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## Of Israel, Forst & Voltaire: Deism, Toleration, and Radicalism

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### ABSTRACT



In the recent progressive reappraisals of the enlightenment by Jonathan Israel and Rainer Forst, Voltaire figures as almost a reactionary thinker, opposing the radical dimensions of the enlightenment pushing forwards secularisation, democratisation, and toleration. Part 1 examines Israel's and Forst's accounts of Voltaire, showing their striking proximity. Part 2 is divided into the three subheadings of (i) Voltaire's deism, (ii) the pivotal subject of toleration, and (iii) the decisive question of what philosophical radicalism, in the direction of democratising reform, involves. At issue in Israel's and Forst's claims that Voltaire's deism represents a step backwards from Bayle's and Spinoza's more radical conceptions of reason and toleration, we will claim, is a shared, anachronistic failure to duly credit Voltaire's deism's distance from the revealed religions, and the radicalism of Voltaire's anti-clericism. In the key claim of the paper, however, we will argue that the larger issue in Israel's and Forst's positioning of Voltaire as almost reactionary are a deeper set of assumptions about how we should assess philosophical texts which aim to act in the world, and (evoking Feuerbach) to change it (2, iii). Both Israel and Forst, despite the former's extensive labours in contextualisation, read the texts of eighteenth century philosophers for their arguments alone, rather than as rhetorical and political acts and interventions which aimed to reach, entertain, and reform an expanding reading public through esprit, art, satire, and rhetoric, as well as by making argumentative contributions to the controversies of the day.

### KEYWORDS

Enlightenment; Voltaire;  
Rainer Forst; Jonathan Israel;  
politics; philosophy

In the two last decades, different but convergent works on the enlightenment and its signature concept, toleration, have been produced by Jonathan Israel and Rainer Forst.<sup>1</sup> Israel's three volume series (*Radical Enlightenment*, *Enlightenment Contested*, *Democratic Enlightenment*) is a massive work of intellectual history defending a systematic rereading of the enlightenment as riven between radical and moderate streams.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, Forst's *Toleration in Conflict* is a philosophical analysis of toleration as a "live issue" in today's world. It is a study in which:

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the history of toleration is also the history of the development of a new understanding of morality and of a new outlook on the ethical, legal, political and moral identity of persons, a conflictual history of normative demands, struggles and continual redefinitions of human beings' understanding of themselves.<sup>3</sup>

Yet proximities exist between these works of intellectual history and philosophy. Firstly, Israel's intellectual history, with its claims concerning the radical and moderate streams of the enlightenment, has one eye always on the present.<sup>4</sup> Almost all historians of the period, Israel charges, have erroneously identified the enlightenment *per se* with the "moderate" stream alone.<sup>5</sup> This stream, hearkening back to Newton and Locke, was intellectually empiricist, dualist, and deistic; and politically reformist, anti-democratic and monarchical.<sup>6</sup> Hence, if we are to look for the origins of our later modern ideas of secular, pluralistic liberal democracies, Israel contends that we must recover the history of the radical enlightenment looking back to Spinoza. Intellectually, this enlightenment was rationalist, monist, and atheistic. Politically, it was revolutionary, giving rise in Israel's account to many of the defining, today-threatened features of contemporary secular societies.<sup>7</sup>

(1) the adoption of philosophical (mathematical historical) reason as the only and exclusive criterion of what is true; (2) rejection of all supernatural agency, magic, disembodied spirits, and divine providence; (3) the equality of all mankind (racial and sexual); (4) secular "universalism" in ethics anchored in equality and chiefly stressing equity, justice, and charity; (5) comprehensive toleration and freedom of thought based on independent critical thinking; (6) personal liberty of lifestyle and sexual conduct between consenting adults, safeguarding the dignity and freedom of the unmarried and homosexuals; (7) freedom of expression, political criticism, and the press, in the public sphere; (8) democratic republicanism as the most legitimate form of politics.<sup>8</sup>

In *A Revolution of the Mind*, Israel's abridgement of his enlightenment series, he is clear about his own presentist aims, akin to those of Forst in *Toleration in Conflict*:

Not only scholars but also the general reading public need some awareness of the tremendous historical difficulty, struggle, and cost involved in propagating our core ideas in the face of the long-dominant monarchical, aristocratic, and religious ideologies, privileged oligarchies and elites, and in face of the various counter-enlightenment popular movements that so resolutely and vehemently combatted [them] from the mid-17th century down to the crushing of Nazism ...<sup>9</sup>

Secondly, when we look at the terms of Israel's and Forst's respective reconstructions of the enlightenment, a remarkable comparison emerges around the pivotal figure of Voltaire. Forst does not work with anything like Israel's systematic division of radical versus moderate enlightenments. Yet in his as in Israel's account of the enlightenment, Voltaire is positioned as secondary or even as *recalcitrant* to what made the enlightenment period so pivotally significant. Alternately celebrated or reviled as the "patriarch" of the *lumières*, for both Israel and Forst, Voltaire is preceded and already surpassed in radicalism by Pierre Bayle on toleration.<sup>10</sup> Israel's radicals led by Diderot and D'Holbach, and Immanuel Kant's deontology in Forst<sup>11</sup> quickly supersede Voltaire's interventions in metaphysics, ethics, politics, and concerning toleration, that subject with which Voltaire's name is most closely linked.<sup>12</sup>

What I want to do here, in a way that is distinct in the existing literatures on both Israel and Forst, is examine whether their convergent "Voltaires" (who we introduce in Part 1) stand up to critical scrutiny.<sup>13</sup> The subject is important, given the present

threats facing the kinds of culturally plural, liberal societies opened up by Voltaire's and others' enlightenment defences of toleration. At the same time, Voltaire's work itself continues to be widely neglected, outside of the circles of scholarship within intellectual history and French studies. The man after whom Victor Hugo thought fit to name an "age", reviled by reactionary thinkers like Joseph de Maistre as the principal engine behind the enlightenment's intellectual subversion of throne and altar, today very often lies unread, and remains unmentioned in leading treatments of the philosophical discourse of modernity. In Israel and Forst, by contrast, he assumes a central role; yet, contra de Maistre et al, he is positioned as, if not reactionary and hostile to the democratising direction of the radical enlightenment, then relatively insignificant, even within the history of modern toleration, that value with which his name is most closely associated.

The paper has two parts. Part 1 closely examines Israel's and Forst's accounts of Voltaire, showing their striking proximity. Part 2 is divided into the three subheadings of (i) Voltaire's deism, (ii) the pivotal subject of toleration, and then (iii) the decisive question of what philosophical radicalism, in the direction of democratising reform, might involve. We will claim in this Part 2 that Israel's and Forst's claims that Voltaire's deism represents a step backwards from Bayle's and Spinoza's more radical conceptions of reason and toleration, involve a shared, anachronistic failure to duly credit Voltaire's deism's distance from the revealed religions (i), and the radicalism of Voltaire's anti-clericalism, which was of course sufficient to see Voltaire spend most of his adulthood in exile (ii).

In what is the key claim of the paper, however, we will argue (in 2, iii) that the larger issue in Israel's and Forst's positioning of Voltaire as almost a reactionary figure, are a deeper set of assumptions about how we should assess philosophical texts which aim to act in the world, and (evoking Feuerbach) to change it in the ways Voltaire clearly did.<sup>14</sup> Both Israel and Forst, despite the former's extensive labours in contextualisation, read the texts of eighteenth century philosophers for their arguments alone, rather than also as rhetorical and political interventions. Through this very specific kind of "logo-centrism", they miss the dimension in which enlightenment philosophical writing, above all Voltaire's, was then radical in its intentions to reach, entertain, and reform an expanding reading public through *esprit*, art, satire, and rhetoric, as well as by making argumentative contributions to the controversies of the day.

