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ARTICLE

Enlightenment for the Common People? Frederick II and the *Philosophes* on Popular Prejudice, Deception, and Education

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Could the common people, including illiterate laborers, be enlightened? How should cultural elites and political leaders embark on the task? Frederick II, king of Prussia, discussed these issues in an extensive correspondence with Voltaire and d'Alembert in the 1760s and 1770s, exchanges that led to an infamous prize contest on the potentially useful deception of the people (Berlin, 1780). Analyzing this discussion in detail for the first time, the article situates it within contemporary and longer-term contexts. The result is a reassessment of the views of mainstream Enlightenment authors on the intellectual capacities of the populace, the function of religion in ethics and politics, and the positive role of prejudice (as distinct from superstition) in eighteenth-century discourse. This should nuance Hans-Georg Gadamer's famous claim that the Enlightenment harboured a "prejudice against all prejudices."

In summer 1770 Frederick II of Brandenburg-Prussia deemed a treatise on human prejudice worthy of public refutation. In his examination of the essay, the king stated that "prejudices are the rationality of the common people."[1] Even before the publication of the treatise, on 8 January 1770, he wrote to Jean le Rond d'Alembert that "credulity, superstition, and the timid fears of feeble minds will always prevail among the majority of the public." Hence "we must abandon the common people to error."[2] Once it became public, this stance infuriated Denis Diderot, chief editor of the *Encyclopédie* together with d'Alembert, who did not spare Frederick his scorn. "The most inconsistent of men," Diderot declared, "is he who says that the truth was not made for mankind, and who takes up his pen in favour of the truth."[3] So much did prejudice,

[1]Frederick II of Brandenburg-Prussia, "Examination of the *Essay on Prejudice*," in *Frederick the Great's Philosophical Writings*, ed. Avi Lifschitz, trans. Angela Scholar (henceforth *PW*) (Princeton, 2021), 160–78, at 161, 162; Frederick II, "Examen de l'*Essai sur les préjugés*," in *Oeuvres de Frédéric le Grand* (henceforth *OFG*), ed. Johann David Erdmann Preuß, 30 vols. (Berlin, 1846–56), 9: 149–75, at 152, 153. The treatise was published in 1770 as an allegedly posthumous work by César Chesneau Dumarsais, who had died in 1756. Frederick II, *PW*, 234.

[2]Frederick II, *OFG*, 24: 522–3.

[3]"Lettre de M. Denis Diderot sur l'examen de l'Essai sur les préjugés," in Diderot, *Oeuvres*, ed. Laurent Versini, vol. 3, *Politique* (Paris, 1995), 165–72, at 166. All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

truth, and their presence among the common people matter to Frederick and Diderot that they composed, in this context, some of their most apoplectic diatribes. The more civil exchange between Frederick and d'Alembert resulted in a prize competition at the Berlin Academy (for 1780) on "whether it is useful for the people to be deceived." The question did not emerge from a sudden reaction, in 1770, to radical works by French authors: it was deeply anchored in longer-term discussions of the benign or useful aspects of prejudice and the limits of the human understanding.

The reconstruction of such debates is required, first, to counter the widespread assumption that the discussion was launched by the 1780 contest at the Berlin Academy, which later inspired the debate of the mid-1780s on "what is Enlightenment."[4] The 1780 prize question concealed many aspects of the earlier discourse, among them the distinction between blameless errors and purposeful duplicity. These issues concerned what may be considered a positive formulation of the popular-deception question. Could the common people in eighteenth-century Europe, including the illiterate masses, be enlightened? How should cultural elites and political leaders embark on the task? Should the people be exposed to the full gamut of science and philosophy or merely to a small dose that might reduce their misery, increase their happiness, and make them "useful" citizens? Debates on these questions included copious references to the capacity of most human beings to discern the truth and adhere to reason-based ethics without recourse to revelation.[5]

Second, a close examination of the debates of the 1760s and early 1770s can open up new perspectives on Frederick II's intellectual profile. The king's responses to the writings of Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach (whose authorship was unknown at the time) earned him the reputation of an arch-reactionary, anti-Enlightenment figure. Frederick's views acquired more sinister hues after Franco Venturi published for the first time, in 1937, Diderot's response to Frederick's critique of the *Essai sur les préjugés*. Venturi, in exile from Mussolini's Italy, gave Diderot's diatribe the title *Pages inédites contre un tyran* (Previously Unpublished Pages against a Tyrant).[6] In the late 1930s, this was not too subtle an analogy to fascist regimes and their state-sponsored propaganda: Diderot became a Résistance hero *avant la lettre* while Frederick was assigned the role of a totalitarian despot.[7] In addition, the king's refutations of *Essai sur les préjugés* and

[4]Eckhart Hellmuth, "Aufklärung und Pressefreiheit: Zur Debatte der Berliner Mittwochsgesellschaft während der Jahre 1783 und 1784," *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* 9 (1982), 315–45; James Schmidt, "Introduction," in Schmidt, ed., *What Is Enlightenment?* (Berkeley, 1996), 1–44.

[5]On the broader issues see Lester G. Crocker, "The Problem of Truth and Falsehood in the Age of Enlightenment," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 14/4 (1953), 575–603; Roland Mortier, "Ésotérisme et Lumières: Un dilemme de la pensée du XVIIIe siècle," in Mortier, *Clartés et ombres du siècle des Lumières* (Geneva, 1969), 60–103; Harry C. Payne, *The Philosophes and the People* (New Haven, 1976); Harvey Chisick, *The Limits of Reform in the Enlightenment: Attitudes toward the Education of the Lower Classes in Eighteenth-Century France* (Princeton, 1981); Michel Delon, "Réhabilitation des préjugés et crise des Lumières," *Revue germanique internationale* 3 (1995), 143–56; Antoine Lilti, "Peut-on éclairer le peuple?," in Lilti, *L'héritage des Lumières: Ambivalences de la modernité* (Paris, 2019), 269–96.

[6]Denis Diderot, *Pages inédites contre un tyran*, ed. Franco Venturi (Paris, 1937).

[7]On Venturi's work on Diderot in Paris of the 1930s see contributions by Giuseppe Giarrizzo, Roberto Vivarelli, and Edoardo Tortarolo in Luciano Guerci and Giuseppe Ricuperati, eds., *Il coraggio della ragione. Franco Venturi intellettuale e storico cosmopolita* (Turin, 1998).

Système de la nature have been regarded as a major turning point from an engaged ruler, publicly supporting the *parti philosophique*, to an older and irascible king who distanced himself decisively from the French Enlightenment.[8] By contrast, this article charts important continuities between Frederick's early writings and his late views.

Finally, an important objective of the article is to nuance Hans-Georg Gadamer's claim that the Enlightenment harboured a fundamental "prejudice against all prejudices."[9] In *Truth and Method* (*Wahrheit und Methode*, 1960), he presented eighteenth-century philosophy in a distinctly Cartesian garb. Gadamer's Enlightenment elevated pure reason and individual autonomy above all else, seeing rational critique as a universal measure of all things while ignoring their historical embeddedness. Since Gadamer saw the "global demand of the Enlightenment" as "the overcoming of all prejudices," he argued that only the rejection of Enlightenment views could "open the way to an appropriate understanding of the finitude which dominates not only our humanity but also our historical consciousness."[10] As we shall see, major Enlightenment authors did acknowledge this human finitude and the potential utility of received ideas, prejudices and customs.

Gadamer's extremely rationalist Enlightenment is representative of a variety of twentieth-(and twenty-first-)century views of eighteenth-century philosophy, whether affirmative or critical.[11] Yet this article suggests that major Enlightenment authors were not at all advocates of the absolute sovereignty of reason. On the sociopolitical front, too, Enlightenment as an eighteenth-century reform program differed significantly from the image it acquired after the French Revolution. Most Enlightenment authors saw an alliance between philosophy and monarchical government not only as

[8]Wilhelm Dilthey, "Friedrich der Große und die deutsche Aufklärung," in Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Bernhard Groethuysen et al., 26 vols. (Göttingen, 1922–2005), 3: 81–205, at 129–30; more recently, Hans-Christof Kraus, *Der Wendepunkt des Philosophen von Sanssouci* (Berlin, 2017), 13–14. For the "reactionary" Frederick see also Nick Treuherz, "Useful Lies: The Limits of Enlightening the Common Man. Frederick the Great and Franco-German Cultural Transfer," in Tatiana V. Artemyeva and Mikhail I. Mikeshin, eds., *Intellectual and Political Elites of the Enlightenment* (Helsinki, 2014), 58–85, at 81.

[9]Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London, 2013), 283.

[10]Ibid., 288. Schneiders has countered this view in his study of the German Enlightenment, while identifying a politicized attack on prejudice in the French Enlightenment. This article paints a different picture, of thorough awareness of the multivalence of prejudice in mostly French discussions. Werner Schneiders, *Aufklärung und Vorurteilskritik: Studien zur Geschichte der Vorurteilstheorie* (Stuttgart–Bad Cannstatt, 1983), 260–61. A thematically broader discussion by Rainer Godel is likewise dedicated exclusively to Germany: *Vorurteil—Anthropolgie—Literatur: Der Vorurteilsdiskurs als Modus der Selbstaufklärung im 18. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen, 2007).

[11]See, for example, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's renowned *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (1944), ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, 2002); and Isaiah Berlin, "The Counter-Enlightenment," in Berlin, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (London, 1979), 1–24. Cf. Israel's vindication of the radicals in Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment* (Oxford, 2001); Israel, *Enlightenment Contested* (Oxford, 2006); Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment* (Oxford, 2011); Israel, *The Enlightenment that Failed* (Oxford, 2019). See also Vincenzo Ferrone, *The Enlightenment: History of an Idea*, trans. Elisabetta Tarantino (Princeton, 2015); Avi Lifschitz, "Between Friedrich Meinecke and Ernst Cassirer: Isaiah Berlin's bifurcated Enlightenment," in Laurence Brockliss and Ritchie Robertson, eds., *Isaiah Berlin and the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 2016), 51–66; Elisabeth Décultot and Nicholas Cronk, eds., *Inventions of Enlightenment since 1800* (Liverpool, 2023).

desirable: it was widely regarded as the only route for moderate yet consequential reform. If politically charged, present-day views of Enlightenment or "Enlightenment values" were replaced with a more historicized approach to the eighteenth-century intellectual scene, Frederick II could well be considered a major participant in Enlightenment debates on human betterment.

