernatural, but Voltaire’s was of this earth.\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Le Mondein} (1736) had shown the values Voltaire attached to the pleasures and luxuries of this world.

Voltaire realized that his attitude toward the passions was not that generally accepted. In 1742, he added the following note to the \textit{Discours} to indicate his purpose:

\begin{quote}
Cette pièce est uniquement fondée sur l'impossibilité où est l'homme d'avoir des sensations par lui-même. Tout sentiment prouve un Dieu, et tout sentiment agréable prouve un Dieu bienfaisant.\textsuperscript{72}
\end{quote}

This edition also defined passions, in order that the reader would not misunderstand the author’s intentions. The note read (in part):

\begin{quote}
Ce mot (passion) vient de pâtrir, souffrir, parce qu'il n'y a aucun désir sans souffrance; désirer un bien, c'est souffrir de l'absence de ce bien, c'est pâtrir, c'est avoir une passion; et le premier pas vers le plaisir est essentiellement un soulagement de cette souffrance.\textsuperscript{73}
\end{quote}

The \textit{Cinquième Discours} was originally dedicated to Frederick and ended with the praises of the Royal Prince of Prussia,
who, according to Voltaire, understood his conception of passion, knew well the gifts of God, and tried to make the world a happier place. Voltaire asked the Prince to help him sing of the happiness which Frederick was spreading over the world. However, after his unfortunate experiences in Prussia, he removed that ending and replaced it with an account of his arrest and detention by Frederick at Frankfort when he was returning to France. The Discours concluded with a statement of Voltaire's pleasure in his art and his ability to overlook any such mundane affairs.74

This Discours had little other change. The first manuscript named Pascal, but after that he used the name Timon to refer to the well-known Jansenist. There was an allegorical development about depriving man of his rights, an Oriental story, which Voltaire omitted in the latter editions.75 In this anecdote, Voltaire had compared the restraint of man's passions to the prohibition of his other rights.

6. SIXIÈME DISCOURS EN VERS SUR L'HOMME

SUR LA NATURE DE L'HOMME

The Sixième Discours borrows very heavily from Pope's Essay on Man. Voltaire wrote to Fermont in December of 1737 concerning this influence.

74IX, 412; Ascoli, op. cit., p. 146.
75IX, 413; Ascoli, op. cit., p. 143.
The ideas of the sixth Discours which have parallels in Pope are that of the chain of being (also found in Plato), the order of the universe, the possibility of a plurality of worlds (the Leibnitzian concept), the perfection of man in relation to his place in the universe, the injustice of man's calling things wrong, since he can see but a part of the whole universe. These are all found in the first Epistle of An Essay on Man. Voltaire opens the Discours with the verse: "Ta grande étude est l'homme," which is almost a direct translation of: "The proper study of mankind is man."77

Voltaire utilizes an Oriental story to develop his theme that the universe is not made for man, and that the animals have every bit as much reason to believe that it is made for them.78 Pope carries out the same idea in the first and second Epistles of the Essay on Man. Voltaire's story goes through the chain of being from a mouse to God, showing that each creates in his own mind an egocentric world. Man alone, however, is not satisfied with his status and wants to argue with God.

76XXXV, 76.

77Pope, Essay on Man, Epistle II.

It is interesting to note that Voltaire chooses an Oriental story here, one which he said he got from a Jesuit missionary who had been to China. He undoubtedly refers to le Père du Halde who wrote a book on the geography, history, and civilization of China.\textsuperscript{79} There was a great vogue for the Orient at this time, which probably accounts for Voltaire's selecting this source. Montesquieu's \textit{Lettres Persanes} is among the better known of the works of the early eighteenth century dealing with Oriental subjects. Several valuable source books also appeared in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, such as Tavernier's \textit{Voyage en Turquie, en Perse, et aux Indes} (1682); Bernier, \textit{Voyages} (1699); and Chardin, \textit{Voyages en Perse, et autres lieux de l'Orient} (1711).\textsuperscript{80}

In this Discourse, Voltaire makes one of his frequent references to the lack of freedom of speech he had in France. He tells the story rather than explain the nature of man to his interrogator since he cannot speak with the liberty of the Greeks or the English. Similarly he fears the Church's censorship if he writes on this subject because he is not a trained theologian.\textsuperscript{81}

Voltaire attacks man's pride and feeling of superiority

\textsuperscript{79} Ascoli, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 151.

\textsuperscript{80} Fellows and Torrey, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 103. (For a complete list of Oriental works of the period, see the introduction to Georges Ascoli's edition of \textit{Zadig}, pp. L-LXV.)

\textsuperscript{81} IX, 416; Ascoli, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 150.
over the other creatures of the earth in this poem, as he does in *Micromégas*, by satirizing the knowledge man possesses, his physical being, and the relative unimportance of the earth. The Chinese scholar represents man who is not willing to accept his station in the universe, and who wants to know all. This is another instance of Voltaire's satire of the theologians. He concludes here, as elsewhere, that there are many things man cannot know. The scholar asks Tien, the Chinese god, the unanswerable questions which have always been in man's mind. Tien's advice is that man work while he can, and not worry about the brevity of life. Man had better be happy with what he has, instead of continually wishing for more.\(^{82}\)

The idea of relativity is carried much further in *Micromégas*, where beings of other planets who come to the earth are so large that they step over the oceans.\(^{83}\) Zadig says that man thinks the earth is large, but Voltaire replies that he actually dwells "sur un petit amas de boue."\(^{84}\) This attitude may come at least in part from Fénelon's *Télémaque*, in which the world is likewise described as "un petit amas de boue."\(^{85}\)

The *Discours en vers sur l'homme* originally closed with the sixth *Discours* (until 1752). Voltaire concluded with a

---

\(^{82}\) IX, 418-419; Ascoli, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

\(^{83}\) XXI, 112.


description of the events contemporaneous with the composition of the poem, the expedition to measure a meridian, Vaucanson's automatons, and his own life at Cirey, where he lived loving God, nature, the literary arts, genius, and hating calumny, fanaticism, and hypocrisy. He was an apostle of hard work, and although often ill, devoted himself to it wholeheartedly. Kehl adds an interesting note here, suggesting that Voltaire described himself at forty years (really forty-four) as he actually was at eighty.\textsuperscript{86}

Voltaire was very anxious that this poem be successful, and retouched it a great deal so that it would be acceptable to the public and the censor. He wrote to Thieriot on this subject in October of 1738.