## 1: The Patriarch Is Dead ...

### *Jonathan Israel's Voltaire, or the Philosophe as Metaphysician-Courtier*

Even his harshest critics recognise the landmark contribution Jonathan Israel's trilogy (*Radical Enlightenment*, *Enlightenment Contested*, *Democratic Enlightenment*) has made to the historiography of the enlightenment. Israel's monumental series stretches the scope of enlightenment historiographies in three registers: geographically, by including thinkers, debates and events from all across Europe and the Americas<sup>15</sup>; chronologically, by following Margaret Jacob in arguing that the enlightenment effectively began as early as 1650 in the Dutch republic<sup>16</sup>; and "materially", by sourcing and examining the work of a host of oft-forgotten French, German, British, Dutch, Italian, Greek, and American authors and writings.<sup>17</sup> Alongside this extraordinary documentary labour,

Israel's enlightenment trilogy is animated by his attempt to mark out a distinction, not always clear to the protagonists, between a "moderate" and a "radical" enlightenment.<sup>18</sup>

According to Israel, the radical enlightenment was championed above all by Spinoza and Pierre Bayle in the later seventeenth century. It went into decline in Holland in the first decades of the eighteenth century.<sup>19</sup> In France, upon his return from exile after 1730, Voltaire's activities were principally responsible for popularising the newly emergent moderate enlightenment. This was indebted far more to Locke and the British experimentalists than to Bayle and Spinoza.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, by the later 1740s, a new generation of radicals led by Diderot had emerged in Paris. These figures were informed by the recent developments in the biological sciences and deeply immersed in clandestine Spinozist literature.<sup>21</sup> With the controversies surrounding Montesquieu's *L'Esprit des Lois* and the censorship of the *Encyclopédie*<sup>22</sup>, the moderate and radical enlighteners were forced into an uneasy alliance in the early "1750s" against shared reactionary foes. Soon enough, however, the alliance between moderate and radical *philosophes* broke down. This occurred with the wave of radical anticlerical and increasingly political publications of the 1760s, culminating in Baron d'Holbach's "bombshell", the *Système de la Nature* of 1770.<sup>23</sup>

The figure of Voltaire then commands a profoundly important, deeply ambivalent place in Israel's narrative, just as we will see shortly that he does in Forst's *Toleration in Conflict*. It is Voltaire who for Israel emerged after 1734 and the *Lettres Philosophiques* at the head of the moderate enlightenment.<sup>24</sup> According to what Anthony La Vopa calls Israel's "package logic"<sup>25</sup>, we soon see the latter positioning the patriarch as a "moderate" not simply in metaphysics – if we can agree that being a deist in the Paris between 1715 and 1778 was meaningfully "moderate", which is disputable (see below) – but on all of the controversial subjects of this period of extraordinary intellectual ferment: the foundations of ethics, the bases and limits of toleration, class, gender, race, slavery, the educability of the people, and (as such) the goals of the enlightenment.

In order to fit Voltaire into his radical-moderate schema, Israel makes at least three interconnected claims whose convergence with Rainer Forst's independent account of the patriarch will soon emerge:

(i) Firstly and above all, despite Voltaire's frequent avowals of metaphysical scepticism and hostility to *l'esprit des systèmes*, Israel's Voltaire is a philosopher commanding an (admittedly scarcely-coherent) "system".<sup>26</sup> As Ira Wade has argued, there is little question that Voltaire was preoccupied throughout his life with six or seven metaphysical quandaries. These return, from *The Treaty on Metaphysics* (1736) to *We Must Take Sides* (1772) and beyond: the existence of God, the nature of the soul, the nature of matter, natural law, freedom of the will, toleration, and *la morale*, including the problem of evil after 1755.<sup>27</sup> According to Israel, Voltaire was lastingly committed to the freedom of the will, ultimately on ethico-political grounds.<sup>28</sup> A Lockean dualist, he held firmly to belief in the immortality of the soul, final causes, the fixity of species<sup>29</sup>, and a providential Deity. Voltaire's deism also went all the way down. For Israel, Voltaire wishes to base morality in "divine agency"<sup>30</sup> and thereby to *counter* the widespread eighteenth century tendency to seek out non-theological grounds for morality in sensibility, conscience, or natural law.<sup>31</sup> We will see how several of these claims, notably the last, are echoed by Forst in due course.

The philosophical basis for Voltaire's deistic system lies in Newton's physico-theology.<sup>32</sup> At issue is the argument from design whose eminent rationality Voltaire,

following Clarke, sees as having been demonstrated by Newton's mathematisation of the world system in the *Principia Mathematica*.<sup>33</sup> It is significant that in his key treatment of Voltaire in *Enlightenment Contested*,<sup>34</sup> Israel focuses especially on the *Traité de métaphysique* of 1736 and the *Métaphysique de Newton* of 1740, alongside Voltaire's letters and *Notebooks*, but not his philosophical *contes* or shorter plays, essays, and dictionary entries (see 2, iii. below). Israel's metaphysician-Voltaire dogmatically accepted the absoluteness of time, place, and motion.<sup>35</sup> He accepted that, where Newton deigned to hypothesise, the force of gravity must have been imparted into matter by God, just as He had established inertia and the other physical laws.<sup>36</sup> Finally, Israel's Voltaire is especially concerned, in the opening chapter of *Métaphysique de Newton* and in his letters to the Jesuit Father René-Josèphe Tournemine, to "safeguard the externality of motion to matter".<sup>37</sup> This is because, we are told, Voltaire *le métaphysicien* understood clearly:

that the entire Newtonian vision of a divinely decreed cosmic order, based on the "argument from design" collapses the moment one concedes the innateness of motion in matter: for that opens the door to notions of a universe "existant par lui-même d'une nécessité absolue" [*Treaty of Metaphysics*], removing the whole foundation of physico-theology and Lockean epistemology.<sup>38</sup>

(ii) Secondly, as the champion of such a totalising system, Israel's Voltaire's "prime philosophical opponent" or "antagonist"<sup>39</sup> was not the Cartesianism he overthrows in the *Lettres philosophiques*, nor Pascal and the Jansenists, the established clergy, "fanaticism", Leibnizian or Popean theodicy, metaphysical presumption, or the proverbial "l'infâme" of his last decades. It was "the threat of Spinoza"<sup>40</sup>, closely followed by Voltaire's apparent inspiration, "the greatest master of the art of reasoning", Pierre Bayle.<sup>41</sup> Voltaire, says Israel, saw "Spinoza as the great adversary, and the latter's system as the seedbed of the atheism and materialism threatening to capture the French enlightenment".<sup>42</sup> Israel's philosophical basis for this claim of a Spinozan centrality in Voltaire comes from assigning to the patriarch an unerring polemical sense that Spinoza's monism "was the system most wholly opposed to physico-theology, and the "argument from design", indeed all teleology, and hence the system most contrary to Newtonianism ..."<sup>43</sup> Israel's historical support for this contention in *Enlightenment Contested* rests again on a very particular selection of Voltaire's texts, notably the *Notebooks* of 1735-1750, as well as Voltaire's handwritten notes to Condillac's *Traité des systèmes* (1749), wherein Spinoza is mentioned more often "than any other thinker of whom Voltaire disapproves".<sup>44</sup> In Israel's *Democratic Enlightenment*, covering 1750-1789, the only section devoted to Voltaire likewise targets his responses to D'Holbach's atheistic monism under the header, "Voltaire's Last Encounter: Battling Spinoza".<sup>45</sup> Israel's patriarch never loses sight of the old foe, however prolific he may have been across nearly every literary genre, on nearly every controversial subject, of his day.

(iii) Finally, Israel presents Voltaire politically as not a rebel who spent most of his life going from exile to exile, but as a compromising and profoundly *compromised* figure. The apparent scandal the *Lettres philosophiques* of 1734 whose open and veiled criticisms of French society had seen Voltaire flee Paris was for Israel something of a storm in an *angliciste* teacup.<sup>46</sup> According to Israel, Voltaire had no "desire to appear to be criticising either the monarchy or the Church" at this time, if ever.<sup>47</sup> His career as an "outlaw"

was in any case extremely brief, and in no way related to the *Lettres*, Israel claims. The Jesuits were already moving towards an acceptance of Newtonianism by the mid-1730s, and we have seen that Israel makes a lot of Voltaire's epistolary attempts to reconcile Father Tournemine to the ideas of Locke and Newton.<sup>48</sup>

What is principally at issue for Israel in this presentation of Voltaire's biography is the latter's larger attempt to "persuade the intellectual elite of the French church fully or in part of the advantages of Locke and Newton from their standpoint".<sup>49</sup> This political campaign is what he will elsewhere call Voltaire's "court strategy", his "courtly, aristocratic approach", one of "strategic reformism", as against principled revolution.<sup>50</sup> Israel sees this strategy as the practical corollary of a profoundly inegalitarian, snobbish elitism which he highlights in Voltaire, amply attested in the patriarch's epistles to monarchs and potentates expressing scepticism concerning the educability of the *canailles, le gros du genre humain, les cordonniers et les servants*, even "nine tenths" of mankind.<sup>51</sup> There is little that could be considered radical in a figure capable of such statements, Israel suggests, especially someone with connections to the Jesuits, as well as Frederick and Catherine the Greats.