As the protagonists of this article frequently debated whether and how the common people should be enlightened (usually using the verb *éclairer* and the noun *lumières*), I shall refer to lower-case enlightenment in this context. Capitalized Enlightenment will be reserved for its present-day meanings as an eighteenth-century movement or a historical period marker (notwithstanding ongoing debates over their utility). "The common people" is an admittedly unsatisfactory translation of *le peuple*. While *le peuple* referred generally to all residents of a certain place, in these particular discussions it denoted "the least significant part of the inhabitants of the same city or country," as defined in the 1762 edition of the dictionary of the Académie française.[12] In this sense, *le peuple* or the common people was synonymous with the group called by eighteenth-century authors "the vulgar" (*le vulgaire*), usually those relying on menial work for their subsistence or the illiterate inhabitants of the countryside.[13] The last item of terminological housekeeping is the distinction, made by eighteenth-century authors, between superstition (virtually always detrimental) and prejudice, a term whose sense was broader and more neutral than its present associations. By the mid-eighteenth century, prejudice had largely been dissociated from its origin in legal discourse, where it had denoted a premature judgment. It did, however, maintain some epistemological connotations.[14] Voltaire, as we shall see, made a division of semantic labour between "superstition" and "prejudice": while the latter concerned epistemic incompleteness, the former carried stronger moral associations.[15]

Epistemic aspects: the frailty of the human mind

By the mid-eighteenth century the mainstream position (in France and elsewhere) had become one of cautiousness and modesty about the capacities of the human understanding rather than strong confidence in the effectiveness of reason. If, in the moral sphere, mid-eighteenth-century authors turned from unrealistic self-abnegation to the broad acceptance of the passions and self-love, the epistemic parallel was a shift from the pursuit of unachievable certainty and absolute truths to a firm focus on probability and hypothesis. This attitude echoed John Locke's position in *An Essay Concerning*

[12] "Peuple," consulted via the useful website of the Academy, offering definitions from all editions of its dictionary (since 1694): www.dictionnaire-academie.fr/article/A4P0950.

[13] See also Samuel Johnson's multivalent definition of "People" in 1755 as "a nation, those who compose a community" but also "the vulgar." At https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/views/search.php?term=people.

[14] Fritz Schalk, *Praejudicium im Romanischen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1971), 25–39. See also contributions by Roland Mortier, Francine Markovits, Yaël Ehrenfreund, and Michèle Bokobza Kahan in Ruth Amossy and Michel Delon, eds., *Critique et légitimité du préjugé* (Brussels, 1999).

[15] For a distinction between the epistemic–cognitive and normative–moral aspects of prejudice see Andreas Dorschel, *Rethinking Prejudice* (Aldershot, 2000), 140–86; Endre Begby, *Prejudice: A Study in Non-ideal Epistemology* (Oxford, 2021), 7–15.

Human Understanding (1689). According to Locke, in most areas of life, God "has afforded us only the twilight, as I may so say, of *Probability*; suitable, I presume, to that State of Mediocrity and Probationership, he has been pleased to place us in here."[16] This was but a logical extension of Locke's sensualist–empiricist theory of knowledge. If sensations provided the understanding only with external input, human beings had no certain way of knowing the world beyond their ideas. Ultimately, they could not fathom the rapport between ideas, sensations, and the correlating objects. Epistemic modesty or humility was, in this framework, the obvious consequence. Awareness of the innate shortcomings of the human understanding called for healthy skepticism about confident claims to certainty and a view of human knowledge as a collection of the most probable hypotheses, tested by experience.

This was not only a timely theory of knowledge, targeting "enthusiasm" after the religious and civil wars that had ravaged Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[17] It was also highly compatible with Newtonian physics, while functioning as a riposte to radical skepticism—the early modern version of ancient Pyrrhonism that had attracted much attention since the late Renaissance. Anton Matytsin has recently suggested that the general tenor of the French Enlightenment emerged from a compromise between skeptics and their opponents, consisting of "soft" skepticism about the remit of human reason: "Far from having extreme confidence in the powers of human reason, the most vocal opponents of the established intellectual, religious and political authorities … remained deeply aware of the limits of rational enquiry and the weakness of human understanding."[18] Voltaire, d'Alembert, and Frederick adopted this epistemic humility as a major tenet of their worldview. In Berlin, figures as different from one another as the deist Marquis d'Argens and the Protestant pastor Formey agreed on the utility of mitigated skepticism or epistemic humility as a weapon against religious dogmatists and atheist radicals alike.[19]

Imbibing the basic elements of Locke's philosophy and Newton's physics in exile in Britain in the 1720s, Voltaire popularized epistemic humility throughout the 1730s in the name of human nature as it actually existed. The passions, self-love, and the narrow limits of the human understanding were, for Voltaire, universal traits, bequeathed to humankind by God. To live well and improve one's lot, one had to work with these characteristics rather than against them. Paraphrasing Alexander Pope's comforting aphorism "Whatever is, is Right," Voltaire argued in *Discours en vers sur l'homme*

[16] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1975), Book 4, Ch. XIV, "On Judgement," 652; see also ibid., Book 4, Ch. III, "Of the Extent of Human Knowledge," 538–62.

[17] On enthusiasm as a target of Enlightenment authors see Michael Heyd, *"Be Sober and Reasonable": The Critique of Enthusiasm in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries* (Leiden, 1996); Lawrence E. Klein and Anthony J. La Vopa, eds., *Enthusiasm and Enlightenment in Europe, 1650–1850* (San Marino, 1998).

[18] Anton Matytsin, *The Specter of Skepticism in the Age of Enlightenment* (Baltimore, 2016), 3. Epistemic humility has also been regarded as a mild form of academic skepticism, as well as "empirical," "mitigated," or "constructive" scepticism. See Giorgo Tonelli, "The 'Weakness' of Reason in the Age of Enlightenment," *Diderot Studies* 14 (1971), 217–44; Tonelli, "Pierre-Jacques Changeux and Scepticism in the French Enlightenment," *Studia Leibnitiana* 6/1 (1974), 106–26; Lorraine Daston, *Classical Probability in the Enlightenment* (Princeton, 1988), 58–67; Richard H. Popkin, Ezequiel de Olaso, and Giorgio Tonelli, eds., *Scepticism in the Enlightenment* (Dordrecht, 1997).

[19] On the contribution of Berlin-based authors to such a compromise see Matytsin, *Specter*, 136–53.

(1738–42) that "nothing is too great or small: everything is just as it should be."[20] What he preached in the late 1730s was an early iteration of the deflationary (or just sober) title of his collection *Le philosophe ignorant* (1766) and the conclusion of *Candide* (1759). In a world one could neither control nor fully comprehend, one should concentrate on cultivating one's garden.

While conducting an extensive correspondence with Voltaire in the late 1730s, Crown Prince Frederick chose the inevitable prejudices of the human mind as the topic of a dialogue he penned in summer 1738, having just read Voltaire's *Éléments de la philosophie de Newton*. In the *Dissertation sur l'innocence des erreurs de l'esprit*, Frederick argued that because human beings could not ultimately grasp the nature of things, scientific and philosophical controversies should be conducted less vehemently; we must all become aware of the tentative nature of our strongest convictions.[21] During a pre-supper stroll, interrupted only by an interloping priest, Frederick's narrator tried to persuade his interlocutor, Philante, that most of his knowledge consisted not of solid truths: it was rather based on probable hypotheses, including the theories of Copernicus, Kepler, and Newton. This was due to the impenetrability of the universe, the uncertain link between our ideas and reality, the weakness of human minds, and the prejudices inculcated through education (at home or institutionally). If what we usually considered self-evident truths were no more than highly probable propositions, "to be in error is our lot in life."[22] Eventually, Philante recanted his initial view that "we are made for truth," recognizing that epistemic prejudice was the human condition. With great astonishment, he also admitted "that human error cannot, for the most part, be overcome by those who are infected with it."[23] As Frederick's narrator explained, in some cases it was preferable to leave deluded or prejudiced individuals (the madman thinking he was in heaven or a dying patient) blissfully unaware of their actual predicament: "There are such things as auspicious errors" which are "harmless."[24] Hence, "if we were to banish error from the universe, we would need to exterminate the whole of the human race."[25]

The sober lesson, for the young Frederick, was a shift from epistemology and metaphysics to practical ethics: "It is not our way of thinking on speculative matters that could influence the happiness of society, but, rather, the way in which we act that does so." For belief in wrongheaded cosmological or religious systems, Frederick's narrator would "gladly forgive you, as long as you retain your humanity," reserving his contempt only for harshness and intolerance.[26] If the mainstream stance of the *philosophes* was one of epistemic modesty, Frederick gave it in his early *Dissertation* a somewhat melancholy, Pyrrhonian twist. The frailty of the human mind, the poverty of our experience, and the annals of history all demonstrated the limits of the possible. Errors, prejudice,

[20] Voltaire, *Discours en vers sur l'homme*, in *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire* (henceforth *OCV*), ed. Theodore Besterman, Nicholas Cronk et al., 205 vols. (Geneva and Oxford, 1968–2022), 17: 453–535, at 517.

[21] Frederick to Voltaire, 30 September 1738, Frederick II, *OFG*, 8: 266.

[22] Frederick II, *PW*, 4; Frederick II, *OFG*, 8: 39.

[23] Frederick II, *PW*, 8; Frederick II, *OFG*, 8: 44.

[24] Frederick II, *PW*, 10; Frederick II, *OFG*, 8: 46.

[25] Frederick II, *PW*, 11; Frederick II, *OFG*, 8: 48.

[26] Ibid.

and self-deceit were, in such epistemically inspired discussions, inevitable side effects of the natural limits of the human mind rather than the consequences of deliberate deception.

Sociopolitical aspects: noble lies, benign prejudice, useful deception

Early preludes

If European discussions of the sociopolitical utility of errors, illusions, or deception stretch as far back as the "noble lie" in Plato's *Republic*, then the most common early modern manifestation of benevolent deception was the so-called beneficial lie (*mensonge officieux*): deliberate insincerity in the face of persecution, or dissimulation for political purposes.[27] Such lies were considered necessary for saving one's life, especially in the context of religious and civil warfare. In dire circumstances, practitioners of the *mensonge officieux* prioritized self-preservation over truth-telling. This applied equally to persecuted religious minorities and to philosophers, libertines, or heterodox authors.[28] On the political front, the early modern focus was on a finely tuned distinction between dissimulation for the sake of political prudence and reason of state, on the one hand, and, on the other, deception in the service of insatiable political ambition. A major point of reference was Tacitus' portrait of the Roman emperor Tiberius, widely discussed after the publication of Justus Lipsius's 1574 edition of Tacitus' works.[29]

The *locus classicus* for political deception was Chapter 18 of *Il Principe* (*The Prince*, 1513) by Niccolò Machiavelli, entitled "In What Ways Rulers Should Keep Their Promises."[30] In an ideal world, Machiavelli argued, we would keep our word at all times, but experience, lamentably, proved otherwise. The ruler should exhibit not only the lion's strength but also the fox's cunning, breaching his word whenever expediency called; most human beings were anyhow covertly dishonest. An effective ruler could

[27]For Plato's "noble lie" see Book III, 414C–415C, in Plato, *The Republic*, ed. G. R. F Ferrari, trans. Tom Griffith (Cambridge, 2000), 107–8. See also Malcolm Schofield, *Plato: Political Philosophy* (Oxford, 2006), 284–309.

