

In Remembrance, with Thanks to Voltaire

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Editor's note: The publication of this issue of the journal coincides with the one-year anniversary of the 2015 attacks in Paris. To commemorate this tragedy, the comments of Dr. Joseph J. Fins at the 2015 *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* Neuroethics Network are reproduced here. That meeting, held in Paris, was dedicated to the memory of those who lost their lives last year.

As we gather for the 2015 *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* Neuroethics Network at L'Institut du Cerveau et de la Moelle Épineuse, I would like to speak from the heart as we consider brain matters. I want to take a moment to reflect on our coming together as friends and colleagues in the pursuit of open dialogue and the exchange of ideas. This is a liberty we all take for granted, but in light of last January's tragic assault on freedom of the press, here in Paris we need to reaffirm our commitment to civility and civil discourse.

So in praise of deliberative democracy, and in remembrance of the lives lost during the massacre at Charlie Hebdo and in the Jewish quarter,¹ I would like to share some excerpts from Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary*,² something of a secular bible to those who believe in free expression.

Voltaire, as our French colleagues know better than this child of New York, was himself a victim of censorship, exile, and imprisonment for his ideas.³

He wrote a treatise on tolerance too,⁴ which is also relevant given the origins of the recent assault. Taken together, his thoughts on liberty and tolerance epitomize the Enlightenment, with which his name is synonymous.

Our gathering today is in this lineage, even as he is in the line of other free thinkers who proclaimed the importance of speaking one's mind. In the *Philosophical Dictionary*, Voltaire quotes Montaigne, "I give my opinion not as being good, but as being my own."⁵

Embedded in that simple statement are both tolerance and the acceptance of fallibility, an awareness absent on the extremes of those convinced of their views at the exclusion—sometimes with deadly force—of the views of others: "Atheism and fanaticism are two monsters which may tear society in pieces; but the atheist preserves his reason, which checks his propensity to mischief, while the fanatic is under the influence of madness which is constantly goading him on."⁶ Voltaire cautions that, confronted by such madness, the intent might be to meet the monster in monstrous ways, with repression and similar excess, noting that "nothing is so common as to imitate the practice of our enemies, and to use their weapons."⁷ So let us meet intolerance not with the same but with an affirmation that all perspectives have a right to *responsible* expression.

The author is grateful to Yves Agid and Tomi Kushner for the opportunity to present an earlier version of these remarks at the 2015 *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* Neuroethics Network at L'Institut du Cerveau et de la Moelle Épineuse. It is written in remembrance of those who died during the tragic events in Paris in January 2015.

Voltaire puts censorship in perspective and offers a remedy for those who might be offended: "The devout cry out, furred doctors assemble, alarms multiply from college to college, from house to house, whole communities are disturbed. And why? For five or six pages, about no one will give a fig at the end of three months."⁸ And here's the kicker: "Does a book displease you? Refute it. Does it bore you? Don't read it."⁹

Voltaire has a sense of humor and also a sense of the joy in learning: "You fear books, as certain cantons fear violins. Let men read, and let men dance—these two amusements will never do any harm to the world."¹⁰

Despite, or because of, his wit, Voltaire is aware of the difficulty of solitary scholarship and a life in letters, which for our purposes must also include journalism—the difficulty faced by those who have chosen this life work against our more common nature, and who often toil unappreciated and scorned until their contributions are appreciated. He observes:

The men of letters who have rendered the greatest services to the small number of thinking beings spread over the world are the isolated writers, the true scholars shut in their studies, who have neither argued on the benches of the universities, nor told half-truths in the academies; and almost all of them have been persecuted. Our wretched species is so made that those who walk on the well-trodden path always throw stones at those who are opening a new road.¹¹

Yet it can be a rewarding life, the life of true scholarship, when we can all gather like this, under the banner of a great press and the shelter of an ancient hospital whose current achievements are as noteworthy as its long history of scientific achievement.

But we need to sustain these opportunities and the structures that sustain us; as Voltaire warns:

Fools go far sometimes, particularly when bigotry is added to ineptitude, and to ineptitude the spirit of vengeance. Another great misfortune of a man of letters is that ordinarily he stands alone. A bourgeois buys himself a small position, and in it he is backed by his colleagues. If he suffers an injustice, he finds defenders at once. The man of letters is unsuccored; he resembles a flying fish; if he rises a little, the birds devour him; if he dives, the fish eat him.¹²

But we must persevere, because books, writers, readers, scientists and ethicists, and journalists and cartoonists can have consequences, if the work is consequential. Voltaire asks:

Who leads mankind in civilized countries? Those who know how to read and write. You do not know either Hippocrates, Boerhaave or Sydenham, but you put your bodies in the hands of those who have read them. You abandon your soul to those who are paid to read the Bible, although there are not fifty among them who have read it through with care.¹³

Voltaire reminds us that a society without books, without free speech, goes dark. "It is with books as with fire in our grates: everybody borrows a light from our neighbor to *kindle* his own, which is in term communicated to others, and partakes of all."¹⁴ And, yes, the name of the modern-day Kindle e-book reader is derived from Voltaire. The "Madmen" who named the device for Amazon, Karin Hibma and Michael Cronan, cite this ancient quote from the *Philosophical Dictionary* as their inspiration in naming that modern-day device.^{15,16}

Whether it be through technology, conventional books, or speech, we all must strive to keep our society as bright as possible through our works, as writers, scholars, doctors, or public intellectuals. We must light those flames; kindle ideas, radical and offensive; and have the courage to speak and the patience to be discomfited when we disagree and to respond civilly.

Let me end with an injunction from Voltaire. He asks, from the ages, though perhaps now on a Kindle, "But where are the men to be found who will dare to speak out?"¹⁷

Good question.

Notes

1. Terror in Paris. *The Economist* 2015 Jan 10; available at <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21638118-islamists-are-assailing-freedom-speech-vilifying-all-islam-wrong-way-counter> (last accessed 18 June 2015).

2. Voltaire. *The Portable Voltaire*. Redman BR, ed. New York: Penguin Books; 1977.

3. Pearson R. *Voltaire Almighty: A Life in Pursuit of Freedom*. London: Bloomsbury; 2005.

4. Voltaire. *A Treatise on Tolerance and Other Writings*. New York: Barnes and Noble; 2009.

5. See note 2, Voltaire 1977, at 221.

6. See note 2, Voltaire 1977, at 220.

7. See note 2, Voltaire 1977, at 226.

8. See note 2, Voltaire 1977, at 154.

9. See note 2, Voltaire 1977, at 154.

10. See note 2, Voltaire 1977, at 155.

11. See note 2, Voltaire 1977, at 162.

12. See note 2, Voltaire 1977, at 163.

13. See note 2, Voltaire 1977, at 90.

14. See note 2, Voltaire 1977, at 227.

15. Gianatasio D. Voltaire stumps for Amazon in first ad for Kindle Fire. *AdWeek* 2011 Sept 29; available at <http://www.adweek.com/adfreak/voltaire-stumps-amazon-first-ad-kindle-fire-135322> (last accessed 18 June 2015).

16. Goldstein R. Michael Cronan, who gave TiVo and Kindle their names, dies at 61. *New York Times* 2013 Jan 5; available at http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/06/business/michael-cronan-who-gave-tivo-and-kindle-their-names-dies-at-61.html?_r=0 (last accessed 18 June 2015).

17. See note 2, Voltaire 1977, at 224.