### **Rainer Forst's Voltaire, the Deistic Philosophe as Beyond Toleration**

The enlightenment era rightly assumes a central place within Rainer Forst's *Toleration in Conflict: Past and Future*. This is the period in European ideas wherein "the demand for toleration and the struggle against religious paternalism ... [were] central features ..."<sup>52</sup> Forst does not seem to be aware of Israel's trilogy. He treats Diderot (for Israel, a leader of the radical atheists) as a deist, and the *Encyclopédie* as a "moderate" document on questions concerning toleration, in stark contrast to Israel's assessment of this landmark text.<sup>53</sup>

What brings Forst into clear proximity with several of Israel's key contentions is that he considers the high French enlightenment, including Israel's moderates, as making "no fundamentally new arguments for toleration".<sup>54</sup> In Israel's *Enlightenment Contested* in particular, a Pierre Bayle read as less a sceptic than a rationalist emerges as second only to Spinoza in understanding the bases of the radical enlightenment.<sup>55</sup> In Forst's history of the development of arguments for toleration in *Toleration in Conflict*, Bayle is comparably positioned as the decisive, founding figure of the enlightenment's contributions to the development of toleration. According to Forst, John Locke's better-known defence of a limited toleration in the first *Letter on Toleration* (which is not to be extended to untrustworthy atheists and papists) remained decisively within the Christian orbit. It turns upon a Protestant defence of the uncoercable freedom of conscience.<sup>56</sup> It was only in response to Proast's criticisms that the British philosopher was drawn towards a potentially more universal, more secular stance in his lesser-known third *Letter*.

By contrast, Bayle is the first modern thinker "in whom the spirit of the Enlightenment finds a clear and differentiated expression".<sup>57</sup> This, both in his "critique of religious dogmatism" and, more decisively, "in the emphasis on a "natural" morality" cut loose from all revealed-religious moorings.<sup>58</sup> As in Israel, the broadly whiggish shaping of Forst's narrative concerning toleration is readily apparent. Bayle in the *Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet* argues that a society of virtuous atheists is possible. For what motivates people to do good and avoid evil are principally natural motives (like love of prestige, fear of disapproval) shared by believers and nonbelievers alike.<sup>59</sup> More than this, Bayle argues

that God has granted to both atheists and faithful alike the capacity for natural reason, a position with which the later *Philosophical Commentary On These Words of the Gospel: "Compel Them to Come In"* effectively begins.<sup>60</sup> With this postulation, Forst contends, Bayle opened up a positive secular basis to justify universal toleration that anticipates Kant, Mill, and later modern understandings:

Bayle's thought renders entirely intelligible what became increasingly clear in the course of the discourse concerning toleration, namely that the conflicts over toleration provide the context for the development of an *autonomous conception of morality* which rests on a free-standing faculty of practical reason to act in a justifiable way—i.e. on the basis of justifications independent of particular religious views.<sup>61</sup>

Forst's Voltaire, like Israel's, is accordingly set up from the start in a retrospective comparison with a great predecessor, albeit that in this case it is the author of the *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique*, rather than Spinoza. Forst's Voltaire also starts off at some disadvantage, given that Bayle has already established what Forst perceives to be the unsurpassable fundamentals of secular, universal toleration. Indeed, in a striking phrase, Forst concludes his section on Voltaire by maintaining that in the latter's work we see nothing less than "the return at the heart of the Enlightenment of the fatal connection between morality and religion which Bayle combated ...".<sup>62</sup> As in Israel's story of two enlightenments, that is, Voltaire is for Forst a roadblock on the path towards the kinds of universal toleration presently enshrined in liberal democratic societies.

Forst passingly credits the power of Voltaire's interventions in favour of toleration, both before and after the judicial execution of Jean Calas in 1762.<sup>63</sup> Voltaire, he notes, brought the full force of his "caustic derision" to bear upon the "root of intolerance" as he saw it, in the "blind superstition, idiotic conceit and ... lust for power" of finite human beings.<sup>64</sup> This is the famous "*l'infâme*" whose destruction the would-be modern Cato famously ended all of his correspondence by enjoining, from 1759 onwards. As Forst perceives, Voltaire was "convinced that fanatical intolerance is an illness rooted in a perverted conception of religion and that it can be healed only by enlightenment, the purification of reason".<sup>65</sup>

So far, then, the parallels between the patriarch of Ferney and his predecessor from Rotterdam are clear. Yet for Forst, the quite different truth emerges when we consider Voltaire's more ambivalent stance on "Bayle's paradox": the latter's idea that a society of virtuous atheists would be possible.<sup>66</sup> Forst's Voltaire shares "Locke's fear" of any such proposition. As his decisive proof text, where Israel reaches for Voltaire's letters and notebooks, Forst cites "Athée, Athéisme" in the *Dictionnaire Philosophique* of 1764. Herein, despite his ongoing campaign against fanaticism, the patriarch contends that the sanctity of oaths being necessary to ensure, "it is much more useful to have a religion (even a bad one) than to have no religion at all".<sup>67</sup>

For Forst, such a "politic" reflection in Voltaire reflects a larger, decisive truth. In contrast to Bayle, the patriarch's opposition to religious intolerance is not based upon a wholly secular conception of reason and morality. What Voltaire instead took aim at in his fight against *l'infâme* was the replacement of revealed, supernatural or "superstitious" religion with a *new*, "pure" or "absolute" religion (adjectives Forst's).<sup>68</sup> Forst intends here Voltaire's deism, whose Newtonian bases have also seen Israel critiquing in Part 1; or, as the patriarch sometimes described it after 1760, his "theism". The



minimal creed of this new religion, repeated by Voltaire in different variants throughout his life, is “we condemn atheism, we revile barbarous superstition, we love God and the human race”<sup>69</sup> or more pithily, “adore God, be just, and love your country”.<sup>70</sup> Voltaire was convinced that such a minimal theism – the belief in one Supreme Being who created and ordered the world, who underwrites the morality of the golden and silver rules – was the first and most universal, indeed “the only sacred” religion<sup>71</sup> out of which other, revealed religions grew, increasingly forgetting and corrupting its moral core. Believers in particular religions subordinate morality to obedience to competing, suprarational claims to exclusive revelation. These claims in turn became the bases for interminable theological disputes, as well as myriad, bloody sectarian conflicts.

However, in what he positions as a contrast to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s contemporary advocacy of a natural religion, Forst tells us that Voltaire’s deism “is not a kind of universal-moral, undogmatic core religion which is supposed to be combined with the other, positive religions”.<sup>72</sup> Rather, Voltaire’s deism presents itself as “the *only rational alternative* to them”.<sup>73</sup> And it is precisely with this Deistic position – differently problematic also for Israel, as we have seen – that the problems with Voltaire’s contribution to the modern discourse of toleration begin, on Forst’s reckoning. At base, Forst claims, Voltaire’s deep commitment to championing a universally valid religion within the bounds of reason<sup>74</sup> means that what looks like a campaign for toleration is not a campaign for *toleration* at all. It is a programme aiming at *overcoming intolerance*, within which toleration of competing particular religions can only be “a second-best solution compared to achieving a unified rational religion”.<sup>75</sup> And at this point, as in what Forst will call the “esteem” conception of toleration<sup>76</sup>—and also, somewhat paradoxically, as in D’Holbach’s calls for a universal atheism which Voltaire reviled<sup>77</sup>—“overcoming intolerance would also amount to an *abolition of toleration*”.<sup>78</sup> Once everyone agrees, there is no need to tolerate differences of opinion which are now counterfactual. However intransigent Voltaire seems sometimes to have thought superstition to be, that is, Forst contends that he remained convinced that in the course of enlightenment, revealed religion could be historically overcome as “not merely useless, but dangerous”.<sup>79</sup> The Voltairean *telos* in which this would take place is the final abolition of religious differences in a newly Catholic, but not supra-rational faith: “in this way, the thought which launched a crusade against “one king, one law, one faith” itself established the principle “one reason, one morality, one religion (or one God)”.<sup>80</sup>

So we have at this point come full circle. With everyone converted to the theism of the sage of Ferney, sectarian strife will have been overcome: “from the standpoint of the “true religion”, these would indeed be primarily the errors and failings of others which one must first tolerate while working to overcome them”.<sup>81</sup> Although Forst does not say this, one could easily imagine scenarios wherein a putative Voltairean of this stripe might well feel licensed to “compel others to come into” the new deism. In short, just as Israel’s philosophical criticism of Voltaire centres upon his deism, so Forst also feels that Voltaire has disastrously mis-stepped in inferring from a reasonable critique of revealed religion to a “religion of reason”: what he calls “the problematic, though morally motivated, humanist idea of an undogmatic universal religion that unites all human beings and puts an end to religious strife”.<sup>82</sup> To subscribe to such a universal religion, Forst claims, is to instate one more faith among others, rather than to mediate between them. Bayle’s “agnosticism of reason”, Forst concludes, is therefore “one

crucial insight ahead” of Voltaire’s position. This is an assessment of the latter whose proximity to that of Israel is now evident.<sup>83</sup>

## 2: ... Long Live the Patriarch

Let us now turn from exegesis towards critique, and ask whether Israel’s and Forst’s compromised, moderate, unoriginal or even reactionary Voltaires can stand the test of critical scrutiny.