[28]Zagorin has argued that dissimulation was a central feature of all forms of religious dissidence in early modern period, also known as Nicodemism—Calvin's term for the outwardly Catholic conduct of persecuted crypto-Protestants. Perez Zagorin, *Ways of Lying: Dissimulation, Persecution, and Conformity in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 1990), 12. On the origins of the practice see Carlo Ginzburg, *Il nicodemismo: Simulazione e dissimulazione religiosa nell'Europa del'500* (Turin, 1970); for its application among English freethinkers see David Berman, "Deism, Immortality and the Art of Theological Lying," in J. A. Leo Lemay, ed., *Deism, Masonry and the Enlightenment* (Newark, 1987), 61–78.

[29]Gerhard Oestreich, *Neostoicism and the Early Modern State*, ed. Brigitta Oestreich and H. G. Koenigsberger, trans. David McLintock (Cambridge, 1982), 139; Arnaldo Momigliano, "Tacitus and the Tacitean Tradition," in Momigliano, *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography* (Berkeley, CA, 1990), 109–31; Peter Burke, "Tacitism, Scepticism, and Reason of State," in J. H. Burns and Mark Goldie, eds., *The Cambridge History of Political Thought 1450–1700* (Cambridge, 1991), 479–98; Jacob Soll, *Publishing the* Prince (Ann Arbor, 2005), 27–40; Jon R. Snyder, *Dissimulation and the Culture of Secrecy in Early Modern Europe* (Berkeley, 2009), 106–58; Christopher Brooke, *Philosophic Pride: Stoicism and Political Thought from Lipsius to Rousseau* (Princeton, 2012), 12–34.

[30]Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ed. Quentin Skinner and Russell Price, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 2019), 59–61.

successfully conceal such dissimulation because people were preoccupied with their immediate needs and paid attention only to outcomes, not to the means by which they had been achieved: "A skilful deceiver always finds plenty of people who will let themselves be deceived."[31] The Tacitean–Machiavellian delineation of two incommensurable spheres, reason of state and individual morality, was loudly condemned, for example by Innocent Gentillet, author of the first work widely known as an *Anti-Machiavel* (1576). The main criticism was that what seemed like lying for the common good could easily conceal cynical dissimulation for individual gain.[32] Yet the condemnation was not universal: Pierre Bayle approvingly referred, in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697), to authors who had distinguished between the morality of individual citizens and the conduct of rulers. To the latter, different criteria applied because the well-being of the state necessitated frequent dissimulation.[33] In some cases, Bayle suggested that philosophers, too, had to resort to dissimulation.

In his own *Anti-Machiavel*, published just after his accession to the throne in 1740, Frederick rejected most of Machiavelli's claims concerning dissimulation while allowing princes to break treaties and embark on preemptive wars in special cases. He found, however, much less need for dissimulation in the eighteenth century than in Machiavelli's time, some two centuries earlier. In line with the call for mutual toleration in the *Dissertation* of 1738, Frederick noted two years later that "it is not what a prince thinks, but what he does, which makes men content."[34] At the same time, the young Frederick confronted Machiavelli in his own arena, that of personal utility. In the eighteenth century, the words and deeds of princes were so closely scrutinized by public opinion that any momentary lapse of attention would expose a lying prince's ruse. "Guile and dissimulation, therefore, will in vain grace the lips of the prince; deceit in his speech and his actions will be of no avail to him [*lui sera inutile*]."[35] Even in his *Anti-Machiavel*, therefore, Frederick was willing to concede some ground to Machiavelli: he rejected princely deceit on the grounds of utility and political expediency rather than pure ethics.[36] The distinction between individual morality and reason of state became much more explicit in 1746, in Frederick's preface to his account of the first and second Silesian Wars. Seasoned and war-hardened, the king distinguished between individuals keeping their word and sovereigns who sometimes had to sacrifice their individual morality for the well-being of their subjects. In 1746 Frederick went as far as arguing that moral probity was not a constant: monarchs' decisions could not be assessed

[31] Ibid., 60.

[32] Innocent Gentillet, *Discours sur les moyens de bien gouverner et maintenir en bonne paix un royaume ou autre principauté, divisé en trois parties, à savoir, du Conseil, de la Religion & de la Police que doit tenir un Prince. Contre Nicolas Machiavel* (Geneva, 1576). See Edward C. Rathé, "Innocent Gentillet and the first 'Anti-Machiavel'," *Bibliothèque d'humanisme et renaissance* 27/1 (1965), 186–225.

[33] Remark E in "Machiavel," in Pierre Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, 3 vols. (Amsterdam, 1702), 2: 1950–60.

[34] Ch. 18 of "Anti-Machiavel," in Frederick II, *PW*, 53; Frederick II, *OFG*, 8: 134.

[35] Frederick II, *PW*, 50; Frederick II, *OFG*, 8: 134.

[36] Frederick II, *PW*, 53; Frederick II, *OFG*, 8: 137: "I am not, at this moment, talking about honesty or virtue; but, if we consider only the self-interest of princes, I say that it is very bad politics on their part to be deceitful and to fool everybody: they deceive only once; and once is enough to lose the trust of all princes."

according to fixed criteria. Such an evaluation depended on thorough acquaintance with the precise contexts of their decisions.[37]

The suspension of moral norms for the sake of political expediency also featured in cases where useful dissimulation or deception became the preserve of an entire class rather than a single monarch. In this guise, popular deception could be regarded as a form of group esotericism, "the conception of secret knowledge to be revealed only to an elite and harmful if communicated to the masses."[38] Radical thinkers of the Renaissance and the seventeenth century held that religious dogmas, especially the immortality of the soul and future rewards and punishments, had been invented to uphold popular morality and the social order.[39] The culprits were politicians and priests, in cahoots with each other. By the second half of the eighteenth century, however, sociopolitical improvement had come to dominate discussions of popular prejudice or deception. If concealment and secrecy had been an intrinsic aspect of early modern esotericism, the 1780 contest at the Berlin Academy showed how much had changed: the political maintenance of popular prejudice and the public diffusion of truth had become the topics of an open debate sponsored by an absolutist monarch via his Royal Academy. The shift was also due to Enlightenment notions of public utility. Within this framework, views that rendered citizens productive or "useful" did not necessarily qualify as prejudices and their holders were not deceived. This change of tone is apparent in the exchanges between Frederick and leading *philosophes*, preceded by discussions of the same themes by three authors in particular.

Bayle, Fontenelle, Voltaire

Pierre Bayle, Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle and Voltaire were not, of course, the only authors who discussed such issues from the late seventeenth century to the mid-eighteenth. Diderot and Helvétius, among others, held strong opinions on truth, deception, and popular prejudice.[40] The focus here is on authors whose views had become so widely known by the 1760s that they played a major role in the exchanges between Frederick and the *philosophes*. Voltaire, of course, maintained direct contact with Frederick, d'Alembert, and numerous other authors.

Pierre Bayle's appeal may be attributed to his broad range of positions, expressed in the characteristic ambiguity of his authorial voice. On the one hand, he repeatedly emphasized the gullibility of all human beings and expressed his exasperation with the credulity of the common people, notions he shared with seventeenth-century libertine

[37] Frederick II, "Introduction to *History of My Age*" in Frederick II, *PW*, 84; Frederick II, "Avant-propos" (1746) to *Histoire de mon temps*, in Frederick II, *OFG*, 2: ix. The final title was given to this work in its 1772 edition.

[38] Zagorin, *Ways of Lying*, 11.

[39] On the attitudes of libertine authors such as Pierre Charron and Gabriel Naudé to the common people and the question of dissimulation see Mortier, "Ésotérisme et Lumières," 61–3; Zagorin, *Ways of Lying*, 293–326. More broadly, see René Pintard's classic *Le libertinage érudit dans la première moitié du XVIIe siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1943); Jean-Pierre Cavaillé, *Dis/simulations: Jules-César Vanini, François La Mothe Le Vayer, Gabriel Naudé, Louis Machon et Torquato Accetto: Religion, morale et politique au XVIIe siècle* (Paris, 2002); Isabelle Moreau, *Guérir du sot: Les stratégies d'écriture des libertins à l'âge classique* (Paris, 2007), 211–34.

[40] D. W. Smith, "The 'useful lie' in Helvétius and Diderot," *Diderot Studies* 14 (1971), 185–95.

and skeptical authors. Bayle complained about the foolish attachment of the people to established traditions and their willingness to be deceived, as well as the wretched condition in which philosophers found themselves: being more enlightened than the multitude exposed them to constant danger.[41] Bayle went as far as to suggest that due to human idleness and the frailty of reason, politicians must have recourse to lies in order to govern the people. The great effort made to prevent alleged heretics from publicly preaching their views testified, for Bayle, to the common assumption that human beings were easily attracted by falsehoods.[42]

At the same time, Bayle presented himself as an apostle of the pursuit of truth. In Section 91 of *Pensées diverses sur la comète* (1682), Bayle initially conceded that "it is necessary to conduct oneself with great discretion and great care when one attacks the old errors of religion," which is why so many statesmen and clergymen believed "that there are several truths that it is not only unnecessary for the people to know, but of which it is expedient for the people to know the contrary." Yet on this occasion Bayle refused to accept such views: "while maintaining all the circumspection Christian prudence requires of us, it should be permitted to work towards the clarification of the truth in all things."[43] The ambiguity of Bayle's position on public enlightenment and the capacity of the lower classes to discern the truth would be reflected in the late eighteenth-century debate. Indeed, Frederick was a keen reader of Bayle, who praised his acumen in the preface to a selection of articles from the *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (coedited with d'Argens in 1765). The king's main lesson to readers of Bayle's *Dictionnaire* was, unsurprisingly, epistemic humility. He highlighted Bayle's exposure of contradictions in past philosophers' writings: "Such obstacles, by demonstrating to you the frailty of your mind, will inspire in you a wise caution [*sage timidité*]."[44]

The legacy of Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle is, arguably, even more ambiguous than Bayle's. Here was the perpetual secretary of the Académie des sciences in Paris, promoter of new discoveries and popularizer of scientific theories, arguing against the broad diffusion of truth. With one foot in the *âge classique* of the late seventeenth century and another in the mid-eighteenth-century Enlightenment, Fontenelle embodied in later debates the argument for an aristocracy of knowledge: a philosophical–scientific clergy should take care of intellectual progress without bothering to enlighten the broader population. This stance was encapsulated in an apocryphal adage attributed to Fontenelle. He was repeatedly quoted as saying that if he had the whole truth in his closed hand, he would not open his fingers to release and disseminate it to the people. Duclos, Voltaire, d'Alembert, and Frederick are among the authors who ascribed this maxim to Fontenelle although it cannot be found in any of his writings.