\ldots s'il y a quelque mérite à cette épître, c'est d'avoir tourné cette conclusion d'une manière qui n'attire pas les conclusions du procureur-general, et d'avoir traité très sagement une matière très délicate.\textsuperscript{87}

In December of the same year, he asked Formont to criticize the work so he might make it as effective as possible.\textsuperscript{88}

Moland gives no variants to this poem, showing that Voltaire's revisions were prior to publication. Ascoli finds only one variant of any significance. The early editions (1740-1750) did not enumerate the various things to which man

\textsuperscript{86}IX, 420; Ascoli, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 161.
\textsuperscript{87}XXXV, 24.
\textsuperscript{88}XXXV, 77.
must submit. Since that time, the Discours carries an added four lines listing the sufferings man must undergo.

7. SEPTIÈME DISCOURS EN VERS SUR L'HOMME

SUR LA VRAIE VERTU

It has already been noted that this Discours was not added to the other six to form the group of philosophical poems dedicated to man until 1752, in the Dresden Edition of Voltaire's works. It was written as early as 1738, however, according to evidence found in the correspondence of that year. Why did Voltaire not publish this épître with the others in 1740? Perhaps the criticism of the poem by Frederick and D'Argental discouraged him, or perhaps he decided (rightly) that it was too daring, and would attract too much attention to the work, jeopardizing the success of the whole. He may have thought that it repeated too great an extent ideas found in the other Discours. At least, it can be stated that he did take some of the verses of the first version of the Septième Discours and insert them in the Troisième.

Another interesting question to consider is why Voltaire later decided to use this as a climax to the other poems after 1752. It had been published following them but not as a part

---

89 Ascoli, op. cit., p. 158.
90 XXXIV, 492.
91 Ascoli, op. cit., p. 163.
of the whole, in 1742, 1745, and 1748. Voltaire may have made this decision since the six Discours were accepted without too much difficulty, and the Septième received no severe opposition.

The last Discours is in complete harmony with Voltaire's humanitarianism, his love of humanity.

The phrase 'love for humanity' is, of course, a relatively meaningless abstraction, unless it means, as in Voltaire's case, that one is gifted with altruistic impulses, and that one rejoices in the joy of other human beings and suffers for their sorrow.

The profound influence which the earthquake at Lisbon made upon Voltaire indicates further how much he was touched by the suffering of others. His hatred of war had a similar basis. The physical and mental torture involved made him feel keenly its horrors.

The relationship between this Discours and the other six is rather close inasmuch as both the first and second Discours counsel man to win his own happiness by being kind and benevolent to others.

Et ce Bernard qu'on vante est heureux en effet, Non par le bien qu'il a, mais par le bien qu'il fait.

---

94 Ibid., p. 59.
96 IX, 386, First version of the Premier Discours; Ascoli, op. cit., p. 79.
In the Deuxième Discours he expressed it thus:

Ce mortel qui s'égare est un homme, est ton frère;  
Sois sage pour toi seul, compatissant pour lui;  
Fais ton bonheur enfin par le bonheur d'autrui.97

Voltaire undoubtedly realized how valuable this philosophy would be for society. The definition he gave to virtue in 1734 was:

La vertu est l'habitude de faire des choses qui plaisent aux hommes et le vice l'habitude de faire ces choses qui leur déplaise.98

In the Dictionnaire Philosophique he qualifies real virtue further, bringing it closer to the meaning of the Septième Discours.

Les véritables vertus sont celles qui sont utiles à la société, comme la fidélité, la magnanimité, la bienfaisance, la tolérance, etc.99

This is actually a statement of the Golden Rule in new terms. Voltaire may have expressed hostility to organized religion, but never was he against the application of the Golden Rule.

Religious fanaticism which led people to personal mortification and suffering did not contain any virtue according to Voltaire. In this Discours he attacks the stoics, extreme ascetics, monks, and the convulsionists (a sect similar to the present-day Holy Rollers), whose religions lacked humanitarianism, since they tended to withdraw from society, and

97 IX, 392; Ascoli, op. cit., p. 100.
98 XXII, 225, Traité de métaphysique.
99 XVIII, 75, "Catéchisme Chinois."
to center their religion on personal means of gaining salvation. He shows again that the social implications of Christianity are those which have the greatest significance for him.\footnote{IX, 421-423; Ascoli, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 165-167.}

Voltaire suggests that a truly virtuous magistrate would not only punish criminals, but would reward good deeds. This idea is demonstrated in \textit{Zadig}, where Zadig is given the yearly reward for the most outstanding virtue.\footnote{\textit{Zadig}, Édition Georges Ascoli, Vol. I, 24-26.}