### *i. Of deism, systematising, and morality*

Thomas Besterman is the best-known scholar to question the sincerity of Voltaire’s everywhere-avowed deism or theism.<sup>84</sup> René Pomeau heads those who maintain the more widespread and more simply defensible attribution of deism to Voltaire.<sup>85</sup> Israel and Forst both adhere to the latter perspective, as we have seen (1). They take seriously the patriarch’s protestations of a belief in one God, and his opposition to atheism, perceived to be a mirror to dogmatic fanaticism: “O God, keep from us the error of atheism which denies thy existence, and deliver us from the superstition that outrages thy existence and fills ours with horror”.<sup>86</sup> Here as elsewhere, however, Voltaire’s prolific output, multiple devices, masks, media, voices and styles mean that a good deal of reasonable doubt remains amongst Voltaire scholars.

Israel’s claim that Voltaire was a systematising philosopher, a kind of deistic, dualistic anti-Spinoza, is nevertheless highly disputable. Voltaire’s hostility to systematic philosophy, grounded in his sceptical, post-Montaignean and post-Lockean sense of the limitations of human understanding are amongst the most manifest, repetitive components of Voltaire’s *oeuvre*.<sup>87</sup> Statements attesting to his sense of being not a systematic metaphysician or theologian, but an “ignorant philosopher” could be multiplied *ad infinitum*.<sup>88</sup> As Israel argues, Voltaire in the *Philosophical Letters* wished to bring Lockean epistemology and Newtonian natural philosophy to Catholic, Cartesian France. But what Voltaire admired most in Locke was the epistemic humility that saw Locke maintain that he could not say whether God might or might not be able to endow matter with thought.<sup>89</sup> What he admired in Newton, as much as the staggering achievements of the *Principia*, was the latter’s humble willingness to suspend judgment as to the essence of gravity: *hypotheses non fingo*.<sup>90</sup> It is true that, in his letters to Tournemine and in the opening chapter of the *Métaphysique de Newton*, Voltaire advises his readers that, if it is a matter of arguing against an atheist, one should assert the externality of movement to matter, before returning to the argument from design whose probable truth there is no evidence that Voltaire ever disputed.

Yet, we need to measure the imputed anti-Spinozist “dogmatism” of this theological opinion, and the fundamental importance Israel assigns to it, against the patriarch’s much more frequent denials that we can know anything about the essence of matter, or what it might be capable of. As his philosopher answers the dogmatic “*énergumène*”’s inquiry as to the nature of “*matière*” in the *Questions sur l’Encyclopédie*: “I scarcely know. I believe it to have extent, solidity, resistance, gravity, divisibility, mobility. [But] God may have given it a thousand other qualities of which I am ignorant”.<sup>91</sup> Again, in “body [*corps*]” in the *Dictionnaire philosophique*, Voltaire concludes that when it

comes to what the essence of a material body might be, “we all resemble the greater part of the Parisian ladies who live well without knowing what is put in their *ragoûts*; just so do we enjoy bodies without knowing of what they are composed”.<sup>92</sup> In fact, *contra* Israel, the same sense of epistemic finitude prevents Voltaire from making any dogmatic claim concerning the nature of the soul and repeatedly professing his *agnosticism* concerning whether it might be immortal or not, from the *Treatise on Metaphysics* onwards.

Voltaire’s deism, which we have seen both Forst and Israel criticise, is also strongly marked by this post-sceptical, post-Lockean stance concerning the limits of human understanding. This Socratic stance indeed forms the principal point upon which his opposition to religious fanaticism turns; alongside his defences of religious pluralism and toleration. As the opening chapter of the *Métaphysique de Newton*, upon which Israel places great weight, concludes (but a hundred like avowals could be adduced): “Philosophy shows us well that there is a God; but it is powerless to teach us what he is, what he does, how and why he does it. It seems to me that it would be necessary to be [God] himself to *know* him”.<sup>93</sup>

In “God, Gods” in the *L’Opinion en alphabet*, we read Voltaire’s effective summation of his position from *The Treatise on Metaphysics* of two decades years before. Of note again is the tell-tale, tentative vocabulary:

We have no adequate idea of the Divinity; we creep on from conjecture to conjecture, from likelihood to probability. We have very few certainties ... Every work which shows us means and an end, announces a workman ... Here is a probability approaching the greatest certainty. But is this supreme artificer infinite? Is he everywhere? Is he in one place? How are we, with our feeble intelligence and limited knowledge, to answer these questions?<sup>94</sup>

Where does such a non-dogmatic Deism leave Israel’s and Forst’s claims positioning Voltaire as a *philosophe* regressively *opposed* to the secularising tendency to divide morality, and hence any conception of toleration, from theology? To Forst’s credit, he equivocates on this issue, albeit arguably projecting onto Voltaire his own ambivalence. On one hand, Forst acknowledges that the key theistic principle in Voltaire points already to a separation of morality from particular creeds and dogmas. As Voltaire underlines: “morality is the same amongst men, therefore it comes from God, worship is various, therefore it comes from men”.<sup>95</sup> Forst acknowledges how, despite the commitment to the supersession of religious plurality (and hence tolerance itself) he attributes to the patriarch, the vital entry “Toleration” in the *Pocket Philosophical Dictionary* begins by announcing that tolerance is the “prerogative of humanity”.<sup>96</sup> He even calls Voltaire’s pure religion a “tolerant religion, or rather *the religion of tolerance* ... a religion which unites men “rather than which divides ... the religion which says that the only law consists in loving God and one’s neighbour ...”<sup>97</sup>

On the other hand, Forst baulks at Voltaire’s frequent language that it is finally God who delivers to human beings those natural data (conscience, compassion, a sense of justice, reason, and self-love) upon which he, no less than Bayle, believes that the universal, non-sectarian morality is based.<sup>98</sup> The “first springs” of morality come from “God’s hand”, Voltaire sometimes maintains.<sup>99</sup> Yet Bayle for his part claims, just like Voltaire, that the “natural light” of reason is God-given. This includes in the decisive opening chapter of the *Philosophical Commentary*.<sup>100</sup> Often, however, Voltaire will simply write “nature” in comparable contexts.<sup>101</sup> Voltaire’s natural law may, but need not, suppose

a legislating Deity: “I call natural laws those laws that nature points to in all ages to all men for the maintenance of that sense of justice which nature, whatever one might say, has engraved in our hearts”.<sup>102</sup> Differing customs are “mere laws of convention, arbitrary usages, transient modes”. By contrast:

what is essential remains ever the same. Point out to me any country where it would be deemed respectable or decent to plunder me of the fruits of my labour, to break a solemn promise, to tell an injurious lie, to slander, murder or poison, to be ungrateful to a benefactor, or to beat a father or mother presenting food to you?<sup>103</sup>

For Israel and Forst, in what is arguably an historically contestable assumption, any mention of a Deity evokes the spectre of divisive sectarianism and must be seen as intrinsically reactionary (see ii. below). In this anxiety, they miss that, for Voltaire, his unknowable God stands sanction only over justice and *bienfaisance*.<sup>104</sup> As such, moral actions by people of any confession are the only positive forms of the “worship of God” which Voltaire will celebrate. Contra Forst, such just or benevolent action does not require that one converts to Voltaire’s theism. Voltaire instead claims a superiority for any belief, worship even “superstition” that promotes “justice and humanity”: what we might term, with Forst in view, a pre-Kantian primacy of practical reason.<sup>105</sup> As “The Homily on Superstition” asks:

What is a theological opinion? It is an idea that may be true or false; but morality has no interest in it. It is clear that you should be virtuous, whether the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father by inspiration, or from the Father and the Son. It is not less clear that you will never understand any proposition of this nature.<sup>106</sup>

The citizen whose discourse closes the discussion between the Moslem, Jew, Christian and atheist in *Il faut prendre un parti* of 1772 will likewise announce:

I am a citizen, and therefore the friend of all these gentlemen. I will not dispute with any of them. I wish only to see them all united in the design of aiding and loving each other, in making each other happy, in so far as men of such different opinions can love each other, and contribute to each other’s happiness, which is as difficult as it is necessary.<sup>107</sup>

Voltaire’s decoupling of theological belief from moral conduct, contra Israel and Forst – and with no need (per Israel) for adopting the pan- or atheistic metaphysics of Spinoza – is nowhere clearer than in the oneiric close to Voltaire’s entry “Dogmes” in the *Questions sur l’Encyclopédie*. In the philosopher’s heaven this entry imagines, all those who profess “I believe” but have behaved badly do not find favour by the Supreme Being. Only those gain favour only who, with “Confucius, Solon, Socrates, Titus, the Antonines, Epictetus, Charron, de Thou, Chancellor de L’Hôpital”, both “taught and practised the virtues that God requires”.<sup>108</sup> Suprarational beliefs are irrelevant to ethical worth. The Supreme Being Himself delivers the closing word:

By the Eternal Creator, Preserver, Rewarder, Revenger, Forgiver, etc., be it known to all the inhabitants of the hundred thousand millions of millions of worlds that it hath pleased us to form, that we never judge any sinners in reference to their own shallow ideas, but only as to their actions. Such is our Justice.<sup>109</sup>

This reframing of Voltaire’s deism challenges Israel’s and Forst’s assessments of Voltaire concerning toleration, atheism, and as such, Spinoza and Bayle.