Fontenelle did, however, iterate this sentiment in his works, especially in the *Dialogues des morts anciens et modernes* (1683, extended edition 1724), modeled on

[41] Remark K in "Anaxagoras," in Bayle, *Dictionnaire*, 1: 225.

[42] Pierre Bayle, *Réponses aux questions d'un provinicial*, 4 vols. (Amsterdam, 1704–7), 2: Ch. 103, 368–9.

[43] Pierre Bayle, *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett (Albany, 2000), Section 91, 116; Bayle, *Pensées diverses, écrits à un docteur de Sorbonne, à l'occasion de la comète qui parut au mois de Decembre 1680*, 4th edn, 2 vols. (Amsterdam, 1704), 1: 175.

[44] Frederick II, *PW*, 127; Frederick II, *OFG*, 7: 145–6. See also Frederick's profuse praise of Bayle as a dialectician in *Essai de la littérature allemande* (1780) in *OFG*, 7: 123.

Lucian's ancient exchanges of the same genre. One of the most striking conversations, between the goddess Artemis and Ramon Llull, confirmed that some false beliefs were benign and even useful because they encouraged, consoled, and motivated human beings. The dialogue ended on a somewhat sombre note. To Artemis' point that it might be useful for people to be misled or mistaken (*trompés*), Llull added that "if, unfortunately, the truth revealed itself for what it is, everything would be lost. But it seems a good thing that the truth knows how important it is, thus always keeping itself hidden in some way."[45] Characteristically of Fontenelle, this observation was accompanied by a belief in slow scientific and philosophical progress. In this context, the polysemous French participle *trompé* should not be translated as "deceived" but rather as "erring" or "mistaken." In Fontenelle's dialogue, there is no agent performing deliberate deception: credulity and prejudice (or merely overreaching beyond the limits of our understanding) were innate aspects of human nature. This mild skepticism, combined with mitigated confidence in gradual if not linear progress, will be taken up by Frederick and his contemporaries.

Fontenelle's skepticism featured prominently in Voltaire's correspondence of the 1760s. In a letter to Helvétius in September 1763, Voltaire noted that when Fontenelle said that he would not open a hand full of truths, it was because he had let some truths out in his *Histoire des oracles* (1687), for which he had his knuckles rapped.[46] In 1766 the closed-hand metaphor was further developed: in a letter to Comte d'Argental, Voltaire noted that if he held the whole truth in his closed hand, he would open it suddenly before immediately withdrawing his hand. "If all philosophers had followed Fontenelle's cowardly maxim, where would we be? We would be groaning under the yoke of the most horrible fanaticism."[47] On other occasions, Voltaire was more appreciative of Fontenelle's character yet equally skeptical about the prospects of widespread enlightenment.[48] In 1756 he published a short piece dedicated squarely to popular prejudice and deception, entitled *Jusqu'à quel point on doit tromper le peuple?*.[49] This brief essay elevated ambiguity into an art. It included three short fables featuring superstitious protagonists, all gently outmaneuvred by well-meaning ruses or interlocutors. Launched by ridiculing those who think that "nine tenths of the human race should be treated like apes," the essay concluded by recognizing that attempts to enlighten the common people should sometimes be abandoned for the sake of public peace.

[45] Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle, *Nouveaux dialogues des morts, nouvelle édition augmentée* (The Hague, 1724), 171–2. This stance is reminiscent of the authorial gesture that Mulsow has called "Harpocratism": withdrawal or retreat in the face of misunderstanding by the "vulgar" (although Mulsow identifies it mostly with radical or underground authors). See Martin Mulsow, "Harpocratism: Gestures of Retreat in Early Modern Germany," *Common Knowledge* 16/1 (2010), 110–27; Mulsow, *Knowledge Lost: A New View of Early Modern Intellectual History*, trans. H. C. Erik Midelfort (Princeton, 2022), 200–23.

[46] Voltaire to Helvétius, 15 September 1763 (D11418), Voltaire, *OCV*, 110: 403.

[47] Voltaire to d'Argental, *c.*15 June 1766 (D13355), Voltaire, *OCV*, 114: 265.

[48] "There is another sort of rabble [*canaille*] to which everything is sacrificed, and this is the common people … It is for their sake that one goes to mass … and that the Chevalier de La Barre was condemned." Voltaire to Condorcet, 27 Jan. 1776, D19883, Voltaire, *OCV*, 126: 359. For further detail see Roland Mortier, "Voltaire et le peuple," in W. H. Barber et al., eds., *The Age of Enlightenment: Studies Presented to Theodore Besterman* (Edinburgh, 1967), 137–51.

[49] Voltaire, *OCV*, 45B: 37–42.

The 1760s witnessed the appearance of Voltaire's most renowned discussions of the public diffusion of truth: Chapter 20 of *Traité sur la tolérance* (1763) and the article "Fraude" in *Dictionnaire philosophique* of the following year. The title of the former was "Is It Useful to Keep People in Their Superstitions"; the subtitle of the latter is "Whether One Should Practice Pious Frauds on the People." In both cases, the argument was heavily conditioned and nuanced. The discussion in the *Traité sur la tolérance* began with the espousal of an ethics-based, simple religious creed, which Voltaire saw as the surest route to a viable, if limited, enlightenment of the common people. In the service of this purified religion, even superstitions might be justified: "The weakness and perversity of the human race are such that it is undoubtedly better for people to be under the influence of every possible superstition than to live without religion, on the condition that the superstitions do not incite people to murder."[50]

The entry "Fraude" in *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764) was another attempt to popularize Voltaire's religion of pure ethics. It was framed as a dialogue between a fakir, who believed in instilling superstitions in the common people to keep them in check, and a follower of Confucius who opposed this tactic and held the upper hand. On the one hand, the Confucian argued, "Our educated people are made of the same stuff as our tailors, weavers, and peasants … So why shouldn't we deign to give our workers an education like that available to the learned?"[51] But such an education must remain basic and useful for the sake of the common people as well as society at large: "I admit that human beings shouldn't all possess the same knowledge, but there are some things everyone should have. It's necessary for everyone to be just, and the surest way of making them so is to inspire them with a religion free of superstition."[52] Here it is important to note the distinction between prejudice and superstition. Superstition, for Voltaire, encompassed religious ceremonies and promises of redemption beyond the worship of a God–creator and his work (the eternal order of nature). Such superstition was almost always detrimental to human beings.[53] Prejudices, on the other hand, were at times "necessary, universal, and the very essence of virtue," as in making children believe in a providential God, respect their parents, and detest crime before they could independently perceive vice and virtue. Beneficial prejudices were "sanctioned by reason and judgement."[54]

In moments of setback and frustration, it was not unusual for Voltaire to complain that "the common people [*le vulgaire*] do not deserve to be enlightened."[55] Yet he did advocate a cautious, top-down enlightenment that was highly dependent on local contexts. In his eyes, the gradual conversion of the educated milieu, the ruling classes, and

[50]Voltaire, *Treatise on Toleration*, trans. and ed. Desmond M. Clarke (London, 2016), Ch. 20, 114; Voltaire, "Traité sur la tolérance," in Voltaire, *OCV*, 56C: 127–343, at 242.

[51]Voltaire, *A Pocket Philosophical Dictionary*, trans. John Fletcher, ed. Nicholas Cronk (Oxford, 2011), 145; Voltaire, *OCV*, 36: 138.

[52]Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, 146; Voltaire, *OCV*, 36: 139.

[53]"Superstition," in Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, 239–40; Voltaire, *OCV*, 36: 536-44.

[54]"Prejudices" in Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, 216; Voltaire, *OCV*, 36: 456.

[55]Voltaire to Mme Bentinck, *c.*23 June 1752, D4921, Voltaire, *OCV*, 97: 86: "Le vulgaire ne mérite pas qu'on pense à l'éclairer." On Voltaire's skeptical attitude to more than rudimentary instruction of the lower classes see Payne, *The Philosophes*, 94–7; Chisick, *Limits of Reform*, 89–95.

eventually even the clergy to the causes of tolerance and natural religion would create a trickle-down effect. It would improve the condition of the common people over time without ever completely removing residues of prejudice, superstition, and inhuman behaviour.

Frederick, d'Alembert, and Voltaire, 1763–1770

The works d'Holbach published pseudonymously in 1770, *Essai sur les préjugés* and *Système de la nature*, fell, therefore, into the fertile soil of lively debates over the human capacity for truth, the remit of its diffusion, and the education of the common people. The main trigger for these discussions was, however, political rather than philosophical: the expulsion of the Jesuits from France, Spain, and their colonies in the 1760s and the eventual suppression of the order by Pope Clement XIV in 1773 (to be reversed in 1814). Because the Jesuits had seen lay education as one of their main duties, their expulsion from France in November 1764 prompted a heated debate on educational reform. Administrators, *philosophes*, and clergymen discussed who should take over the Jesuit colleges, how education should be reorganized, and whether this was an opportunity for an overhaul or extension of traditional forms of education.[56] At the same time, the predominance of agriculture within the French economy weighed on any proposal to broaden secondary education beyond elite colleges in major towns. When, for example, René de La Chalotais excluded farmhands in 1763 from his plans for educational reform, Voltaire showered him with praise. Assuming the mantle of landowner and cultivator of the land (at his Ferney estate), Voltaire thanked La Chalotais for preventing the transformation of useful labourers into idle clerics.[57] In this context, how far should enlightenment extend? Should its advocates proceed cautiously, adapting themselves to contemporary beliefs and socioeconomic contexts, or promote the ultimate eradication of all prejudices and a reign of truth? The implications of broadly accessible education also depended, in these debates, on the social role of religion. Could a contemporary society properly function without popular belief in divine rewards and punishments? In their absence, what sanctions were required to maintain peace and order?

Yet another factor in these debates was Voltaire's newfound role, in the 1760s, as a public campaigner against religious persecution and judicial abuse. The most renowned cases were those of Jean Calas, a Protestant executed in March 1762 for

[56] Payne, *The Philosophes*, 97–116; Bernard Grosperrin, "Faut-il instruire le peuple? La réponse des physiocrates," *Cahiers d'histoire* 21 (1976) 157–69; Maurice Gontard, *L'enseignement secondaire en France de la fin de l'Ancien Régime à la loi Falloux (1750–1850)* (Aix-en-Provence, 1984), 22–8; Natasha Gill, *Educational Philosophy in the French Enlightenment: From Nature to Second Nature* (Farnham, 2010), 235–63; Gemma Tidman, *The Emergence of Literature in Eighteenth-Century France: The Battle of the School Books* (Liverpool, 2023), 72–8, 95–106.

