

Naturally free, politically unfree

Voltaire's Quakers and the modern discourse of human rights

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A recurring question echoes through the seemingly endless volumes that constitute Voltaire's *œuvre*: how might freedom materialize in real historical societies? The Enlightenment *philosophe* repeatedly defined “freedom” as a matter of tolerance. Tolerance not only ensures individual freedom; as tolerant religious or political authorities do not interfere in the citizens' thoughts and actions, they encourage a dynamic public sphere and, consequently, tolerance also furthers societies' economic as well as intellectual growth. In well-known works such as *Lettres philosophiques* (1734) or *Candide* (1759), Voltaire shows how religious and political tyranny constantly lead to conflicts while unhindered commerce and scientific progress are the true sources of prosperity and peace. Such an inclination to correlate freedom with the absence of external intervention – thus emphasizing a liberal concept of freedom as non-interference – becomes visible in the author's representations of ideal societies, such as the legendary Eldorado or contemporary England. It has led, among scholars, to the generally accepted view of Voltaire as an early liberal thinker.

Yet, a more thorough inquiry of the author's notion of freedom implies that this view needs to be modified. *Candide*'s Eldorado – the incarnation of an enlightened society – or indeed the London Exchange scene in the sixth philosophical letter – where Presbyterians and Jews cooperate to further the common good – each clearly illustrate that Voltaire pictures a state of non-interference in utopian terms. He represents both the fictional land of gold and the actual Exchange as communities too good to be true. From a realist point of view, both world history and contemporary European politics continually reveal to Voltaire that freedom should rather be regarded as absence of domination. This view is predominant in *Lettres philosophiques* where the author convincingly argues that English citizens are free due to the British constitution, while, on the other hand,

Frenchmen are not free as their lives depend upon arbitrary power – the will of the Prince.

In defining freedom as non-domination rather than non-interference, Voltaire relies on classical republicanism and the Roman conception of freedom, according to which the distinction between free subjects and slaves is of crucial importance. While free men enjoy certain individual rights within a legal constitution, slaves are dependent on the will of their masters. “Unfreedom” thus means to be subordinated to arbitrary power (cf. Skinner, 2003).

Nevertheless, the obvious contrast between free English citizens and unfree French slaves is not the only configuration of a republican notion of freedom in Voltaire’s philosophical letters. The kind of unfreedom that will be questioned in the following is not contrary to, but, rather, an inherent part of the idea of freedom as non-domination: i. e. the idea of “natural liberty.” More specifically, I will argue that the representation of the Quakers in *Lettres philosophiques* exposes the shortcomings, or rather the unfreedom, of natural liberty. By illustrating how freedom necessarily follows from citizenship and the citizens’ participation in political life, the Quaker letters reveal that non-domination does not necessarily equal freedom. The letters indicate that Voltaire’s *œuvre* touches a problem inherent in 18th century discourses on liberty and human rights, and that it ought to be discussed within the framework of classical republicanism.

THE DIFFERENTIATION OF FREEDOM: ANALYTICAL AND HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK

Hannah Arendt’s political philosophy offers an analytical framework for a discussion of the notion of natural liberty and the difficulties it entails with respect to a political concept of freedom. In Arendt’s view, freedom is not only a question of domination. Taking a specific historical notion of political organisation as her point of reference, the city state or *polis* in ancient Greece, Arendt stresses the crucial association of freedom with politics as she emphasizes that “[t]he meaning of politics is freedom” (Arendt, 2005, p. 108). Individuals gain freedom by fulfilling their citizen duties inside the walls of a delimited *polis*. Furthermore, she argues that freedom is what defines human beings as different from other creatures. In other words, it is only as a citizen, a political agent, that an individual may achieve its humanity. Freedom thus constitutes both citizens and human beings, and Arendt’s critical idea is that the notion of “human rights” is worthless in cases where human beings lack citizenship. In order to have “the

rights to have rights”, one ought to be a citizen. It is only as *bios politikos* that human life has purpose and value beyond fulfilling biological needs (Arendt, 1998).