## ii. Of Toleration and Atheism

When Forst gives his account of the arguments for toleration in Voltaire's 1763 *Traité* on the subject, he begins with what he terms the philosophical (as against Voltaire's "traditional", Christian, political, and economic) arguments. As if this could be insignificant in an account which would cast the patriarch "behind" Bayle when it comes to tolerance, Forst then lays out clearly Voltaire's first two philosophical arguments:

First, the insight into the metaphysical limitation of reason [as per i.] according to which "it would be the height of folly to bring all men to think alike on matters of metaphysics" – and correspondingly the recognition of the futility of endless and acrimonious dispute over dogmatic truth. Connected with this, second, is the insight into the priority of the morality of reciprocity, the Golden Rule, which Voltaire describes as a "natural law" and according to which the coercion of conscience cannot be reciprocally justified ...<sup>110</sup>

The issue is that these two claims are *exactly* what Forst has earlier described as shaping Bayle's "normative-epistemological" justification for a toleration that could be extended even to atheists.<sup>111</sup> If toleration is "the prerogative of humanity", for Voltaire in the *Dictionnaire*, it is "because we are all so full of weaknesses and errors".<sup>112</sup> This is the epistemological justification: for such a finite creature can never be rightly certain of his metaphysical convictions. As Voltaire continues, "let us mutually pardon each other our follies – it is the first law of nature".<sup>113</sup> This is the normative requirement of reciprocity, as in Bayle. Forst is then simply incorrect to gloss such Voltairean claims as pointing for the patriarch to a regrettable "fate" that he supposedly imagines we can overcome on the march to universal Theism.<sup>114</sup> By pardoning the Other for their follies, Voltaire means just what Bayle did: we are thereby respecting their dignity, independently of their creed. This, at the same time as we acknowledge how we too are prone to trespasses that in due course will reciprocally require their forbearance. Contra Forst, epistemic finitude and ethical fallibility are not things which Voltaire envisages human beings can optatively transcend.

But what then of Voltaire's embrace of "Locke's fear", and as such, what both Israel and Forst imply is Voltaire's *limitation* of tolerance so as to exclude those atheists who, according to Forst, "must not be tolerated" for the patriarch?<sup>115</sup> Contra Besterman, it seems beyond reasonable doubt that Voltaire was no atheist; as Ages has commented, the "thousands of statements" to this effect are too numerous to sanction doubt.<sup>116</sup> Israel is right but hardly unprecedented to point out the extent to which, in his last decades, the patriarch fought a war on two fronts, one of which was against the atheistic radicals.<sup>117</sup> Voltaire opposed the open atheism of D'Holbach and Diderot, both theoretically and politically. Theoretically, he believed that the argument from design was, all things being equal, more probable an explanation of the facts of cosmic order and human intelligence than an explanation from atoms, void, motion, time and chance.<sup>118</sup> Whether he was therefore, per Israel, primarily "battling Spinoza" at this point is much more contentious, as Israel himself is forced to acknowledge.<sup>119</sup> Voltaire throughout his life defended Spinoza's "pure *moeurs*", despite his metaphysics<sup>120</sup>, and scholars such as Wade, Vernière, Ages and Curtis note how Voltaire late in his life read Spinoza as a theist, using him in his campaign against materialist atheism.<sup>121</sup> Voltaire wrote in 1776 that in his view, Spinoza "was a philosopher of whom everyone spoke but no one actually read, and who even if he undeniably had a huge reputation, had no discernible impact".<sup>122</sup>

Voltaire argued against atheism, which he called “the vice of a few intelligent persons”, as superstition is the vice of the many.<sup>123</sup> Not without his usual irony, he expresses grave doubts about whether atheism in princes or servants is optimally conducive to the promotion of virtue. He even joked that, if Bayle had had fifty servants, he would have preached to them a just and punitive God.<sup>124</sup> But intellectual and political disagreement with atheism is not tantamount to proscribing atheist opinions or censoring their expression. Voltaire never did this. He talks of “universal toleration” in the penultimate chapter of the *Treatise on Toleration*, preceding the closing prayer.<sup>125</sup> In *Il faut prendre un parti*, atheism is one of many sects about whose moral conduct the Deist, as a citizen, may be concerned (as he is with theistic sectarians), but with whose metaphysics s/he will peaceably beg to differ.<sup>126</sup> It is also true that Voltaire felt that it was vital, politically, to the cause of the enlightenment to combat the potentially damaging idea that all *philosophes* were radical atheists like D’Holbach.<sup>127</sup> But Voltaire frames his critique of his radical rival, D’Holbach, in the *Dictionnaire philosophique* in “God-Gods” §IV by describing the amiable baron as “often luminous (*clarté*), sometimes eloquent; although he may be charged, like all the rest, with repetition, declamation, and self-contradiction. But for profundity, he is very often to be distrusted both in physics and in morals”.<sup>128</sup> These are the words of a philosophical critic who believes “the interests of humanity are at stake”<sup>129</sup>, not a political censor.

As for whether a society of atheists is possible, Voltaire does equivocate in ways that neither Israel nor Forst registers. Genevieve Lloyd subtly draws these out in *Enlightenment Shadows*.<sup>130</sup> The Senate of Rome in the time of Caesar and Cicero was a society of atheists, Voltaire comments in “Atheism”, and the philosophical sects have also been such collectives.<sup>131</sup> In the entry, “Athée” in *L’Opinion en alphabet*, meanwhile, Voltaire directly sides with the author of the *Pensées diverses*:

They who have maintained that a society of atheists may exist have then been right, for it is laws that form society, and these atheists, being moreover philosophers, may lead a very wise and happy life under the shade of those laws. They will certainly live in society more easily than superstitious fanatics. People one town with Epicureans such as Simonides, Protagoras, Des Barreaux, Spinoza; and another with Jansenists and Molinists. In which do you think there will be the most quarrels and tumults?<sup>132</sup>

In sum, it is true that Voltaire objects to atheism, theoretically and prudentially. But it is a central tenet of Forst’s conception of toleration that it include such an “objection component”, in between complete consensus and disagreement.<sup>133</sup> Voltaire never calls for the exile or persecution of those with whom he disagrees. He greatly admires many atheists, led by Israel’s Spinoza.

### **iii. Voltaire’s Rhetorical Radicalism**

There are therefore good reasons to question Israel’s and Forst’s representations of Voltaire’s deism, and his stances on morality, toleration, and atheism. It remains to consider Israel’s charges concerning Voltaire as a reactionary political agent, which align with his own and Forst’s assessment of Voltaire’s putatively backwards steps concerning toleration, relative to Bayle, and his “unoriginality” when it comes to arguments for toleration.<sup>134</sup> If these readings are right, Voltaire’s widespread marginalisation from understandings of the genesis of modern, critical thought would be vindicated. We want to propose two contentions to challenge these readings here; the first concerning

Israel's claims concerning Voltaire as *politique*; and the second, more deeply significant, concerning what we will term Israel's and Forst's shared "arguments-only" approach to reading the texts of the *philosophes*, which blind them to what we will call the "rhetorico-political dimension" of Voltaire's writings as themselves a mode of political action of greatest continuing importance today.

### ***Voltaire, a Moderate Exile?***

Israel's critique of Voltaire as *politique*, we saw, turn around Voltaire's so-called "court strategy".<sup>135</sup> Voltaire is arraigned for trying throughout his career to win a consensus amongst the clerical and noble elites about the consistency between his Lockean-Newtonian philosophy with the teachings of the established Churches, thereby reassuring the powers-that-be that philosophers were not seditious men.<sup>136</sup> Israel acknowledges that Voltaire was never primarily *un homme de pouvoir*. His aim, at the times of his closest diplomatic relations with established powers, was always more than simply political; to win "an impregnable standpoint from which to launch a campaign for more toleration and reduced censorship and finally to reduce ecclesiastical influence in France".<sup>137</sup> Our first question here concerns what standards we can be using to contend that this was *not* a radical position in the 1730s through 1760s, and whether any such assessment is problematically anachronistic.