[57] Voltaire commented on *Essai d'éducation nationale ou Plan d'études pour la jeunesse* (1763) in a letter to the author, Louis-René de Caradeuc de La Chalotais, 28 Feb. 1763 (D11051), Voltaire, *OCV*, 110: 83. See also the article "Fertilisation" in *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* (1771), where Voltaire railed against the "so-called equality of human beings which some sophists make fashionable," arguing that most men of "common intelligence" should be employed in agriculture. Voltaire, *OCV*, 41: 367, 372.

allegedly murdering his son after the latter's conversion to Catholicism; the Sirven family, Protestants accused of murdering their daughter, who fled in 1762 to Switzerland; and the Chevalier de La Barre, executed in 1766 in Abbeville for blasphemy and public profanation. These affairs turned into causes célèbres that popularized Voltaire's motto "écrasez l'Infâme!", his call to crush the lethal persecution sanctioned by the Catholic Church and the civil courts in France. Frederick followed these campaigns avidly from afar: his correspondence with Voltaire and d'Alembert exposed the disagreements within this little flock of deists.

The fate of the Chevalier de La Barre was the topic on which Frederick chose to provoke his public advocate, Voltaire. How could the judges have ruled against the law of the land, Frederick asked Voltaire rhetorically: by ridiculing the crucifix and committing public blasphemy, the young chevalier and his accomplices were guilty of offending common beliefs and customs (however irrational). It is here that Frederick put his finger on the nexus of public prejudice and the freedom of thought and expression:

> Should we clash head-on with prejudices that time has enshrined in people's minds? And, if we want to enjoy freedom of thought, should we insult established beliefs? Anyone who does not want to stir things up is rarely persecuted. Remember the words of Fontenelle: "If my hand were full of truths, I would think more than once before opening it." The common people do not deserve to be enlightened; and, if your *parlement* took action against this unfortunate young man who had struck down what Christians revere as the symbol of their salvation, blame the laws of the kingdom.[58]

Here Frederick quoted Voltaire's own occasional views on the common people back at him while challenging his stance on the chevalier's execution. The king repeated the point a few days later, comparing Calas's innocence to the young chevalier's active transgression of common norms.[59] Anticipating his much sharper attack on d'Holbach in 1770, Frederick distinguished here, much like Voltaire himself, between malign superstition and inevitable prejudice. He expected intellectuals to make the same distinction and demonstrate their self-touted public utility. His own toleration and asylum policy, Frederick argued, was predicated on the gradual spread of enlightenment without disturbance of the social order. If Socrates attended public sacrifice in Athens and Gassendi went to the Catholic Mass, philosophy should operate within the public predicament where it found itself: "Toleration, in any society, must ensure that everyone is free to believe what they like; but this toleration must not extend to authorizing the effrontery and licence of young fools who audaciously insult what the people revere."[60] At the same time, Frederick tried to show that in Brandenburg-Prussia, everyone could pursue their peculiar prejudices as long as they did not harm others. This applied even to the Jesuits and to the accomplice of the Chevalier de La Barre, Morival d'Étallonde, who had been indicted in Abbeville and by the Paris *parlement*. Frederick granted him an officer's commission in Wesel, grateful to the French government for

[58] Frederick to Voltaire, 7 Aug. 1766, Frederick II, *OFG*, 23: 115.

[59] Frederick to Voltaire, 13 Aug. 1766, Frederick II, *OFG*, 23: 116.

[60] Ibid., 117.

allowing him to assume yet again the mantle of magnanimous provider of asylum for the persecuted.[61]

Frederick's challenge extended, in fact, to Voltaire's entire campaigns. If Voltaire often distinguished between the common people and the proper addressees of enlightenment (higher social echelons and the literate bourgeoisie), his public battles and publications in accessible forms testified to his confidence in the gradual diffusion of reason across social strata. For Voltaire, the slow undermining of persecution and religious dogma should eventually leave in its wake a basic cult of a God–creator and a moral catechism that was comprehensible even to illiterate farmhands.

Frederick, for his part, repeatedly poured cold water on Voltaire's programme in the late 1760s. He portrayed his correspondent's plans as beautiful illusions that would benefit humanity, but illusions nonetheless. The overwhelming majority of the people, Frederick told Voltaire, were condemned to error. Labouring for subsistence, they did not have enough leisure to verse themselves in geometry and philosophy. "If one man in a thousand is thinking, that's a lot. You and your kind write for him; the rest are scandalized, and they charitably damn you."[62] Any attempt to establish a new creed or simplify existing dogmas would be either quickly reversed or halted midway by priests, miseducated rulers, and the populace itself.[63] While occasionally expressing his wish for the eventual extirpation of all religious superstitions, on the whole Frederick presented himself as doing whatever he could within the limits of his predicament.[64] The gradual enlightenment of a broad public would not happen overnight, nor by engaging in metaphysical debates on the nature of God and his attributes, but rather by "reforming the ordinary colleges, the universities and even the village schools."[65] Throughout Frederick's reign, teachers' training was centralized (1747 and 1752), obligatory school attendance was extended (1763), and, shortly after his death, schools were declared state institutions (1794), though there always remained a yawning gap between the king's decrees and their implementation.[66] The sluggish pace of educational reform in Prussia was not, however, unusual: serious consideration of genuine popular education (beyond basic instruction) was not a mainstay of Enlightenment discussions. Even authors of the German *Volksaufklärung*, a movement for popular education that gathered pace in the 1780s, rarely suggested more than basic tuition and agricultural or artisanal training for the labouring classes. In their treatises, too, the peasantry was regarded with "a mixture of moral concern, cultural superiority and distrust of the

[61] Frederick II, *OFG*, 23: 142, 24: 468–9. On Frederick's toleration of the Jesuits see his letters to d'Alembert of 7 January 1768, 11 March 1774, and 28 July 1774. Frederick II, *OFG*, 24: 475, 688–9, 700; and Paul Shore, "Ex-Jesuits in the East Habsburg Lands, Silesia and Poland," in Jeffrey D. Burson and Jonathan Wright, eds., *The Jesuit Suppression in Global Context: Causes, Events, and Consequences* (Cambridge, 2015), 229–47.

[62] Frederick to Voltaire, 25 Feb. 1766, Frederick II, *OFG*, 23: 112.

[63] Frederick to Voltaire, Aug. 1766, Frederick II, *OFG*, 23: 120.

[64] Frederick to Voltaire, 16 Sept. 1770, Frederick II, *OFG*, 23: 191.

[65] Frederick to d'Alembert, 6 Oct. 1772, Frederick II, *OFG*, 24: 644.

[66] Andreas Flitner, *Die politische Erziehung in Deutschland: Geschichte und Probleme 1750–1880* (Tübingen, 1957), 20–23; Anthony J. La Vopa, *Prussian Schoolteachers: Profession and Office, 1763–1848* (Chapel Hill, 1980), 11–51; Wolfgang Neugebauer, *Absolutistischer Staat und Schulwirklichkeit in Brandenburg-Preussen* (Berlin, 1985).

Other."[67] In this case, the situation was similar in France and Prussia despite their different sociopolitical contexts.

Frederick became at once more confident and optimistic when the conversation turned to practical matters. What caught his imagination was Voltaire's half-serious proposal, in 1766–7, to establish a colony of persecuted intellectuals in the small Prussian territory of Cleves in the northern Rhineland, close to the Dutch Republic.[68] While nothing ever came out of this initiative, it allowed Voltaire and Frederick to put imaginary flesh on the vision of a community of philosophers, governed by a self-styled philosopher–king, separate from the common people, while attempting to spread enlightenment in print. Frederick stressed time and again that a fully enlightened society would always remain a small-scale affair, eventually succumbing to the human craving for the wondrous and the marvelous.[69] Anywhere and everywhere, new prejudices would occupy the place of eradicated ones: "The small dose of common sense spread over the surface of this globe is, it seems to me, sufficient to establish only a widely scattered society, much like that of the Jesuits, but not a state."[70] No need, then, for Pierre Bayle's fictive society of virtuous atheists: even a minuscule colony of reasonable deists, in Cleves or elsewhere, could not constitute a model for larger, stable polities.

Voltaire, in response, encouraged his correspondent to uproot the worst superstitions among those who could be enlightened: "I am not talking about the rabble [*la canaille*], who are not worthy of enlightenment, and for whom all yokes are appropriate; I am talking about respectable people [*honnêtes gens*], men who think, men who want to think."[71] Voltaire may have told Frederick what the king wanted to hear, but the sentiment was amply present in his writings at the time of the Chevalier de La Barre affair. In a letter of April 1766 to Damilaville, Voltaire distinguished sharply between *honnêtes gens* and the *peuple*, those who laboured for their subsistence. "It is not the manual worker that we should instruct, it is the good bourgeois, the city resident"—already a substantial task, according to Voltaire.[72]

The substitution of a socially useful religion for popular superstition made an appearance also in the king's correspondence with d'Alembert, which was more explicitly focused on the education of the lower classes. It was, in fact, Frederick who channeled his doubts about the limits of the human mind in a religious direction,

[67] Jonathan B. Knudsen, "On Enlightenment for the Common Man," in Schmidt, *What Is Enlightenment?*, 270–90, at 283. Cf. Holger Böning, "Entgrenzte Aufklärung: Die Entwicklung der Volksaufklärung von der ökonomischen Reform zur Emanzipationsbewegung," in Holger Böning, Hanno Schmitt, and Reinhart Siegert, eds., *Volkaufklärung: Eine praktische Reformbewegung des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts* (Bremen, 2007), 13–50; Holger Böning and Reinhart Siegert, "Einführung in den 1. Teil," in Böning and Siegert, eds., *"Volksaufklärung": Bibliographisches Handbuch zur Popularisierung aufklärerischen Denkens im deutschen Sprachraum von den Anfängen bis 1850*, vol. 1 (Stuttgart–Bad Cannstatt, 1990), xxii–xlvii.

[68] Frederick to Voltaire, Dec. 1766, Frederick II, *OFG*, 23: 130. On this scheme see Christiane Mervaud, *Voltaire et Frédéric II: Une dramaturgie des Lumières. 1736–1778* (Oxford, 1985), 378–80.

[69] Frederick to Voltaire, 13 Sept. 1766, in Frederick II, *OFG*, 23: 123: "If philosophers established a government, after half a century the people would forge new superstitions."

[70] Ibid.

[71] Voltaire to Frederick, 5 Jan. 1767, Frederick II, *OFG*, 23: 134.