After discussing what true virtue is, he gives examples of how it may manifest itself. A king, unwilling to hear malicious remarks about his courtiers merits this recognition, as does a man who will fight for his friends against calumny, injustice, and unfair, jealous tyrants. Voltaire thanks his own friends for their kindesses toward him, and concludes the poem using the new word \textit{bienfaisance}, benevolence, created by the Abbé de Saint-Pierre. Voltaire counsels the whole universe to cherish the idea carried by this word and the many virtues it involves.\footnote{IX, 424; Ascoli, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 175.}

There were several versions of this poem, with few differences in the fundamental ideas. The first editions (until 1742) were addressed to Racine fils who had written a poem on grace, following the Jansenist doctrine. Some of the editions
carried a short section addressed to Hermotimus, tying this Discours up with the early form of the first. The other changes were an abridgement in the example of the virtuous king, and the removal of contemporary instances of lack of virtue because they no longer were well known.\textsuperscript{103}

\textsuperscript{103}IX, 426-427; Ascoli, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 165-176.
CHAPTER VI
VOLTAIRE AND FREDERICK

Voltaire's most celebrated correspondent while the Discours sur l'homme were being composed, was Frederick, Crown Prince of Prussia. In August of 1736, Frederick began this exchange of letters which lasted, with some interruptions, for almost half a century. Frederick admired Voltaire greatly. He had literary ability himself. Their letters discuss government, metaphysics, history, literature, and morality. Not infrequently they contain poems composed in honor of the other correspondent.

The author of the Discours, who had long aspired to political and social importance, was flattered by the friendship and attention showered upon him by the Royal Prince. In Frederick's first letter to Voltaire, he asked him for copies of all his works. This letter begins with fulsome praise:

Monsieur, quoique je n'aie pas la satisfaction de vous connaitre personnellement, vous ne m'en êtes pas moins connu par vos ouvrages. Ce sont des trésors d'esprit, si l'on peut l'exprimer ainsi, et des pièces travaillées avec tant de goût, de délicatesse, et d'art, que les beautés en paraissent nouvelles chaque fois qu'on les relit. Je crois y avoir reconnu le caractère de leur ingénieux auteur, qui fait honneur à notre siècle et à l'esprit humain.1

Voltaire's esteem for Frederick then was no less great. He was as happy to know of the existence of a prince such as

1XXXIV, 101-102.
Frederick, as was Frederick to know an author like Voltaire.

He replied to Frederick's letter thus:

Mon amour-propre en a été trop flatté; mais l'amour du genre humain, que j'ai toujours eu dans le coeur, et qui, j'ose dire, fait mon caractère, m'a donné un plaisir mille fois plus pur, quand j'ai vu qu'il y a dans le monde un prince qui pense en homme, un prince philosophique qui rendra les hommes heureux.²

In every letter, the young prince and the author, whose works had already brought him acclaim, speak of their admiration of and friendship for each other. Frederick praises Voltaire's works effusively in an early letter.

Ce n'est point uniquement en faveur de la Henriade, seul poème épique qu'auraient les Français, que je me declare, mais en faveur de tous vos ouvrages: ils sont généralement marqués au coin de l'immortalité.³

Voltaire helped Frederick compose French verse, and corrected his poetry for him. The latter referred to himself as a schoolboy who dares: "croasser en présence d'Apollon."⁴ Voltaire managed to praise Frederick even through the lessons he gave him in poetics.

Une idée poétique c'est comme le sait Votre Altesse royale, une image brillante substituée à l'idée naturelle de la chose dont on veut parler; par exemple, je dirai en prose: Il y a dans le monde un jeune prince vertueux et plein de talents, qui déteste l'envie et le fanatisme. Je dirai en vers:

²XXXIV, 106.
³XXXIV, 121.
⁴XXXIV, 203.
O Minerve! ô divine astrée!  
Par vous sa jeunesse inspirée  
Suivit les arts et les vertus;  
L'Envie au coeur faux, à l'oeil louche,  
Et le Fanatisme farouche,  
Sous ses pieds tombent abattus.\(^5\)

Mr. Gooch in his series of articles on Voltaire and Frederick aptly refers to the relations between the two men during this time as the "honeymoon period."\(^6\) Voltaire spoke kindly of Wolff whose philosophy he did not like, evidently in order not to offend Frederick.\(^7\)

As already noted, mention of the various Discours in the correspondence between Voltaire and Frederick is the only means we have of dating the composition of most of them. Voltaire sent many of his works to the Royal Prince for the latter's suggestions and criticisms. It would be expected that the Épitres sur le bonheur would be included in Voltaire's letters, since they discuss metaphysical questions and man's morality, both of which figured prominently in the correspondence of the two men. In February of 1738, Frederick expressed his pleasure with the first two Discours.

\[
\text{Vous venez de m'envoyer deux Épitres qui n'ont jamais eu leurs semblables. Il sera donc dit que vous vous surpassez toujours vous-même. Je n'ai pas jugé de ces deux Épitres comme d'un thème de philosophie, je les ai considérés comme des ouvrages tissus de la main des Grâces.}\(^8\)
\]

\(^5\)XXXIV, 359.
\(^7\)XXXIV, 108.
\(^8\)XXXIV, 417.
Frederick, a determinist, would not have agreed with the philosophy of the *Deuxième Discours*, since it follows closely that of the treatise, *Sur la liberté*, sent to Frederick in October of 1737. After receiving that article, Frederick had written that he regretted being unable to accept Voltaire’s ideas on the matter of philosophical liberty. In the letter which included the two discourses, Voltaire acknowledged the fact that Frederick would find his *Second Discourse* contrary to his belief.

Frederick showed as much enthusiasm for the *Troisième Épître, de l’envie*, sent to him in a letter dated March 8, 1738, as for the first.