In contrast to Israel, any adequate assessment of Voltaire's uneven political career can arguably not avoid the record of Voltaire's continually falling foul of the same authorities Israel arraigns him for courting.<sup>138</sup> The (failed) courtesan and would-be Platonic adviser of Frederick was in 1717 imprisoned in the Bastille, courtesy of a *lettre de cachet*, and then exiled to England in 1726. By May 1734, the *succès de scandale* of the *Lettres philosophiques* forced Voltaire to flee Paris, pre-warned of the further *lettre de cachet* that had been issued for his arrest. In June, all copies of the "moderate" text were seized and publically burned by the hangman. In 1735, he would again flee Paris, after the clandestine circulation of passages from his subversive poem, *La Pucelle*, caused another stir. In 1736, the Epicurean poem *Le Mondain* forced Voltaire to flee Cirey, in disguise, to Brussels.<sup>139</sup> In 1738, the *Eléments de la philosophie de Newton*, which Israel positions as a highly conformist text, were refused the royal privilege (being printed finally in 1741). In 1742, Mahomet was withdrawn from performance after four nights by Cardinal Fleury for suspected irreligion.<sup>140</sup> And, whilst from 1745-1747, Voltaire and Madame du Châtelet enjoyed places at Versailles, in 1748 *Le voix du sage et du peuple* boldly attacked clerical and monastic privilege, and exemption from taxation, in France.<sup>141</sup> In December 1752, the philosophe's *Diatribes of Dr. Akakia* satirising Maupertuis was publically burnt by the Prussian authorities, precipitating Voltaire's fall from Frederick's good graces, and exile from this exile.<sup>142</sup> In 1754, the *Essai sur les mœurs*' assessment of Christendom meant that the itinerant *philosophe* was denied re-entry into Paris by order of the King, with Jesuit support.<sup>143</sup> The patriarch of Ferney, as he thus became, would not return to Paris until the year of his death. Given such a record, we have to wonder how much more radical Voltaire could have been, without drinking the hemlock.

Probably the most striking marker of the degree of historical revision at issue in Israel's polemical assessment of Voltaire comes in *Democratic Enlightenment*, on the years 1750-1789. Israel is largely silent about Voltaire's extraordinary campaign of clandestine publications to *écrasez l'infâme* from 1759-1769. Instead, in Israel's account of the rush of anti-clerical radicalism of the period, Voltaire is positioned as a recalcitrant

element reigning the radicals in.<sup>144</sup> The *Questions of Zapata, Epistle to the Romans, Homilies on Superstition, the Old and New Testament* and the dozen other radical anticlerical pamphlets of the 1760s<sup>145</sup>—all published clandestinely, under pseudonyms<sup>146</sup>, and some attracting punishments for publishers of up to nine years' in the galleys – are left unconsidered.<sup>147</sup> The *Treatise of Toleration* of 1763 is mentioned just four times, and the Calas case once in Israel's trilogy, without any developed treatments.<sup>148</sup> Given Israel's purview, we are hence lost when confronted with texts like Voltaire's exhortation to Diderot and the radicals on *l'infâme* as late as January 1958, which show that he recognised no fundamental divide between them:

Go on, brave Diderot, intrepid d'Alembert; . . . fall upon the knaves, destroy their empty declamations, their miserable sophistries, their historical lies, their contradictions and absurdities beyond number; do not let men of intelligence become the slaves of those who have none. The new generation will owe to you both reason and liberty.<sup>149</sup>

### ***If to Write is to Act, What Then? Voltaire's Uniqueness***

Our concluding argument is one which points to perhaps the deepest level of our criticism of Israel's and Forst's Voltaires. It concerns the manner in which Israel and Forst alike read Voltaire's texts, as examined in Part 1 above. This manner, we maintain, is shaped by their respective, convergent intentions to reclaim a radical enlightenment and defence of secular toleration on the basis of philosophical premises (in Israel's case, Spinozist, in Forst's Kantian) foreign to Voltaire himself. Our claim is that such approaches bring an inaccurate metaphilosophical understanding to Voltaire, as a *philosophe* who was also very much, or even first of all, a *litterateur*.<sup>150</sup>

What is most telling about Israel and Forst here is how they each choose almost exclusively to address the philosophical texts of the *lumières* in general, and Voltaire in particular. In this way, they leave aside almost wholly the extraordinary volume of literary writings of these decades, including (not least) by Voltaire. It is as if these literary texts, many staging philosophical subjects very directly, could not be significant to the programme of enlightenment, which principally included the *spreading* of the lights of knowledge to new publics. Israel's methodological statements explicate his ambition to counterbalance anti-intellectualist, social-contextualist accounts of the enlightenment, which he sees as destroying any sense of the importance and radicality of the ideas of the *philosophes*.<sup>151</sup> However, with this in view, La Vopa observes:

As [Israel] practices it, a controversialist approach abstracts from the texts the broadly philosophical propositions that he sees configuring into fields of public argumentation. We learn little else about how meanings – not only philosophical, but also social and cultural – were constituted in them, or about tensions, ironies, and shifts of perspective audible beneath the argumentative surface.<sup>152</sup>

Given such a singled-minded manner of reading, it can make sense to call “unoriginal” the author of *Candide, Zaire, Zadig, Ingenu, Micromégas, Mahomet, Le monde comme il va, the Henriade* and myriad other philosophically-informed works of literature, many written under assumed names. But this is surely less a paradoxical than a myopic assessment. What it loses sight of is that Voltaire's originality, as the poet-*philosophe* avowed, as an “ignorant philosopher”, did not consist in discovering any new system of philosophy.<sup>153</sup> Above all, it involved inventing new ways of staging philosophical ideas so as



to make them vivid, pressing, comical, disturbing, outrageous, moving and urgent for wider audiences by staging them in satires, dialogues, *aperçus*, epics, tragedies, comedies, *contes*, sermons, *Dictionnaire* entries, the list goes on.<sup>154</sup> After 1755, Voltaire's originality increasingly involved applying philosophical ideas to concrete political and juridical cases, led by those of Jean Calas and the Chevalier de la Barre. Above all, it turned around an impassioned commitment, through the use of pseudonymy, wit and clandestine means, to publicise as widely as possible considerations of these specific events and issues, despite royal and clerical censorship. Voltaire's aim was to reach and win over as many readers as possible, outside of the more or less closed circles of the intellectual elites, to the causes of toleration and enlightenment as he perceived them.<sup>155</sup>

In short, if the French enlightenment was more than a set of intellectual debates, but also a social movement (or movements) aiming at sociopolitical change, as Forst or Israel would agree, then the art of using literary forms to proselytise anti-clerical, pro-toleration contents was at its heart. Recovering a sense of the enlightenment, and its significances, will not only involve recovering the arguments for toleration and cultural change the *philosophes* made. It will involve recovering their sense of philosophy as a means to instrument social change, by reaching and moving audiences beyond the clergy.

Yet, neither Israel nor Forst consider this dimension of the intellectual politics and metaphysical persona of Voltaire. As we have seen, Israel instead contends that the radicals became the dominant intellectual faction in France in the decisive decades preceding the French revolution, despite Voltaire's and the moderates' best efforts at stabilising the "faltering mainstream".<sup>156</sup> Forst comparably rates Voltaire's deism as a step backwards towards a political theology with real potential to become intolerant.<sup>157</sup> However, the moment we pass from considering the *philosophes'* texts as the containers for arguments, as it were, seeing them also as rhetorico-political deeds, and assess the evidence surrounding *who was being read by whom* in these years, the picture is very different. However derivative Voltaire's metaphysics, and however contentious his deism, he was still by far the most-widely read *lumière* in this period. As Chisick has documented, indeed:

while 181 libraries had Voltaire's *Henriade*, 173 his *Oeuvres*, and 161 his *Century of Louis XIV*, ... Diderot's *Thoughts on the Interpretation of Nature* was found in only five libraries, his *Letter on the Deaf and Dumb* in six, and his *Letter on the Blind* in seven ... [whereas] Diderot's publications occupy 25 columns [in the catalog of the *Bibliothèque Nationale*] ... Voltaire's publications [fill] a staggering 1,824 columns ... The same proportions are more or less maintained in the periodicals ... Diderot or his works are mentioned 17 times in the *Journal de Trévoux*, 27 times in the *Année Littéraire*, and curiously ... only 11 times in the *Journal Encyclopédique*. The corresponding figures for Montesquieu are 32, 44, and 25; for Rousseau 32, 150, and 95; and for Voltaire 94, 427, and 367.<sup>158</sup>

Voltaire certainly continued to try to win over the highest secular and clerical authorities to his cause, as Israel observes. He continued to court Frederick in Prussia and to support the *thèse royale* in France.<sup>159</sup> His metaphysical opinions remained largely and avowedly derivative, even Socratically "ignorant", as Diderot lamented<sup>160</sup>, although he tellingly changed his mind in later years (although, arguably, in a clearly Spinozist direction) on free will, as Israel quietly acknowledges.<sup>161</sup> What neither Israel nor Forst register, due to their hermeneutic assumptions about how to read eighteenth century texts, is that the patriarch also was radicalised in his way after the controversies and troubles of the