[72] Voltaire to Damilaville, 1 April 1766, Voltaire, *OCV*, 114: 155.

confronting d'Alembert in November 1769 with the question "whether people can do without fables in a religious system."[73] In the same vein of his exchange with Voltaire, Frederick teased d'Alembert by denying the prospects of a rational religion without recourse to fables of some sort. Used to such provocations from his royal interlocutor, d'Alembert knew well how to transform them into a challenge. In December 1769, he suggested setting the question "whether it is possible for the people to dispense with fables in a religious system" as the topic of an essay competition at the Berlin Academy. D'Alembert did not neglect to add a bait by insisting that "men should always be taught the truth, and there is never any real advantage in deceiving them."[74]

The king's reply, in January 1770, was a dress rehearsal for his refutations of d'Holbach's writings a few months later. The imagination was much stronger than reason, Frederick stated, "because the marvellous system seduces." Throughout human history, religions have been "a mixture of absurd fables and a morality necessary to the maintenance of society."[75] This argument from history was accompanied by one of Frederick's constantly repeated points, the very small share of right-thinking human beings in any society:

> If eight-tenths of the nation, preoccupied with subsistence, do not read; if another tenth do not apply themselves to study due to frivolity, debauchery, or ineptitude, it follows that the little good sense of which our species is capable can only reside in the smallest part of a nation … We must be content to be wise for ourselves, if we can, and abandon the common people to error, trying to turn them away from crimes that disturb the social order. Fontenelle said very well that if he had a hand full of truths, he wouldn't open it to communicate them to the public, because this wasn't worth the trouble. I am more or less of the same opinion.[76]

Frederick's casual reference to Fontenelle's closed hand was not lost on d'Alembert. Superstition might be the food of the masses, he replied, only because they have not been offered a more wholesome fare:

> It seems to me that you should not, like Fontenelle, keep your hand closed when you are sure you have the truth in it; you should only open the fingers of your hand wisely and cautiously, one after the other, and little by little your hand will be completely open and the truth will emerge from it in its entirety. The philosophers who open their hand too abruptly are fools; their fist is cut off, and that

[73] Frederick to d'Alembert, 25 Nov. 1769, Frederick II, *OFG*, 24: 514.

[74] D'Alembert to Frederick, 18 Dec. 1769, Frederick II, *OFG*, 24: 517.

[75] Frederick to d'Alembert, 8 Jan. 1770, Frederick II, *OFG*, 24: 521.

[76] Ibid., 522–3. In his correspondence and published writings, Frederick repeatedly made such arithmetic arguments, emphasizing the insignificant share of serious readers, writers, and thinkers in any contemporary nation (cf. his response to d'Holbach's *Essai sur les préjugés* in Frederick II, *PW*, 164; Frederick II, *OFG*, 9: 156). A similar point had been made by Voltaire in his *Letters Concerning the English Nation* of the early 1730s: "If we divide Mankind into twenty Parts, 'twill be found that nineteen of these consist of Persons employ'd in manual Labour, who will never know that such a Man as Mr. *Locke* existed. In the remaining twentieth Part how few are Readers? And among such as are so, twenty amuse themselves with Romances to one who studies Philosophy." Voltaire, *Letters*, ed. Cronk, Ch. 13, 60; Voltaire, *OCV*, 6B: 119.

> is all they gain. But those who keep their hand firmly closed are not doing for humanity what they owe it.[77]

By repeatedly posing a challenge to Frederick's grim vision of public enlightenment, d'Alembert also confronted the king with an unflattering portrait. A self-proclaimed *philosophe*, even if he happened to be a monarch, should be socially useful, as Frederick himself recurrently argued. If the king regarded a *philosophe* as more than a Stoic recluse, he owed something to humanity and had to discharge certain duties to qualify for the title.[78]

The pressure was only moderately effective. In April 1770, Frederick sent a detailed reply, where he once again played the realist statesman distinguishing between theory and practice.[79] While d'Alembert remained politely unimpressed by Frederick's lukewarm endorsement of the fight against superstition, his remedy was rather mild—patient gradualism and indirect action:

> I think that instead of force we should employ finesse and patience, attacking error obliquely and without appearing to mind it, establishing contrary truths on solid principles while taking care not to apply them in any way. We must not aim the cannon directly at the house, because those who defend it would fire a hail of rifle shots from the windows; we must slowly build another, more habitable and convenient house next door. Gradually and imperceptibly, everyone will come to live in this one, and the house full of leopards will be deserted.[80]

A fascinating sub-thread in the correspondence between Frederick and d'Alembert (and a clear case where the *philosophe* made the king change his mind) concerned the material conditions of the lower classes. In January 1770, d'Alembert asked the king whether a destitute father, responsible for the subsistence of his family, could legitimately steal from richer citizens if all his pleas for charity had been ignored and if he could evade punishment.[81] Initially Frederick argued that state-sponsored welfare schemes and private charity made the case of near-starvation unrealistic. Yet following d'Alembert's insistence on a case of extreme indigence, Frederick relented in April 1770, admitting that on some occasions, stealing was not only legitimate, but amounted to a virtuous action:

> If by chance a family were deprived of all assistance and in the dreadful state you describe, I would not hesitate to determine that theft becomes legitimate for them: 1° because they have been denied help instead of receiving it; 2° because allowing oneself, one's wife, and one's children to perish is a far greater crime than robbing someone of their superfluous possessions; 3° because the intention to steal is virtuous, and the action is an indispensable necessity … The bonds

[77] D'Alembert to Frederick, 9 March 1770, Frederick II, *OFG*, 24: 527.

[78] See Shiru Lim, "Frederick the Great and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert on Philosophy, Truth, and Politics," *Historical Journal* 61/2 (2018), 357–78.

[79] Frederick to d'Alembert, 3 April 1770, Frederick II, *OFG*, 24: 529.

[80] D'Alembert to Frederick, 30 April 1770, Frederick II, *OFG*, 24: 535.

[81] D'Alembert to Frederick, 29 Jan. 1770, Frederick II, *OFG*, 24: 524.

> of society are established on reciprocal service; but if this society is made up of ruthless souls, all commitments are broken and we return to the pure state of nature, where the right of the strongest determines everything.[82]

Frederick's concession and the entire episode demonstrate that the debate on the extension of enlightenment and popular prejudice did not concern only the means and media of educating the common people.[83] It also addressed socioeconomic issues and compelled both king and *philosophe* to contemplate the consequences of the unequal distribution of wealth. In his reply to Frederick, d'Alembert noted that one could not acknowledge publicly the legitimacy of theft in the case of extreme poverty, and that this "prevents us from producing a complete work on morality for the use of all classes of society." D'Alembert concluded on a grim pragmatic note, noting that

> the distribution of fortunes in society is monstrously unequal; that it is as atrocious as it is absurd to see some overflowing with the superfluous and others lacking the necessary. But, especially in large States, this evil is irreparable, and we may sometimes be forced to sacrifice victims, even innocent ones, to prevent the poor members of society from arming themselves against the rich, as they would be tempted and perhaps entitled to do.[84]

D'Alembert confronted the king with what he perceived as the structural injustice inherent both in the Old Regime society of estates and in modern commercial society. Like Voltaire and Adam Smith, he was willing to condone such inequalities, but he did so reluctantly, highlighting the ensuing impediment to universal ethics. In addition to epistemic and religious obstacles, public enlightenment had its socioeconomic limits.[85]

D'Holbach's challenge, Frederick's rejoinder

It was in May 1770 that Frederick confessed to Voltaire and d'Alembert his frustration with the newly published *Essai sur les préjugés*. A refutation of the *Essai* was sent to his correspondents in the same month and published shortly afterwards. As the king did not know the author's identity, this was not an ad hominem diatribe against d'Holbach, severe as its tone was. What was it, then, about the *Essai* that Frederick found objectionable enough to wrestle in public with its author?

The main thesis of d'Holbach's *Essai* may be summarized as an epistemic paraphrase on the opening line of Rousseau's *Du contrat social*, "Man is born free but everywhere he is in chains," with error and prejudice replacing political shackles. All around him, d'Holbach found human beings in thrall to prejudice, superstition, and falsehoods. Initially spawned by priests, these webs of error were maintained by governments

[82] Frederick to d'Alembert, 3 April 1770, Frederick II, *OFG*, 24: 528–9.

[83] Cf. Lilti, *L'héritage des Lumières*, 269–96.

[84] D'Alembert to Frederick, 30 April 1770, Frederick II, *OFG*, 24: 534–5.

[85] Frederick discussed a similar scenario some twenty years earlier in *Dissertation sur les raisons d'établir ou d'abroger les lois*. There he argued against the application of capital punishment in the case of theft for subsistence without condoning the act itself. Frederick II, *PW*, 101; Frederick II, *OFG*, 9: 29.

that have always found in religious institutions willing partners for the enslavement of the people. Religious charlatans have grounded morality in future rewards and punishments instead of simple utility, thereby rendering it uncertain and vague.[86] Kings should be shown "the futility of a policy which makes it a principle to deceive the people"; government ought to work, at last, for the common good by putting an end to the widespread persecution of "useful citizens," promoting the freedom of thought and extending religious toleration.[87] Unlike the authors we have so far followed, d'Holbach solemnly declared, "There is no error that is useful to mankind; there is no prejudice that does not have more or less terrible consequences for society."[88] Remove the religious–political obstacles and human beings, destined for the truth, would gladly pursue it to its logical end. In sum, "the distinctive character of truth is that it is equally and constantly advantageous to all parties," easily discoverable in the present or discernible in history.[89]

At the same time, d'Holbach combined his strong confidence in truth and reason with the more common awareness of the limits of human nature. The *Essai* is interspersed with statements such as "error is an innate disease of the human race";[90] "Passions, worldly business, pleasures, temperament, laziness, and natural dispositions prevent human beings from searching for truth" (rather than religious or political deception);[91] "If man is stubbornly attached to his prejudices, it is because he believes them necessary for his rest and well-being in this world and the next."[92] D'Holbach still railed against this condition, natural or artificially induced. He encouraged philosophers to undermine what one may call the false consciousness of the people.[93]

If the lofty argument about the comprehensive diffusion of truth set d'Holbach apart from most *philosophes*, his dismissive reference to "the opinion of the imbecile common people" revealed a derisive, or at least highly ambiguous, attitude towards the lower classes.[94] Despite his repeated statements on the simplicity and accessibility of truth, d'Holbach shared the *philosophes*' deep skepticism about the intellectual capacities of the common people. He argued that philosophers must always be judicious, addressing only a specific milieu; they also had to fine-tune their message to the capacities of their audience. Chapter 3 of the *Essai* acknowledged that the only proper target for public intellectuals was the educated upper and middle classes:

[86] [D'Holbach], *Essai sur les préjugés, ou De l'influence des opinions sur les moeurs & sur le bonheur des hommes. Ouvrage contenant l'apologie de la philosophie, par Mr. D.M* (London [Amsterdam], 1770), 11–13, 27–30. In 1768 d'Holbach published *Lettres à Eugénie, ou Préservatif contre les préjugés*, a work dedicated to religious issues with no serious analysis of prejudices and their function.