In the letter containing this *Épître*, Voltaire had expressed the hope that Frederick inspired envy in all the other princes of Europe because of his outstanding qualities.

The *Fourth Épître* was received with evident pleasure by

---

9XXXIV, 368.
10XXXIV, 393.
11XXXIV, 431.
12XXXIV, 453.
13XXXIV, 431.
Frederick, who wrote that he and Césarion (Baron de Keyserlingk) had read it and reread it.

Je ne saurais vous dire à quel point j'estime vos ouvrages. La noble hardiesse avec laquelle vous débitez de grandes vérités m'enchant.

'Au bord de l'infini ton cours doit s'arrêter.'

Ce vers est peut-être le plus philosophique qui ait jamais été fait. L'orgueil de la plupart des savants n'est pas capable de se plier sous cette vérité.... Vous avez un grand talent tout particulier pour exprimer les sentiments et les grandes vérités. Je suis charme de ces deux vers:

'O divine amitié, félicité parfaite; Seul mouvement de l'âme où l'excès soit permis.'

This letter shows one of the traits which Frederick admired the most in Voltaire, his mistrust of and aversion to metaphysical systems. Both men thought such things led only to confusion. Later Voltaire made some changes in the Quatrième Discours, which Frederick heartily approved.

Frederick gives his objections to the Cinquième Épitre (the seventh) in the same letter.

Pour vous parler avec ma franchise ordinaire, je vous avouerai naturellement que tout ce qui regarde l'Homme-Dieu ne me plait point dans la bouche d'un philosophe, d'un homme qui doit être au-dessus des erreurs populaires.

Frederick was further dissatisfied with the Discours because it seemed to praise the Jesuits. If Morley is correct in saying

14 XXXIV, 491.
15 XXXIV, 580.
16 XXXIV, 492.
17 XXXIV, 492.
that there never was anyone in public life "who despised humanity so bitterly and unaffectedly as Frederick despised it," there is ample reason for his disliking Voltaire's Épitre, which called for benevolence and kindness for all men.

Frederick received another Épitre in June, identified by Moland as the sixth, with which Voltaire was pleased. Frederick also was enthusiastic about the poem. In the letter of August 8, he wrote:

Mon cher ami, je vous reconnais, je reconnais mon sang dans la belle Épitre sur l'Homme que je viens de recevoir, et dont je vous remercie mille fois.... Vous recherchez modestement la vérité, et vous la publiez avec hardiesse lorsqu'elle vous est connue. Non, il ne peut y avoir qu'un Dieu et qu'un Voltaire dans la nature.

Il n'y a que de grandes vérités dans votre Épitre sur l'homme.  

Not until November of 1738 does Frederick mention the real Cinquième Épitre, sur le plaisir.

Je vous ai une obligation infinie de l'Épitre, sur le plaisir; ce système me parait très-conforme à la Divinité, et s'accorde parfaitement avec ma manière de penser. Que ne dois-je point pour cet ouvrage incomparable!

Frederick exhibited keen delight with all the Discours except the Septième, and testified to his great admiration for the French author. Voltaire reciprocated and wrote a number of

18 Morley, op. cit., p. 168.
19 XXXIV, 502.
20 XXXIV, 549.
21 XXXV, 46.
poems honoring the Royal Prince.

Les lauriers d'Apollon se fanaient sur la terre,
Les beaux-arts languissaient ainsi que les vertus;
La Fraude aux yeux menteurs et l'aveugle Plutus
Entre les mains des rois gouvernaient le tonnerre;
La Nature indignée élève alors sa voix:
Je veux former, dit-elle; un règne heureux et juste,
Je veux qu'un héros naîsse, et qu'il joigne à la fois
Les talents de Virgile et les vertus d'Auguste,
Pour l'ornement du monde et l'exemple des rois.
Elle dit; et du ciel les vertus descendirent,
Tout le nord tressaillit, tout l'Olympe accourut;
L'olive, les lauriers, les myrtes, reverbèrent,
Et Frédéric parut.  

Some have been inclined to suspect the sincerity of the two men, considering what later happened. At this time, however, I believe they were both flattered by the friendships offered them, and were quite sincere in their praise for one another. Voltaire speaks of the kindnesses Frederick showed him, in his correspondence,  

and Frederick writes to his sister, late in 1738, praising Voltaire thus:

Voltaire est le plus beau génie de la France, le plus grand poète, le plus grand historien et un des plus grands philosophes qu'ils aient jamais eu en France.  

Lytton Strachey points out the reason why it was impossible for these two men to live together, after both had shown their personal motives for being with the other.

22XXXIV, 221.
23XXXIV, 200.
When two confirmed egoists decide for purely selfish reasons, to set up house together, every one knows what will happen. 25

We must agree with Morley, however, that each had a great contribution to make to eighteenth-century Europe.

Voltaire and Frederick were the two leaders of the two chief movements then going on—the great work of the transformation of old Europe into the new 'vastly different.' Voltaire... (was) to destroy the supremacy of an old spiritual order. Frederick's work was to shape down the old political order. The sum of their efforts was the definite commencement of the revolution in the thought and the political conformation of the West. 26

What was Frederick's contribution to the Discours en vers, if any? He was the most distinguished correspondent of this period, and the only person with whom Voltaire discussed metaphysics and morality at any length. The Second Discourse is an exposition of Voltaire's conception of free will, substantially the same as that found in the treatise, Sur la liberté, sent to Frederick in October, 1737. Voltaire had already received Frederick's criticisms of the latter, and in the Discours carried further his argument based upon man's moral need for liberty. In the letter answering Frederick's refutation of the Deuxième Discours, Voltaire was forced to systematize his ideas.

