

## **ON ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY**

### **By Voltaire**

I HAVE spent nearly forty years of my pilgrimage in two or three corners of this world seeking the philosopher's stone that is called Truth. I have consulted all the adepts of antiquity, Epicurus and Augustine, Plato and Malebranch and I have remained in my poverty. Maybe in all these philosophers' crucibles there are one or two ounces of gold; but all the rest is residue, dull mud, from which nothing can be born.

It seems to me that the Greeks wrote much more to show their intelligence than that they used their intelligence in order to learn. I do not see a single author of antiquity who had a coherent system, a clear, methodical system progressing from consequence to consequence.

When I wanted to compare and combine the systems of Plato, of the preceptor of Alexander, of Pythagoras and of the Orientals, here, more or less, is what I was able to gather:

Chance is a word empty of sense; nothing can exist without a cause. The world is arranged according to mathematical laws; it is therefore arranged by an intelligence.

It is not an intelligent being such as I am, who directed the formation of this world, for I cannot form a mite; therefore this world is the work of a prodigiously superior intelligence.

Does this being, who possesses intelligence and power in so high a degree, exist necessarily? It must be so, for either the being received existence from another, or from its own nature. If the being received existence from another, which is very difficult to imagine, I must have recourse to this other, and this other will be the prime author. To whichever side I turn I have to admit a prime author, potent and intelligent, who is such necessarily by his own nature.

Did this prime author produce things out of nothing? that is not imaginable; to create out of nothing is to change nothing into something. I must not admit such a production unless I find invincible reasons which force me to admit what my intelligence can never comprehend.

All that exists appears to exist necessarily, since it exists. For if to-day there is a reason for the existence of things, there was one yesterday, there was one in all time; and this cause must always have had its effect, without which it would have been during eternity a useless cause.

But how shall things have always existed, being visibly under the hand of the prime author? This power therefore must always have acted; in the same way, nearly, that there is no sun without light, so there is no movement without a being that passes from one point of space to another point.

There is therefore a potent and intelligent being who has always acted; and if this being had never acted, of what use would his existence have been to him?

All things are therefore eternal emanations of this prime author.

But how imagine that stone and mud are emanations of the eternal Being, potent and intelligent?

Of two things one, either the matter of this stone and this mud exist necessarily by themselves, or they exist necessarily through this prime author; there is no middle course.

Thus, therefore, there are only two choices to make, admit either matter eternal by itself, or matter issuing eternally from the potent, intelligent, eternal Being.

But, either subsisting by its own nature, or emanated from the producing Being, it exists from all eternity, because it exists, and there is no reason why it should not have existed before.

If matter is eternally necessary, it is therefore impossible, it is therefore contradictory that it does not exist; but what man can affirm that it is impossible, that it is contradictory that this pebble and this fly have not existence? One is, nevertheless, forced to suppress this difficulty which astonishes the imagination more than it contradicts the principles of reasoning.

In fact, as soon as you have imagined that everything has emanated from the supreme and intelligent Being, that nothing has emanated from the Being without reason, that this Being existing always, must always have acted, that consequently all things must have eternally issued from the womb of His existence, you should no more refuse to believe in the matter of which this pebble and this fly, an eternal production, are formed, than you refuse to imagine light as an eternal emanation from the omnipotent Being.

Since I am a being with extension and thought, my extension and my thought are therefore necessary productions of this Being. It is evident to me that I cannot give myself either extension or thought. I have therefore received both from this necessary Being.

Can He give me what He has not? I have intelligence and I am in space; therefore He is intelligent, and He is in space.

To say that this eternal Being, this omnipotent God, has from all time necessarily filled the universe with His productions, is not to deprive Him of His liberty; on the contrary, for liberty is only the power of acting. God has always acted to the full; therefore God has always made use of the fullness of His liberty.

The liberty that is called liberty of indifference is a phrase without idea, an absurdity; for it would be determination without reason; it would be an effect without a cause. Therefore, God cannot have this so-called liberty which is a contradiction in terms. He has therefore always acted through this same necessity which makes His existence.

It is therefore impossible for the world to be without God, it is impossible for God to be without the world.

This world is filled with beings who succeed each other, therefore God has always produced beings who succeed each other.

These preliminary assertions are the basis of the ancient Oriental philosophy and of that of the Greeks. One must except Democritus and Epicurus, whose corpuscular philosophy combated these dogmas. But let us remark that the Epicureans relied on an entirely erroneous natural philosophy, and that the metaphysical system of all the other philosophers holds good with all the systems of natural philosophy. The whole of nature, excepting the vacuum, contradicts Epicurus; and no phenomenon contradicts the philosophy which I have just explained. Well, is not a

philosophy which is in accord with all that passes in nature, and which contents the most careful minds, superior to all other non-revealed systems?

After the assertions of the ancient philosophers, which I have reconciled as far as has been possible for me, what is left to us? a chaos of doubts and chimeras. I do not think that there has ever been a philosopher with a system who did not at the end of his life avow that he had wasted his time. It must be admitted that the inventors of the mechanical arts have been much more useful to mankind than the inventors of syllogisms: the man who invented the shuttle surpasses with a vengeance the man who imagined innate ideas.