1750s.<sup>162</sup> But what the patriarch revolutionised was not solely his intellectual system, but his publishing programme and rhetorical strategies. His political failures with *les grands* engendered in him a realisation of the limits of appealing for major reform to those in positions of power. As Voltaire writes in the *Homily on Superstition* of 1767:

Find me a man with an income of a hundred thousand pounds a year, and with four or five hundred thousand subjects throughout Europe, who cost him nothing, besides his soldiers, and tell him that Christ, of whom he is the vicar and imitator, lived in poverty and humility. He will reply that the times are changed ... What can one do, then? Appeal to the people, and, brutalised as they are, they listen and half open their eyes. They partly throw off the most humiliating yoke that has ever been borne. They rid themselves of some of their errors, and win back a part of their freedom, that appurtenage or essence of man of which they had been robbed. We cannot cure the powerful of ambition, but we can cure the people of superstition. We can, by speech and pen, make men more enlightened and better.<sup>163</sup>

Ideas have a relative autonomy, and one invaluable thing Israel's and Forst's monumental studies arguably do is bring renewed attention to the foundational philosophical arguments and debates which shaped the enlightenment.<sup>164</sup> The value of their contributions here is immense, after decades of ill-informed generalisations about this period in many quarters wherein "the enlightenment" has become almost parodically misrepresented.<sup>165</sup> Yet radical new ideas, even those we today judge to be on the right side of history, can lie fallow and unread, if they do not find or speak to an audience capable of being moved by and enacting them. Philosophical ideas, especially those published in the geometrical form of a Spinoza<sup>166</sup> or the convoluted footnotes of a Bayle, tend to circulate only amongst tiny groups of highly-educated elites (although Bayle was widely published in the eighteenth century).<sup>167</sup> Even if their content is radical and egalitarian, their form will be (as it were) aristocratic or oligarchic, without that "diffusion and outreach" Israel himself recognises as vital in understanding the enlightenment as a movement for socio-political change.<sup>168</sup> As Voltaire writes in *Le philosophe ignorant*, the final words of his chapter on Spinoza: "One eloquent man, skilled and accomplished (*accrédité*), can do much for men; a hundred philosophers can do nothing if they are only philosophers".<sup>169</sup>

An intellectual radicalism that would become politically efficacious in any meaningfully democratising, secularising sense, of the kind sympathetic to both Israel and Forst, must attend to issues of the transmission, as well as discovery of ideas – in classical rhetorical categories, *dispositio* and *elocutio*, as well as *inventio*. This is ironically why Voltaire argued that the *Encyclopédie* could never be politically effective, as against the briefer texts he increasingly chose to pen:

[n]ever have 12 volumes in folio made a revolution [*viz.* the *Encyclopedia*]; it is the little portable books for 30 sous a piece which are to be feared. If the gospel costs 1200 sesterces, the Christian religion would never have been established.<sup>170</sup>

If we adopt such an expanded rhetorico-political as well as philosophical purview, contra Israel and Forst, Voltaire's works proselytising for toleration, deism, and universal morality show up as far from moderate or reactionary. Neither does the claim hold up that they were unoriginal and, thereby, putatively insignificant. Voltaire's deism and hesitations about atheists notwithstanding, the patriarch was in this purview if not the most intellectually radical *lumière*, then by far the most successful philosophical advocate for the extension of universal toleration, and opposition to fanaticism.<sup>171</sup> Without his philosophical and

literary efforts, it is possible to say, Israel's more intellectually radical enlighteners may never have found their audiences, and Forst's Bayle's arguments for toleration would not have become so widely known in the decades preceding the French revolution.

## Conclusion

To conclude: we must fully credit the extraordinary ambition, erudition, and vision of Jonathan Israel, and the great importance of the work of Rainer Forst. In a period wherein "the enlightenment" is subject to continuing blackening at the hands of often scantily-informed critics, their copiously-documented recoveries of the intellectual significance of the French and European enlightenments in shaping the liberal-democratic societies have great importance. But, in this fraught period wherein, in addition to the rise of anti-enlightenment forces on both New Left and Right, the gap between the progressive ideas which circulate amongst scholars and the wider public grows – and the latter becomes more exposed to widely-circulated forms of ill-informed, irrational conspiracism of the kind that saw Jean Calas killed in 1762 – a recovery of the enlightenment must involve a recognition of its singularity as a period in which the most advanced philosophical ideas of the time were given literary and dramatic forms that enabled them to disseminate and to (exactly) enlighten wider publics. Voltaire may not have been, theoretically, a Spinoza or a Kant, as Israel or Forst contend. But that is because he was Voltaire. And it was because he was Voltaire, which is to say, a poet, critic, dramatist, publicist, satirist, and *raconteur*, that he was able to inspire such fear in the hearts of his opponents, and inspire so many allies in his great ambition of creating more tolerant, open, and critical societies.

## Notes

1. Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity* 1650–1750; *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity and the Emancipation of Man 1670–1752*; *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights, 1750–1790*; and Rainer Forst, *Toleration in Conflict: Past, Present, and Future*, henceforth cited as TC.
2. For summary, see Israel, "Democratic Enlightenment", 7–11.
3. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 7. See Galeotti, "Toleration Out of Conflicts"; Nederman, "Toleration in Conflict: Past and Present, by Rainer Forst"; Horton, "Rainer Forst, *Toleration in Conflict: Past and Present*".
4. Forst, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 1–2.
5. See Chisick, "Looking for Enlightenment," 572; La Volpa, "New Intellectual History", 720.
6. See Israel, *Revolution of the Mind*, 1–36.
7. Forst, "Enlightenment Contested", 3, 4, 565. See Jonathan Israel, "Enlightenment, The".
8. Forst, *Enlightenment Contested*, 866; see 594, 866–67. Cf. Chisick, "Interpreting the Enlightenment," 39–40.
9. Israel, *Revolution of the Mind*, vii.
10. Forst, *Radical Enlightenment*, 331–41; *Enlightenment Contested*, 87, 92–93, 148, 388, 413, 426, 456, 528, 538; Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 231–65. For Israel, before Bayle, Baruch de Spinoza (whom is central for almost everything in the radical enlightenment, according to Israel) precedes, preoccupies and confounds Voltaire concerning metaphysics, politics and ethics (RE, 230–57; Part 1, i. below)
11. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 314–38. See Galeotti, "Toleration", 253.
12. Forst, *Radical Enlightenment*, 704–13; TC, 311–328.

13. We will therefore develop directions concerning Israel indicated especially in Chisick, "Interpreting the Enlightenment". None of the reviews of Forst's *Toleration in Conflict* (see note 3 above) either focus upon or contest his claims concerning Voltaire, our specific focus here.
14. See Pearson, *Fables of Reason*, 6.
15. Forst, *Radical Enlightenment*, 175–86; *Enlightenment Contested*, 590–662.
16. See Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*; with Chisick, "Looking for Enlightenment", 576, 579.
17. For full lists, see (egs) Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 12, 43, 363, 365, 714.
18. See La Vopa, "A New Intellectual History?", 717–738; Muenck, "The Enlightenment as Modernity"; Michael Mosher, "Reviewed Work(s): *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* by Jonathan I. Israel"; Schleisser, "Jonathan Israel, Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights, 1750-1790"; Moyn, "Mind the Enlightenment"; "A Response to Jonathan Israel"; Litti, "Comment écrit-on l'histoire intellectuelle des Lumières ? Spinozisme, radicalisme et philosophie".
19. See Chisick, "Interpreting the Enlightenment", 36.
20. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 11–12, 37–38, 360–61.
21. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 704–13; *Enlightenment Contested*, 781–93.
22. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 824–39; *Democratic Enlightenment*, 39–93.
23. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 648–83.
24. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 360–63.
25. La Vopa, "New Intellectual", 724; Chisick, "Looking," 578.
26. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 360–61, 683, 751, 772–76.
27. Wade, *The Structure and Form of the French Enlightenment, Volume 2. Esprit Revolutionnaire*, 36–37; *Intellectual Development of Voltaire*, 145, 625, 763.
28. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 768–69.
29. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 761.
30. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 681.
31. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 681.
32. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 515, 681.
33. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 681.
34. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 756–772.
35. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 361, 769.
36. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 761.
37. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 759.
38. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 763.
39. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 761.
40. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 767.
41. Voltaire, "Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne"; Mason, *Pierre Bayle and Voltaire*; see Wade, *Intellectual Development*, 632–651; Brush, "Pierre Bayle and Voltaire (review)".
42. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 768.
43. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 766.
44. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 766. Cf. Wade, *Intellectual Development*, 695.
45. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 658–75.
46. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 754–55.
47. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 755.
48. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 756–57.
49. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 757.
50. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 71, 111; Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 755.
51. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 547; *Democratic Enlightenment*, 122, 658. Cf. Israel, *Revolution*, 6.
52. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 266.
53. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 393–97.
54. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 266.
55. In what Chisick calls an "odd couple", at "Interpreting the Enlightenment," 43–44.
56. Cf. Horton, "Toleration".

57. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 243.
58. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 243.
59. Bayle, *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*, §§ 172-182, 212-227.
60. Bayle, *A Philosophical Commentary on These Words of the Gospel, Luke 14.23, 'Compel Them to Come In, That My House May Be Full'*.
61. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 247
62. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 247.
63. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 289. See Voltaire, *Treatise on Toleration*, ch. 1-2, 4--5.
64. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 286.
65. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 286.
66. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 289.
67. Voltaire, "Atheism-Atheist", *Pocket Philosophical Dictionary*, 36.
68. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 287, 288.
69. At Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 287.
70. Wade, *Intellectual Development*, 631; Voltaire, *Poème sur la Loi naturelle*, II; see Wade, *Structure and Form of the French Enlightenment, Volume I: Esprit Philosophique*, 257; *Esprit Revolutionnaire*, 59-66.
71. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 287.
72. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 287.
73. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 287.
74. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 288.
75. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 293.
76. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 31--32.
77. Cf. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 297.
78. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 289.
79. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 292.
80. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 293.
81. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 290.
82. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 291.
83. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 293.
84. Besterman, Voltaire.
85. Pomeau, *La religion de Voltaire*.
86. Voltaire, "Homily on Superstition", 124.
87. See (egs) Wade, *Intellectual Development*, 603-4, 620-621, 627-8, 760-64; Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation Volume 1: The Rise of Modern Paganism*, 135-141; Rasmussen, *The Pragmatic Enlightenment*, 135-190; Lloyd, *Enlightenment Shadows*, 45-59.
88. Voltaire, *Ignorant philosopher*, 3-24, etc.; Wade, *Intellectual Development*, 699.
89. Wade, *Intellectual Development*, 623-24, 627-28.
90. Voltaire, *Letters on the English Nation*, "Letter XV: On Attraction". Cf. Wade, *Intellectual Development*, 603
91. Voltaire, "Matière", in *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*.
92. Voltaire, "Body", in *Pocket Philosophical Dictionary*, 68.
93. Voltaire, *Eléments de la philosophie de Newton*, 435.
94. Voltaire, *L'Opinion en alphabet*.
95. Voltaire, "Athée", in *L'Opinion en alphabet*. Cf. "The Priest's Catechism", *Pocket Philosophical Dictionary*, 90.
96. Voltaire, "Tolerance", *Pocket Philosophical Dictionary*, 242. Cited at Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 289.
97. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 288-89.
98. For Voltaire as natural law theorist, see Crocker, *Nature and Culture*, 30-37.
99. Voltaire, *Poème sur la Loi naturelle*, II.
100. Bayle, *Philosophical Commentary*, bk I, ch. 1. Forst does not comment on Bayle's "God talk". On Israel's reading of Bayle as crypto-atheist and crypto-monist, see Chisick, "Interpreting the Enlightenment", 43-44.

101. Voltaire, *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, tome 14, 475–76: “[i]t seems clear that there are natural laws which men are obliged to acknowledge throughout the universe, whatever they might say.” See Crocker, *Nature and Culture*, 32–34.
102. Voltaire, “Commentary on the Book *On Crimes and Punishments*”, 266.
103. Voltaire, “Natural Law”, in *A Philosophical Dictionary [Complete]*.
104. See “Virtue”, in *Pocket Philosophical Dictionary*, 245–46.
105. Voltaire, “Homily on Superstition”, 116–17, 123.
106. Voltaire, “Homily on Superstition”, 120.
107. Voltaire, “We Must Take Sides”, in *Selected Works*, 45.
108. Voltaire, “Dogmes”, in *Questions*.
109. Voltaire, “Dogmes”, in *Questions*.
110. Forst, *Toleration*, 287, 291. See Crocker, *Nature and Culture*, 31 on the golden and silver rule in Voltaire, and Wade, *Intellectual Development*, 702–704 on the close proximity between this morality and that of Spinoza.
111. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 231–232.
112. Voltaire, “Tolerance,” 242.
113. Voltaire, “Tolerance,” 87.
114. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 287, 289–90.
115. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 287, 292.
116. Ages, “Voltaire’s Philosophical Modernity”, 339.
117. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 658–674; cf. Davidson, *Voltaire in Exile*.
118. Ages, “Voltaire’s Philosophical Modernity”, 340.
119. Voltaire, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 662–63.
120. Hazard, “Voltaire et Spinoza”, *Modern Philology* 38, no. 3 (Feb., 1941): 352–357.
121. See eg Voltaire, “Athéisme”, in *Questions*; cf. Wade, *Intellectual Development*, 693–698; Hazard, “Voltaire et Spinoza,” 356–357 (on *Tout en Dieu* and *Le système vraisemblable*); Ages, “Voltaire’s Philosophical Modernity”, 339–340; Curtis, “La Providence: vicissitudes du dieu voltairien”. In his later work, Voltaire also renounced his earlier belief in free will, embracing a form of determinism akin to Spinoza’s position in this respect.
122. Voltaire, at Thomas, “Spinoza and The Origins of Modern Thought”. See Hazard, “Voltaire et Spinoza,” 358–359.
123. Voltaire, “Athéisme”.
124. Voltaire, “Athéisme”.
125. Voltaire, *Treatise on Toleration*, 123–124.
126. Voltaire, “We Must Take Sides,” 45–47.
127. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 660–61.
128. Voltaire, “Dieu”, in *Questions*.
129. Voltaire, “Dieu”, in *Questions*.
130. Lloyd, *Enlightenment Shadows*, 48–52.
131. Voltaire, “Athéisme”.
132. Voltaire, “Athée”, in *L’opinion en alphabet*
133. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 18–19, 30.
134. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 266, 293; Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 52–53, 708.
135. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 71, 111.
136. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 66–67, 660–61.
137. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 757.
138. Gay, *Voltaire’s Politics*; cf. Pomeau, *Politique de Voltaire*.
139. Gay, *Voltaire’s Politics*, 145–46.
140. Gay, *Voltaire’s Politics*, 71.
141. Gay, *Voltaire’s Politics*, 135–38.
142. Gay, *Voltaire’s Politics*, 155–57.
143. Gay, *Voltaire’s Politics*, 170–71, 185–87.
144. Forst, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 130–39, 658–68. The admittedly-radical *Sermon of the Fifty* (published 1762), Israel dates uncomfortably to the early 1740s in *Enlightenment*

- Contested* (121), where it sits awkwardly with the pro-establishment Voltaire Israel is depicting for us at this time. By *Democratic Enlightenment* (93), Israel has changed his mind, denying its authorship to Voltaire.
145. See Wade, *Intellectual Development*, 560–561 for a full list.
  146. See Wade, *Intellectual Development*, 330 ff., with Wade, *Esprit révolutionnaire*, 18–19 on the clandestinity of Voltaire.
  147. Chisick, “Interpreting the Enlightenment,” 51
  148. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 112, 114, 116, 133.
  149. Voltaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, 363. See also Pomeau, *Religion de Voltaire*, 301; Naves, *Voltaire et l’Encyclopedie*, 53.
  150. One may agree with the presentist intentions, or not; it is the interpretation of the 18th century texts at issue.
  151. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 23–26; *Democratic Enlightenment*, 32–33. See Chisick, “Interpreting the Enlightenment”, 37, 41.
  152. La Vopa, “New Intellectual History?”, 731.
  153. Cf. La Vopa, “New Intellectual History?”, 724, 731–32.
  154. See Pearson, *Fables of Reason*, 6–15; Lloyd, *Enlightenment Shadows*, 45–48; Besterman, *Voltaire*, 487.
  155. See Wade, *Intellectual Development*, 764–74.
  156. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 130–39, 658–74.
  157. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 286–93.
  158. Chisick, “Interpreting the Enlightenment,” 45–46, 48; cf. Pearson, *Fables*, 110–11.
  159. Gay, *Voltaire’s Politics*, 66–143, 309–340.
  160. At Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 674.
  161. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 662.
  162. See Wade, *Voltaire and Candide*, 116–31; *Esprit révolutionnaire*, 35–36.
  163. Voltaire, “Homily on Superstition”, 117–18.
  164. See Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, vi–xi.
  165. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 1–2. See Rasmussen, *Pragmatic Enlightenment*; & “Contemporary Political Theory as an Anti-Enlightenment Project”, 39–60.
  166. Voltaire, “Dieu”, in *Questions*; see Hazard, “Voltaire et Spinoza,” 363; Wade, *Intellectual Development*, 700.
  167. See Gay, *Enlightenment*, 293–95.
  168. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 27.
  169. At Hazard, “Voltaire et Spinoza,” 354.
  170. Voltaire, “Letter to Damilaville, Apr. 5, 1765”.
  171. Voltaire, “Fanaticism”, in *Pocket Philosophical Dictionary*, 137–38.

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