How did the Greek citizen become a *bios politikos*? Arendt identifies three essential activities which describe the human condition: “labour”, “work” and “action”. In ancient Greece these activities had their clearly defined purposes as well as distinct localizations. While labour and work primarily were located within the family sphere (*oikos*) and contributed to the provision of material necessities, action was the only activity located in the *polis*, which also explicitly involved freedom. Arendt’s (and the Greek) concept of “action” is a complex one. Action is first and foremost interaction, an activity conditioned by the gathering of a plurality of viewpoints. Such a plurality would never exist within families or other hierarchical or doctrinal communities, she argues, in as far as all the members of such groups automatically represent the same subject and thus hold identical viewpoints. Arendt considers the ability to “act in plurality” as the crucial quality that distinguishes human beings from other species. In acting, man exceeds the bare necessities of life by leaving his immediate existence as *zoe*, naked life, and entering the political community as a political agent, *bios politikos* (Arendt, 1998).

This notion of politics and of man as a political being was a Greek invention that would soon evaporate. Even the Romans were unfamiliar with the formerly sharp distinctions between labour, work, and action. Consequently, the borders between a political and a non-political space became blurred, thus altering the meaning of freedom. Instead of equalling freedom with action, in other words, to understand freedom as the possibility to act politically, Arendt argues that freedom in fact soon became associated with the opposite – withdrawal from politics (Arendt, 1998, 2005).¹ Politics thus lost its purpose as the specific space of freedom; it was, so to speak, deterritorialized and depoliticized.

17th and 18th century discourses on natural law explicitly articulate this depoliticization of freedom. They invigorate the Stoic idea that man is born free and, consequently, that freedom is a natural quality independent of historical and political conditions (cf. Hunt, 2007, pp. 117cc.). Natural law theory and its idea of natural freedom, or liberty, made a crucial impact on modern notions of universal human rights, as the first article of the United Nation’s 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* makes clear: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and

1 Cf. the notions of religious and academic freedom understood as a freedom from politics (Arendt, 2005, p. 136).

should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”² Arendt emphasizes that the individual’s affiliation with and participation in the *polis* defines him as a citizen and bestows upon him the ability to rise above mere biological existence and, thus, that citizenship is the condition for his freedom. Human rights discourses, on the other hand, argue that all men are born free and consequently demand that freedom should be available in every circumstance. Even though the idea of natural liberty has greatly impacted modern notions of rights and politics, it has not entirely displaced the idea of political liberty. Following Susan Maslan (2004, 2006), I would argue, rather, that these two varieties illustrate a differentiation of the republican notion of freedom as non-domination, which emerged in the 17th and 18th centuries and became emblematic of the modern era’s political and judicial institutions.

The explicit and politically potent distinction between political rights and human rights and, consequently, between political and natural freedom, emerged in the 18th century (cf. Hunt, 2007). As the name reveals, the French revolution’s *Déclaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen* (1789), a precursor of the UN’s *Declaration* from 1948, makes a division between “the rights of man” (natural rights) and “the rights of the citizen” (political rights). While all men are born free, that is, endowed with natural rights, not all men are citizens of France enjoying the freedom of the French Constitution. The 1789 *Déclaration* clearly states that some liberties are exclusively reserved for the latter, and it thus draws a fundamental demarcation line within the category “human being” – here, a distinction between citizens and foreigners. It emphasizes the citizen’s right to take part in the general will and thus in the making of the law. Additionally, it claims that “[t]ous les Citoyens étant égaux à ses yeux, sont également admissibles à toutes dignités, places et emplois publics, selon leur capacité, et sans autre distinction que celle de leurs vertus et de leurs talents” (“[a]ll citizens, being equal in the eyes of the law, are equally eligible to all dignities and to all public positions and occupations, according to their abilities, and without distinction except that of their virtues and talents”, *Déclaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen de 1789*, article 6). Likewise, only citizens may “parler, écrire, imprimer librement” (“speak, write, and print with freedom”, *Déclaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen de 1789*, article 11). Consequently, the citizen’s rights are not designated by his natural liberty due to the rights of Natural Law, but are instead associated with and defined by what we, following Arendt, may call the freedom to act politically inside a delimited political sphere – in this case:

2 United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), article 1.

France. In the *Déclaration* this implies the right to hold public positions and the right to distribute one's thoughts within the French public space.