[87] *Essai*, 20–23.

[88] Ibid., 42.

[89] Ibid., 30.

[90] Ibid., 50.

[91] Ibid., 7–8.

[92] Ibid., 356.

[93] Ibid., 14–15.

[94] Ibid., 15.

> Therefore, every writer must have in mind the middle part of a nation, which reads, which is interested in good order, and which is, so to speak, a proportional average between the great and the common people. The people who read and think in a nation are not the most to be feared. Revolutions are made by fanatics, by ambitious grandees, by priests, by soldiers, and by an imbecile populace who neither reads nor reasons.[95]

By contrast to their role as truth-warriors elsewhere in the *Essai*, philosophers are presented here as prudent and politically dependable authors. This argument rehashed the self-justification of seventeenth-century libertine authors or heterodox thinkers such as Spinoza and Bayle: the natural limits of the human mind and the socioeconomic predicament of the common people strictly circumscribed the audience of philosophy, thereby neutralizing its political impact. Voltaire, too, occasionally excused, along these lines, the slow pace of public enlightenment. Already in the *Lettres philosophiques* of the 1730s he argued, "The thinking Part of Mankind are confin'd to a very small number, and these will never disturb the Peace and Tranquility of the World."[96] Yet despite d'Holbach's distinctions between the "imbecile populace" and the literate middle classes, he urged philosophers to speak the whole truth regardless of present-day prejudice and most sociopolitical contexts.[97] Frederick, d'Alembert, and Voltaire begged to differ, while sharing d'Holbach's doubts about the capacities of the lower classes.

Beyond the content of the *Essai sur les préjugés*, Frederick seems to have been piqued particularly by the author's tone and style. The king perceived in the *Essai* the extreme self-assurance characteristic of enthusiasts and fanatics, the *philosophes*' bugbears who, enamoured with their own arguments, neglected to apply a healthy dose of skepticism to their views. While the focus here is on the published reply to the *Essai sur les préjugés*, Frederick made a similar point in his unpublished response to d'Holbach's *Système de la nature*, focused on more abstract issues such as God's existence and human freedom. The king put his finger, in his introduction, on what he saw as the author's main fault, the lack of epistemic humility:

> To lose one's way is pardonable when one enters a labyrinth in which so many others have gone astray. It would appear, however, that this shadowy path can be

[95] Ibid., 47 n. See also a similar comment in Ch. 14 (*Essai*, 381). Lough has suggested that Jacques-André Naigeon might have inserted his own footnotes into d'Holbach's *Essai*. Since the authorship of the text was unknown upon publication, this hypothesis matters little for the reception of the *Essai*. John Lough, "Essai de bibliographie critique des publications du Baron d'Holbach," *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* 46/3–4 (1939), 215–34.

[96] Voltaire, *Letters*, ed. Cronk, 60; Voltaire, *OCV*, 6B: 119. This point should nuance the dichotomous distinction between "moderates" like Voltaire and "radicals" such as d'Holbach, who shared some strategies and views despite major disagreements. For the distinction see Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 648–75; Philipp Blom, *Wicked Company: Freethinking and Friendship in Pre-revolutionary Paris* (London, 2011), xv–xvi, 313–16.

[97] On these tensions in d'Holbach's authorial persona see Alain Sandrier, *Le style philosophique du baron d'Holbach: Conditions et contraintes du prosélytisme athée dans la seconde moitié du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 2004), 81–94; and Nicholas Cronk, "Who Are d'Holbach's Readers?", in Laura Nicolì, ed., *The Great Protector of Wits: Baron d'Holbach and His Time* (Leiden, 2022), 253–74.

> followed with less risk if one doubts one's own judgement, if one remembers that in speculation of this kind the guidance of experience deserts us and we are left only with probabilities, stronger or weaker, on which we may base our opinions. This consideration is in itself enough to inspire restraint and humility in every philosopher who wishes to establish a system.[98]

Unwarranted self-confidence in the powers of human reason was also at the root of most other problems that Frederick identified in the *Essai sur les préjugés*. The king imagined a wiser philosopher who could have proposed, instead of d'Holbach's great transformation, to remove the most absurd dogmas, rectify institutional abuses of power, and deprive the clergy of political and judicial power. "In this way, religion would become a purely speculative matter with no bearing on morality and government, superstition would diminish, and tolerance would spread more widely every day."[99] This stance recapitulated, at times almost verbatim, the themes and arguments that stood at the centre of Frederick's exchanges with Voltaire and d'Alembert in the 1760s. Here too, he drew on speculative statistics to argue that only 200,000 souls could be philosophically persuaded in a nation, like France, of roughly 16 million inhabitants.[100] Human epistemic capacities and the course of history converged to buttress Frederick's sombre view "that man is born to err, that error holds sway over the whole universe, and that we scarcely see more clearly than do moles"; that "the world is awash with prejudice and superstition" and thus "truth was not made for man."[101]

There was, however, more to Frederick's long-standing emphasis on natural inclinations and the limits of reason. Quixotic attempts to transform human nature were, Frederick suggested, a form of despotism. Such idealistic projects ran against human experience. The author of the *Essai sur les préjugés* presumed, according to Frederick, to tell most human beings what was in their best interests. This point was particularly evident in the king's critique of religious transformation with no regard to existing customs and beliefs. He wondered about the practicalities: how, for instance, people would be inculcated in the principles of the new natural–ethical religion and who would run the schools. Frederick's example was the forced Catholic education of Huguenot children in France: at home, these pupils were disabused of everything they had learned at school and retaught Calvin's catechism. "It is an act of violence to deny fathers the freedom to bring up their children as they wish," Frederick argued, "and a violent act to send these children to a school of natural religion when their fathers wish them to be Catholics like themselves."[102] In the subsequent reply to the *Système de la nature*, the argument was extended from the religious sphere to the political:

> No doubt all governments of civilised peoples concern themselves with public education. What, then, are the colleges, the academies, the universities with

[98] Frederick II, "Critical Examination of *The System of Nature*," in Frederick II, *PW*, 179; Frederick II, "Examen critique du Système de la nature," in Frederick II, *OFG*, 9: 179.

[99] Frederick II, *PW*, 166; Frederick II, *OFG*, 9: 159.

[100] Frederick II, *PW*, 164; Frederick II, *OFG*, 9: 156.

[101] Frederick II, *PW*, 162; Frederick II, *OFG*, 9: 154.

[102] Frederick II, *PW*, 165; Frederick II, *OFG*, 9: 157.

> which Europe teems, if they are not establishments dedicated to the instruction of the young? … There is no need for a Sovereign to rummage in the affairs of families and to meddle with what goes on in private houses, which can only result in the most odious tyranny.[103]

At first sight, this is a peculiar spectacle: an absolutist monarch accusing his interlocutor of despotism while defending a policy of laissez-faire. Yet it is important to bear in mind that Frederick repeatedly endorsed the freedom of thought and, in most cases, expression (a "philosophical freedom" distinct from political liberty).[104] Whatever did not form part of the original social contract remained outside the remit of the state, and projects that ran against natural drives and historical precedent could not be imposed by force. Epistemic humility and the limits of the human mind vindicated probability and governmental prudence against what Frederick regarded as prophetic zeal.

The king shared the vacillation of Voltaire, d'Alembert, and even d'Holbach between belief in gradual reform, on the one hand, and condescension towards the common people, on the other. His responses to d'Holbach's writings also demonstrate how the exciting ideas of the 1730s had assumed a pessimistic tone by the 1770s. Sober acceptance of human nature with all its defects was a liberating move in the late seventeenth century and the early eighteenth, implying a clean break with Christian or republican notions of virtue and disinterestedness. In the meantime, Pope's dictum "Whatever is, is right" (initially a legitimization of fallen human nature) revealed its side effects: weariness of change and distrust of anything that had not been historically recorded.

A "rhetoric of reaction"?

When Frederick surrendered once again to d'Alembert's pressure, in October 1777, and forced the Berlin Academy to run a prize contest on the usefulness of popular deception, the academicians expressed their concern. Eventually they modified the question, with the king's consent, from "whether it is useful to deceive the people" to "whether it is useful for the people to be deceived." Their intervention was not only an attempt to neuter an ominous Machiavellian echo; it reframed the issue within the long eighteenth-century discussions surveyed in this article. The full question—"Is it useful for the people to be mistaken or deceived [*trompé*], either by being led into new errors or by maintaining present ones?"[105]—testifies to the deep roots of the contest in debates over human error and social utility. If, for the uninitiated, the topic concerned the cynical exploitation of the people by dissimulating rulers, the Academy highlighted

[103] Frederick II, *PW*, 186; Frederick II, *OFG*, 9: 189.

[104] See Avi Lifschitz, "Philosophy and Political Agency in the Writings of Frederick II of Prussia," *Historical Journal* 64/3 (2021), 533–56.

[105] "Est-il utile au Peuple d'être trompé, soit que l'on l'induise dans de nouvelles erreurs, ou qu'on l'entretienne dans celles où il est?", in Adolf von Harnack, *Geschichte der Königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, 4 vols. in 3 (Berlin, 1900), 2: 308. On reactions to the king's unusual directive see Werner Krauss, ed., *Est-il utile de tropmer le peuple?* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1966), 4–5; Hans Adler, *Nützt es dem Volke, betrogen zu werden?/Est-il utile au Peuple d'être trompé? Die Preisfrage der Preußischen Akademie für 1780*, 2 vols. (Stuttgart–Bad Cannstatt, 2007), 1: xxxiv–li. See also Élisabeth Décultut and Daniel Weidner (eds.), *Nützt es dem Volk, betrogen zu werden? Eine Debatte zur Politik der Aufklärung* (Basel, 2025).

the links between the set question and contemporary debates on the limits of the human understanding and the ensuing, inevitable prejudices. Indeed, in the exchanges preceding the formal announcement of the contest, Academy member Nicolas Beguelin suggested replacing the "errors" in the prize question with "prejudices."[106] Although the proposal was not unanimously approved, this is another case where an exclusive rendering of the multivalent French participle *trompé* as "deceived" prioritizes only one of its senses, that of deliberate deception, at the expense of others.

The Berlin prize contest of 1780 did not, therefore, inaugurate a brand new set of debates on public enlightenment. Nor was it the terminus of a trajectory on which the Prussian king suddenly embarked in 1770 in his critiques of d'Holbach's treatises. (In any case, Frederick and d'Alembert did not show any interest in the essays submitted to the contest.)[107] The conversations on useful prejudices preceded Frederick's refutations of d'Holbach: they had a long pedigree stretching from the Crown prince's early essay on errors of the mind (innocent because unavoidable) and the *Anti-Machiavel* to the mature monarch's exchanges with Voltaire and d'Alembert in the 1760s, occasioned by the expulsion of the Jesuits from France and Voltaire's campaigns against religious persecution. For Frederick, the sober recognition of the limits of self-enlightenment and the constraints on public enlightenment remained a prerequisite for extensive toleration, apparent in his 1738 essay and, later, in his response to the execution of the Chevalier de La Barre.