In discussing the influence of Frederick on the Discours

---


26 Morley, op. cit., p. 164.
sur l'homme, the pleasure Voltaire derived from Frederick's friendship and kindnesses must be mentioned. It definitely affected Voltaire's philosophy and outlook on life. Speaking of the most optimistic of the Discours, the Cinquième, sur le plaisir, originally dedicated to Frederick, Voltaire wrote:

Je prends la liberté d'envoyer à Votre Altesse royale mon système de plaisir; je ne suis point sceptique sur cette matière, car depuis que je suis à Cirey, et que Votre Altesse royale m'honore de ces bontés, je crois le plaisir démontré.\(^{27}\)

The praise of amitié found in both the second and fourth Épitres may also be a result of the famous correspondence.

As already noted, Frederick did not approve of the Seventh Discourse. This could be one of the reasons for Voltaire's withholding the last Discours from publication. The exchange of ideas between the two men undoubtedly plays an important part in the shaping of the works contemporaneous to the correspondence. However, from a consideration of the available data, it is difficult to show any definite relationship. Voltaire always received Frederick's suggestions seriously, and often made changes accordingly. However, there is no discussion of possible changes in the Discours in the correspondence of 1737 and 1738. Frederick criticized only the Septième Discours, and, as far as we know, it was not revised until later, and still retained the passage which Frederick found distasteful.

\(^{27}\)XXXIV, 512.
CHAPTER VII

STYLE OF THE DISCOURS EN VERS SUR L'HOMME

Voltaire chose poetry as the literary form in which to write his treatise on man. In some respects he gained by this choice, and in others he lost. Voltaire himself realized that the poetic medium presented difficulties, because "il est bien difficile de dire en vers tout ce qu'on voudrait." The poetry of this work varies in its merit, but it is not generally considered today to be among Voltaire's best verse.

The procedure followed in the seven Discours is interesting. In the first and fourth, Voltaire begins by affirming his doctrine. The Deuxième, Sixième, and Septième first state the confusion which greets man on the subjects of free will, the nature of man, and virtue. The third, Sur l'envie, combines the transition from the second with a summary of the evils of envy. The Cinquième opens with an attack on austerity, and then continues by the enunciation of Voltaire's thesis. Starting from the conclusion in each Discours, Voltaire then goes ahead to prove his case, by tearing down all opposing arguments in the first and second Épîtres, and in the Troisième and Quatrième by a demonstration of the unhappiness and distress that can come from envy and immoderation. In the seventh, Voltaire enumerates accepted ideas of virtue which he does not.

1XXXIX, 3.
believe constitute virtue. The Sixth Discourse is developed by a Chinese story which shows man his true nature. The Cinquième contains more unveiled didacticism. Thus Voltaire's method of approach is somewhat similar in all seven of the Discours. Émile Faguet, examining the procedure of the Premier Discours, notes that it is very much like that of the Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne. He comments upon the method in the following passage:

Le procédé n'est peut-être pas irréprochable au point de vue de la dialectique. Quoi qu'il en soit, il était particulièrement cher à l'auteur.2

Another aspect of his manner of presentation in the Discours sur l'homme is his use of supernatural beings to reveal truth, a device frequently used by Voltaire.

Faguet, in his Histoire de la poésie française, states, as does Condorcet, that Voltaire's Discours en vers sur l'homme surpass Pope's Essay on Man in several respects.3 However, Faguet does not believe that Voltaire's attitude and tone are those of the philosophical poet.

Dans le Discours sur l'homme, il se montre trop sous son aspect de poète satirique; il n'a pas la gravité qu'exige la discussion de problèmes d'une pareille profondeur.4

---


3Émile Faguet, Histoire de la poésie française de la Renaissance au romantisme (11 vols.), Boivin, Paris, n.d., t. 7, 8-9; Condorcet, Vie de Voltaire, I, 217 (Moland).

4Ibid., p. 204.
Most everyone agrees that Voltaire's best poetry is his light satirical verse, but his influence on poetry of all kinds continues right down to the romantic era.\(^5\)

Faguet discusses the style of Voltaire's philosophical poems thus:

> Mon Dieu, comme toutes les fois qu'on a affaire à des vers philosophiques de Voltaire, on ne peut pas dire que ces vers soient mauvais. Cependant, où est la fermeté, le mouvement, le souffle oratoire de la belle tirade cornélienne? Le style ici est faible et même plat, et les meilleures parties sont tout au plus de la bonne prose.\(^6\)

The eighteenth-century La Harpe believed, on the other hand, that Voltaire presented his metaphysical ideas well, but that his verses "n'en sont pas moins pleins de vivacité et de verve."\(^7\)

According to Faguet, Voltaire was lacking in the three qualities necessary for good poetry, "l'imagination, la sensibilité, et l'éloquence."\(^8\) However, the person living today must project himself back to the eighteenth century to understand its poetic ideals. Ascoli presents this problem well, showing in what light we must judge Voltaire, and why he was a great poet during his epoch.

\(^5\) Lanson, *op. cit.*, p. 207.


\(^7\) La Harpe, *op. cit.*, t. 13, 283.

\(^8\) Faguet, *op. cit.*, p. 87.
Si Voltaire fut jugé si grand c'est sans doute parce qu'il a senti, mieux que personne alors, ce que devait être la poésie, c'est parce qu'a force d'intelligence et d'adresse, et dans la mesure où la réflexion et l'effort concerté surpléent à l'inspiration, il a, seul, trouvé des notes qui rappelaient la divine mélodie, que Racine avait modulée, et dont tous ses successeurs préoccupés d'art poétique, de règles et de procédés n'avaient point découvert le secret: car c'est le sentiment qui la crée, et le sentiment - émotion et passion - avait peu de place en un siècle élegant sans doute et agréable, mais sec et froid, le siècle de l'esprit. C'est dire que Voltaire a été le grand poète d'une époque sans poésie; cela explique à la fois son succès auprès de ses contemporains, et notre sévérité à nous qui avons été, depuis, formés par plus d'un siècle de forte, de libre, et de riche écllosion poétique.9

Condorcet thought the Discours en vers sur l'homme were one of the "plus beaux monuments de la poésie française."10 He was possibly somewhat prejudiced, but his comments are well worth noting because they represent the reaction of Voltaire's century.

S'ils n'offrent point un plan régulier comme les épitres de Pope, ils ont l'avantage de renfermer une philosophie plus vraie, plus douce, plus usuelle. La variété des tons, une sorte d'abandon, une sensibilité touchante, un enthousiasme toujours noble, toujours vrai, leur donne un charme que l'esprit, l'imagination, et le coeur, goûtent tour à tour: charme dont Voltaire a seul connu le secret; et ce secret est celui de toucher, de plaire, d'instruire sans fatiguer jamais, d'écrire pour tous les esprits comme pour tous les âges.11

La Harpe is very sensitive to the faults of the Discours.


10I, 216.

11I, 216-217.
but that does not blind him to the beauties of the poem.\textsuperscript{12} He believed the first \textit{Discours} to be among the better ones, and after summing up its worst qualities, concluded:

\textit{Quelques négligences ne défigurent point une diction habituellement brillante et facile.}\textsuperscript{13}

In the introduction to La Harpe's discussion of the \textit{Discours}, he lists the literary merits of the work.

\textit{..., mais, dans sa marche libre et facile, il repand de tous côtés les fleurs de l'imagination et c'est par là qu'il compense ce qui lui manque en justesse et en force de raisonnement. Les formes de son style sont très variées: il joint le familier au sérieux avec beaucoup d'aisance, mais pas toujours avec des nuances assez bien gondues, ni avec assez de respect pour les bien- seances. Ses transitions ne sont pas toujours bien ménagées et enfin la versification même offre plus de négligences que leur genre et le style de ces discours n'en peuvent faire excuser.}\textsuperscript{14}

Most critics are severe with Voltaire for the amount of personal satire that enters into the \textit{Discours}, especially in the \textit{Troisième}. He seems to have stooped to calumny himself in order to criticize his critics and calumniators.

There are several passages in the \textit{Discours sur l'homme} which prove that Voltaire did possess a limited degree of lyricism, lacking in most of the poetry of the eighteenth century until that of Chenier. The conclusion of the \textit{Troisième Discours}, calling for an alliance of all true artists, is an exceptionally

\textsuperscript{12}La Harpe, \textit{op. cit.}, t. 13, 294.

\textsuperscript{13}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 281.

\textsuperscript{14}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 277.
vigorou s passage showing Voltaire's ability in effective comparison and quick transitions.

C'est ainsi que la terre avec plaisir rassemble
Ces chênes, ces gapins, qui s'élèvent ensemble:
Un suc toujours égal est préparé pour eux;
Leur pied touche aux enfers, leur cime est dans les cieux;
Leur tronc inébranlable, et leur pompeuse tête,
Résiste en se touchant, aux coups de la tempête;
Ils vivent l'un par l'autre, ils triomphent du temps:
Tandis que sous leur ombre on voit de vils serpents
Se livrer, en sifflant, des guerres intestines,
Et de leur sang impur arroser leurs racines.15

In the **Premier Discours**, the description of the peasants is a skillful blending of romanticism and realism.

Vois-tu ces vallons ces esclaves champêtres
Qui creusent ces rochers, qui vont fendre ces hêtres,
Qui détournent ces eaux, qui, la bêche à la main,
Fertilisent la terre, en déchirant son sein?
Ils ne sont point formés sur le brillant modèle
De ces pasteurs galants qu'a chantés Fontenelle:
Ce n'est point Timarette et le tendre Tyrois,
De roses couronnées, sous des myrtes assis,
Entreleasant leurs noms sur l'écorce des chênes,
Vantant avec esprit leurs plaisirs et leurs peines;
C'est Pierrot, c'est Colin, dont le bras vigoureux
Soulève un char tremblant dans un fossé bourbeux,
Perretu au point du jour est aux champs la première.
Je les vois, haletants et couverts de poussière,
Braver, dans ces travaux chaque jour répétés,
Et le froid des hivers et le feu des étés.16

Voltaire's particular contribution to French poetry was the expression of scientific discovery and discussion in verse.

Faguet suggests that Voltaire had the makings of a great poet in this respect.17 Several outstanding examples of this are

15IX, 398; Ascoli, *op. cit.*, p. 117.
16IX, 381; Ascoli, *op. cit.*, pp. 82-83.
found in the Quatrième Discours.

Je veux savoir de lui par quels secrets mystères
Ce pain, cet aliment dans mon corps digéré,
Se transforme en un lait doucement préparé;
Comment, toujours filtre dans ses routes certaines,
En longs ruisseaux de pourpre il court enfiler mes veines,
À mon corps languissant rend un pouvoir nouveau,
Fait palpiter mon cœur et penser mon cerveau.18

In a striking passage Voltaire describes the voyage of Maupertuis and the other scientists to measure a meridian.