Such arguments for the utility of some popular prejudices (rather than superstition or malicious deception) were not the exclusive preserve of Frederick and his coterie. David Hume had pointed out, around 1740, the personal and social utility of prejudices we could hardly do without.[108] The *Encyclopédie* article on prejudice (1765), by Louis de Jaucourt, began with its older definition as a premature or false judgment, only to portray prejudice, later on, as a universal and inevitable feature of human nature.[109] A year later, Georg Friedrich Meier (a philosophy professor at the Prussian University of Halle) published an entire treatise on prejudices, emphasizing not only their social utility but also their indispensability as a launchpad for practical action.[110] In Berlin, in the context of the 1780 prize competition, Jean Henri Samuel Formey joined the

[106] Adler, *Nützt es dem Volke*, 1: xlvii–xlviii.

[107] Forty-two essays were submitted to the Academy, of which nine were excluded on formal grounds. Of the rest, twenty essays answered the question in the negative, thirteen in the affirmative. The prize was divided between the positive answer of Frédéric de Castillon, a mathematician and philosopher (later professor at the Ritterakademie in Berlin), and a negative one by Rudolph Zacharias Becker, a journalist and major author in the *Volksaufklärung* movement. Harnack, *Geschichte*, 3: 308–9; Adler, *Nützt es dem Volke*, 1: xxxiv–li.

[108] David Hume, "Of Moral Prejudices," in Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp, Mark A. Box, and Micheal Silverthorne, 2 vols. (Oxford, 2021), 1: 7–10. This piece was last published in the 1742 edition of Hume's *Essays*.

[109] Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, eds., *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, University of Chicago, ARTFL Encyclopédie Project (Autumn 2022 edn), ed. Robert Morrissey and Glenn Roe, at http://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu, 13: 285.

[110] Meier, *Beyträge zu der Lehre von den Vorurtheilen des menschlichen Geschlechts* (Halle, 1766). See esp. Section 51, arguing that the toleration of benign prejudices among one's peers did not amount to deception.

choir affirming the utility of beneficial prejudices, especially in religious matters. Such beliefs were socially useful because they provided individuals with consolation and comfort, as in the case of the immortality of the soul.[111] In 1771, Voltaire added a final sentence to the article "Fraude" in *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* (1770–72), otherwise largely recycled from his *Dictionnaire philosophique* of 1764. The revised version concluded with the statement, "Let us remember, above all, that a philosopher must announce a god if he wants to be useful to human society."[112] Voltaire's point was the public utility of benign, if irrational, prejudice, not too differently from the appeal of Rousseau's lawgiver (in *Du contrat social*) to superhuman entities in order to "persuade without convincing" or Rousseau's emphasis on emotive ways of political persuasion (in *Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne*).[113]

By defending this intellectual amalgam against d'Holbach's attacks, Frederick could credibly consider himself a guardian of Enlightenment rather than its detractor. The radicals betrayed, in his eyes as in Voltaire's and d'Alembert's, the central Enlightenment principle of epistemic humility. Instead of focusing on gradual reform and what was cumulatively achievable, they fantasized about unlimited insight (all human beings grasping the whole truth) and erected on this shaky foundation an ambitious edifice of social regeneration. Frederick presented himself as a champion of Enlightenment against authors he regarded as newfangled zealots, system builders who risked the achievements of the preceding decades: increasing toleration, ongoing political reform, and a tentative alliance between philosophy and government. Unwarranted confidence in the power of reason, Voltaire and Frederick warned, might alienate its addressees while forcing governments to wage public war on the *philosophes*.

If, in the 1930s, Franco Venturi cast Frederick as a totalitarian despot, even in calmer times the heavily circumscribed enlightenment endorsed by the king, d'Alembert, and Voltaire could raise serious doubts. Did it amount to more than a version of the Augustinian Fall, highlighting the ineffectiveness of any attempt to transform the human world?[114] Did these authors not prefigure what Albert Hirschman called "the rhetoric of reaction," a set of preemptive arguments casting progressive change as either futile or counterproductive?[115] The charge of hypocrisy too might be levelled against our protagonists (and many other *philosophes*). The universalist language of eighteenth-century authors was predicated on independent judgment, usually the preserve of a privileged group of male, literate, and propertied authors who spoke for *le peuple* while deeply distrusting it. Their discussions of reform were, as we have seen,

[111] Formey, "Examen de la question: Si toutes les Vérités sont bonnes à dire?", in *Nouveaux mémoires de l'Académie Royale des Sciences et Belles-Lettres, année MDCCLXXVII* (Berlin, 1779), 333–54.

[112] Voltaire, *OCV*, 41: 553.

[113] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge, 1997), 71; Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin, Marcel Raymond et al., 5 vols. (Paris, 1959–95), 3: 383; and Rousseau, "Considerations on the Government of Poland," in Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 177–260, at 179, 187; Rousseau, *Oeuvres*, 3: 951–1041, at 955, 964. See also Dallas G. Denery, *The Devil Wins: A History of Lying from the Garden of Eden to the Enlightenment* (Princeton, 2015), 247–53.

[114] Cf. Carl Becker's argument that "the *Philosophes* demolished the Heavenly City of St. Augustine only to rebuild it with more up-to-date materials" in *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven, 1932), 31.

[115] Albert O. Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy* (Cambridge, MA, 1991).

conducted with a principled exclusion of its alleged beneficiaries, the common people. If appeals to common sense and emerging respect for the "wisdom of the crowds" (gathering pace from the 1780s) usually served as battle cries against cultural elites, the discourse on popular prejudices was elaborated by elite authors who lamented the people's unreasonableness.[116]

The limitations of the discourse analysed in this article reflect, indeed, some of the paradoxes at the centre of Enlightenment thought. In Immanuel Kant's essay *What Is Enlightenment?* of 1784, the famous call to dare to think for oneself was addressed mostly to a group he repeatedly identified as scholars (*Gelehrte*). In the same essay, Kant argued that the people could achieve enlightenment very slowly: revolutions could not truly reform ways of thinking. For Kant, as for Frederick, the result of such upheavals was that "new prejudices, like the ones they replaced, will serve as a leash to control the great unthinking mass."[117] If the attitudes to the common people, held by authors from Bayle and Fontenelle to Voltaire, Kant, and Frederick, do not chime well with present-day views of Enlightenment, it is because such images are far from the mainstream reform impulses of the eighteenth century. Kant's derogatory reference to the "great unthinking mass" in a manifesto for the public use of reason betrays the same conundrum as d'Holbach's *Essai sur les préjugés* and, to a greater or lesser extent, all authors discussed in this article. As Roland Grimsley has suggested in relation to d'Alembert, the *philosophes* tended to "despise and enlighten mankind" simultaneously.[118] During and after the revolutions of 1776 and 1789, this tension became apparent in the uneasy relationship between republican elites and the people in whose name they wrote and acted.[119]

The discourse on the common people was tightly anchored in the culture and sociopolitical structures of the *ancien régime*. At a time when states only began to assume responsibility for elementary instruction and in a predominantly agrarian economy, universal secondary education remained virtually unimaginable. Voltaire's strategy for stadial enlightenment was one of the very few practical recipes for change within this framework, and he could be cautiously optimistic about its long-term prospects in the wake of the recent expansion of literacy and the reach of print media. Suspicions of general enlightenment and the intellectual aptitude of the common people did not necessarily amount to an overall denial of the human capacity for change. D'Alembert, Voltaire, and their contemporaries did believe that cumulative progress was possible on various fronts (if not without backward lapses), as attested at least since the Renaissance. Frederick frequently emphasized that the limits

[116]Sophia Rosenfeld, *Common Sense: A Political History* (Cambridge, MA, 2011), Chs. 4–6; Rosenfeld, *Democracy and Truth: A Short History* (Philadelphia, 2019), 92–112.

[117]Immanuel Kant, "What Is Enlightenment?", in Kant, *Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge, 1991), 45–60, at 55.

[118]Roland Grimsley, *Jean d'Alembert (1717–1783)* (Oxford, 1963), 120.

[119]Franchise limitation, bicameral legislatures, constitutional courts, and merit-based political promotion were conceived (also) as institutional bulwarks against the sweeping power of uninformed majorities. See Andrew Jainchill, *Reimagining Politics after the Terror: The Republican Origins of French Liberalism* (Ithaca, 2008), 35–42; Wilfried Nippel, *Ancient and Modern Democracy: Two Concepts of Liberty?*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, 2016), 136–9; cf. Marcel Gauchet, *La révolution des pouvoirs: La souveraineté, le peuple et la représentation, 1789–1799* (Paris, 1995), 13–18.

of human reason should not dissuade one from searching for truths. The quest was, for him, the point, even if he was pessimistic about the results. In recommending "the spirit of Bayle" instead of philosophical enthusiasm, he employed a botanic metaphor evocative of Candide's garden: "If your land does not yield much fruit, it will, at least, bear no thorns, and it will become readier for cultivation."[120]

The debates examined in this article also suggest that Enlightenment authors were fully aware of the fragility of the human understanding and the double-edged nature of reason. Their different emphases—on the interaction between reason and the passions, on the significance of local customs and traditions, or on the lessons of history and experience—were all means to delineate the appropriate remit of reason. This was a thorough acknowledgment of what Gadamer called "human finitude."[121] Beyond such boundaries, reason had to be combined with other instruments of action and persuasion. Different as their theories were, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Hume, as well as Frederick and d'Alembert, felt that reason was not strong enough to effect change on its own, not only among the common people. The progress of reason and philosophy depended, therefore, on their effective alliance with the passions and benign forms of prejudice. Enlightenment authors, far from being enamoured with the absolute sovereignty of reason, recognized the staying power of benign prejudices, or beliefs and motives for action that extend beyond the remit of reason. This was not, however, ground for despair. Frederick and his interlocutors tried to mobilize the inevitable "errors of the mind" and popular prejudices in the service of gradual (if uncertain) betterment of the human lot.

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[120] Frederick II, "Preface to Extracts from Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary*," Frederick II, *PW*, 127; Frederick II, *OFG*, 7: 146.

[121] See also Andreas Dorschel's point that Gadamer has misapplied the term "prejudice." If readers brought their own perspectives and expectations to texts (or to the world), these could hardly be called prejudices: certain ways of seeing the world do not necessarily dictate the content, or judgment, of what is seen. Dorschel, *Rethinking Prejudice*, 82–99.

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