Courriers de la physique, Argonautes nouveaux,
Qui franchissez les monts, qui traversez les eaux,
Ramenez des climats soumis aux trois couronnes
Vos perches, vos secteurs, et surtout deux Lapones;
Vous avez confirmé dans ces lieux pleins d'ennui
Ce que Newton connut sans sortir de chez lui.
Vous avez arpenté quelque faible partie,
Dgs flancs toujours glacés de la terre aplatie,
Dévoilez ces ressorts qui font la pesanteur;
Vous connaissez les lois qu'établit son auteur.
Parlez, enseignez-moi comment ses mains fécondes
Font tourner tant de cleux, graviter tant de mondes;
Pourquoi vers le soleil notre globe entraîné
Se meut autour de soi sur son axe incliné; 19

It seems at times as if Voltaire were more interested in
the ideas in the seven Discours than in the poetic expression.

There are many clichés and some chevilles. We find such repetitious passages as:

Hélas! où donc chercher, où trouver le bonheur?
En tous lieux, en tous temps, dans toute la nature.20

Dieu te la devait-il immuable, infinie,
Égale en tout état, en tous temps, en tout lieu?21

---

19 IX, 402-403; Ascoli, op. cit., pp. 125, 127.
20 IX, 383; Ascoli, op. cit., p. 88.
21 IX, 390; Ascoli, op. cit., p. 98.
Many passages of excellent description and lines with an epigrammatic turn can be opposed to these. His definition of liberty in the Second Discourse is a familiar quotation in French.

La liberté dans l'homme est la santé de l'âme.  

Another outstanding line is found in the Septième Discours. This verse sums up Voltaire's thought in the last Discourse.

C'est n'être bon à rien de n'être bon qu'à soi!  

There are several lines which are striking because of their antithesis.

Il agit comme libre et parle comme esclave.  

......................................................

Aime la vérité, mais pardonne à l'erreur.  

Pensent enfumer leur être et hausser leur bassesse.  

In the Second Discourse, Voltaire uses an admirable image to describe his mental state as he listens to the revelations of the angel.

J'étais à ce discours tel qu'un homme enivré  
Qui s'éveille en sursaut, d'un grand jour éclairé,  
Et dont la clignotante et débile paupière  
Lui laisse encore à peine entrevoir la lumière.  

The presentation of the anthropocentric world in the Sixth

---

22IX, 391; Ascoli, op. cit., p. 99.
23IX, 421; Ascoli, op. cit., p. 166.
25IX, 379; Ascoli, op. cit., p. 77.
26IX, 390; Ascoli; op. cit., p. 98.
Discourse is quite picturesque as well as forceful. Its effectiveness lies in the interesting choice of detail.

L'homme vint, et cria: 'Je suis puissant et sage; Cieux, terres, éléments, tout est pour mon usage; L'océan fut formé pour porter mes vaisseaux; Les vents sont mes courriers, les astres mes flambeaux. Ce globe qui des nuits blanchit les gombres voiles, Croît, décroît, fuit, revient, et prêse aux étoiles:27

The opening lines of the Cinquième Discours are exceptionally vigorous, undoubtedly because the sentiment was so close to Voltaire's heart.

Jusqu'à quand verrons-nous ce reveur fanatique, Fermer le ciel au monde, et d'un ton despoticque Damnant le genre humain, qu'il pretend convertir, Nous prêcher la vertu pour la faire hair?28

Voltaire's use of satire in the Discours en vers cannot be overlooked. Ascoli says rightly: "Mais le ton de Voltaire est exquis quand il tend vers la satire..."29 As an example, Ascoli gives the description of the animals who believe creation is for them.

Un jour quelques souris se disaient l'une à l'autre: 'Que ce monde est charmant! quel empire est le nôtre! Ce palais si superbe est élevé pour nous; De toute éternité Dieu nous fit ces grands trous: Vois-tu ces grag jambons sous cette voûte obscure? Ils y furent créées des mains de la Nature; Ces montagnes de lard, éternels aliments, Sont pour nous en ces lieux jusqu'à la fin des temps. Oui, nous sommes, grand Dieu, si l'on en croit nos sages, Le chef-d'oeuvre, la fin, le but de tes ouvrages.

27IX, 417; Ascoli, op. cit., p. 154.
28IX, 409; Ascoli, op. cit., p. 136.
Les chats sont dangereux, et prompts à nous manger; 
Mais c'est pour nous instruire et pour nous corriger."

Plus loin, sur le duvet d'une herbe renaissante,
Près des bois, près des eaux, une troupe innocente
De canards nasillants, de dindons renorgés,
De gros moutons bêlants, que leur laine a chargés,
Disait: 'Tout est à nous, bois, prés, étangs, montagnes;
Le ciel pour nos besoins fait vêdir les campagnes.'
L'âne passait auprès, et se mirant dans l'eau,
Il rendait grâce au ciel en se trouvant si beau:
'Pour les ânèg, dit-il, le ciel a fait la terre,
L'homme est né mon esclave, il me panse, il me ferre,
Il m'ustille, il me lave, il prévient mes désirs.'

The choice of adjectives in this passage is excellent. Voltaire belittles man and minimizes his importance, a thought expressed rather frequently by the author of the Discours.

The work is uneven, and has its faults. However, the Discours show a refreshing versatility, a capable handling of philosophical ideas in verse, and a skillful blending of detail and anecdote.

---

\textsuperscript{30}IX, 416; Ascoli, pp. 153-154.
CHAPTER VIII
VOGUE AND INFLUENCE OF THE POEM
CONCLUSIONS

The Discours en vers sur l'homme are read today only by the student and Voltaire specialist. Voltaire is known to the twentieth century primarily as an historian, a political philosopher, and a writer of amusing philosophic contes. His tragédies and other verse have been largely forgotten. The general attitude toward his philosophical verse was well summarized by Richard Aldington.

There is good didactic verse in the Discours en vers sur l'homme and the Poème sur la loi naturelle, but these are in essence semi-philosophical tracts, put into rhyme by an able virtuoso. The reader can safely neglect them...1

However, the opinion of today must be contrasted with that of the eighteenth century. Condorcet believed the Discours were a monument to all French poetry.2 La Harpe spoke of them thus:

Les Discours sur l'homme, que Voltaire fit à Cirey, et qui furent publiés depuis 1730 (sic) jusqu'en 1740, sont pour le talent poétique, ce que nous avons de plus estimé en ce genre, surtout les quatre premiers, beaucoup mieux travaillés et mieux penses que les trois autres.3

The position occupied by the Discours in the correspondence

2I, 217.
3La Harpe, op. cit., t. 13, 275-276.
of Voltaire, Madame du Châtelet, and Frederick the Great for
the years 1736, 1737, 1738 testifies to the importance they
placed upon the work. All of Voltaire's friends showed a
similar interest in them, and did what they could to help him
make the Discours as effective as possible. They were con-
tained in the publications of his works after 1742.

The wide reading of the Discours en vers in the eighteenth
and nineteenth centuries is proved by the fact that they have
furnished several well known quotations. The Second Discourse
has provided one of these familiar lines, used particularly
by the spiritualists. Here Voltaire describes man's status if
he has no free will. We are:

Automates pensants, mus par des mains divines.⁴

The opening lines of the Troisième Discours were inscribed on
the chariot which carried Voltaire's remains to the Pantheon.
They are of course the verses which appealed greatly to the
supporters of the French Revolution, and they have remained
famous as a result of their frequent use.

Si l'homme est créé libre, il doit se gouverner;
Si l'homme a des tyrans, il les doit détrôner.⁵

The well known lines in the Sixième Discours are a caution to
any writer, who becomes too verbose.

⁴Othon Guerlac, Les Citations françaises, Librairie Armand

⁵Ibid., p. 104.
Mais malheur à l'auteur qui veut toujours instruire! Le secret d'ennuyer est celui de tout dire. 6

The expression of Voltaire's humanitarianism was condensed into one line in the Septième Discours, and this verse is among those often cited.

C'est n'être bon à rien de n'être bon qu'à soi. 7

The question of Voltaire's influence on the romantic and pre-romantic poets is very interesting. Chénier, Hugo, and Lamartine all read Voltaire's works, and left us some evidence as to their opinion of the eighteenth century writer. Chénier had little admiration for Voltaire, alienated principally by his satire. He spoke of his predecessor thus:

Chez lui tous les genres de poésie deviennent la satire. Heureux encore s'il ne la faisait pas tomber souvent sur des hommes éloquents et profonds, qui ne lui avaient rien fait et qu'il eût dû traiter autrement. 8

Hugo's attitude toward Voltaire became more favorable as he grew older. However, he never thought Voltaire was truly a poet.

Voltaire n'est précisément ni un grand poète, ni un grand philosophe. C'est un grand représentant de tout. 9

---

6 Ibid., p. 104.
7 Ibid., p. 104.
8 Émile Faguet, André Chénier, Librairie Hachette, Paris, 1902, p. 25.
Voltaire's liking for antithesis has already been noted. Hugo's poetry also abounds in such contrasts. Perhaps Hugo may have been introduced to this procedure through Voltaire's works.

Gustave Lanson carefully traces Lamartine's reading, and finds that many of Voltaire's works were well known to him, including the Discours sur l'homme. A comparison of the ideas in L'Homme of Lamartine and the Discours reveals a close parallel. The style, imagery, and procedure also show striking similarities, proving Voltaire's influence on the romantic poet. This resemblance can of course be carried much further, and undoubtedly Voltaire's importance in the formation of other poets, not to speak of prose writers, of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be shown.

The Discours cannot be overlooked by anyone interested in Voltaire's philosophy or in his life at Cirey, because they offer the reader valuable information on both subjects. In this series of poems, we see Voltaire as the intellectual humanitarian who hated tyranny, and who became the leader of the movement for a new Europe. He shows himself hostile to bigotry, fanaticism, and metaphysical systems which do nothing to aid man. The author preaches the golden rule and a restricted Epicureanism as the means for man's achieving happiness. This is truly the spirit of Voltaire, the spirit which has lived on.

---

10Gustave Lanson, Lamartine, Méditations poétiques, Librairie Hachette, Paris, 1902, pp. xii-xv.
The questions discussed in the Discours were of prime importance in the eighteenth century, and never have ceased to be.

Like Professor Torrey, one cannot help but feel that Voltaire is timeless and has a great deal to say to us in the twentieth century.

Christendom seems more bent than ever on its own destruction, religion is again on the warpath, and the very principles of democracy are being challenged. It is in such periods of increasing fanaticism that generations will turn again to the spirit of Voltaire.\footnote{Torrey, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 284.}
BIBLIOGRAPHY

EDITIONS OF VOLTAIRE'S WORKS (CONSULTED)


Traité de métaphysique, critical edition by H. Templeton Patterson, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1937.


GENERAL BIBLIOGRAPHY


Lanson, Gustave, Éditeur, Lamartine, Méditations poétiques, Paris, Librairie Hachette, 1902 (Collection des Grands Écrivains français).


Pascal, Blaise, Pensées de Pascal sur la religion et quelques autres sujets, Paris, Garnier, 1866.


PERIODICALS


Barr, Mary-Margaret H., "Bibliographical Data on Voltaire from 1931 to 1940," Modern Language Notes, December, 1941, 56: 563-583.


Watts, George Byron, "Voltaire's Change of Name," Modern Language Notes, June, 1923, 38: 329-333.