The *Déclaration* thus activates two different significations of freedom as non-domination: the right not to be a slave and the right to be a citizen, to participate in the construction and conservation of a democracy. This distinction within the republican concept of freedom is of crucial importance in 18th century discourses, as the two articles "Liberté naturelle" and "Liberté politique," both signed by Louis de Jaucourt, in Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* (1751-1772), signal.

Jaucourt considers natural liberty to be human beings' ultimate right, a kind of liberty given to man in his natural state:

"Le premier état que l'homme acquiert par la nature, & qu'on estime le plus précieux de tous les biens qu'il puisse posséder, est l'état de liberté; il ne peut ni se changer contre un autre, ni se vendre, ni se perdre; car naturellement tous les hommes naissent libres, c'est-à-dire, qu'ils ne sont pas soumis à la puissance d'un maître, & que personne n'a sur eux un droit de propriété."

"The first state that man acquires through nature, and that we esteem the most precious of all things, is the state of liberty; he can neither be traded for another, nor sold, nor lose his person; because naturally all men are born free, that is to say, they are not subject to the power of a master, and no one else has a proprietary right over them." (*Encyclopédie*, Louis de Jaucourt, LIBERTÉ NATURELLE)

Natural liberty ensures every individual the right to pursue happiness as long as he does not contradict governmental laws. It is considered a sort of premise based on a law given by nature and thus a matter that exists before and beyond any political sphere. Political liberty, on the other hand, is a question of the political division of powers:

"la liberté politique d'un état est formée par des lois fondamentales qui y établissent la distribution de la puissance législative, de la puissance exécutive des choses qui dépendent du droit des gens, & de la puissance exécutive de celles qui dépendent du droit civil."

"the political liberty of a state is shaped by fundamental laws which establish therein the distribution of the legislative power, the executive power in matters of public law, and the executive power in matters of civil law." (*Encyclopédie*, Louis de Jaucourt, LIBERTÉ POLITIQUE)

While Jaucourt in line with the Roman division between slaves and free subjects thus defines natural liberty as non-domination, his definition of political liberty emphasizes that freedom originates from membership in the *polis* or the *res publica*. Finally, Jaucourt turns to history and asserts that England is the ultimate historical manifestation of this latter kind of liberty.

LETTRES PHILOSOPHIQUES' TWO ASPECTS OF REPUBLICAN (UN)FREEDOM

Lettres philosophiques, also known as *Lettres Anglaises*, was first published in an English translation in London in 1733 (*Letters Concerning the English Nation*), then in Paris in 1734. Voltaire's letters on England anticipate Jaucourt's articles. In a peculiar potpourri of satire, historiography, Enlightenment propaganda, and personal anecdotes, the letters discuss the rather abstract notions of natural and political liberty within a number of specific historical contexts. While the English publication went unheeded, the French reception of the 24 letters has become legendary: The work, published without approbation, was immediately censored. Authorities confiscated the edition, arrested the publisher, and issued a proscription and warrant of arrest against Voltaire, who was immediately recognized as the author. The Parisian parliament accused the letters of subverting religion and manners, as well as the government, and ordered a public book burning at the stairs of the Palais Justice. A Jansenist pamphlet referred to them as "lettres diaboliques." The author had to flee Paris.

The strong censure indicates that the letters were considered a threat to both the political and religious order. A few decades after its publication, *Lettres philosophiques* was nearly canonized as revolutionary. "Cet ouvrage fut parmi nous l'époque d'une révolution" ("This work would start the era of a revolution among us"), Condorcet stated in his biography *Vie de Voltaire* (1787) (Condorcet, 1994, p. 46), a view the French literary historian Gustave Lanson would adopt more than a century later, confirming that the letters were "la première bombe lancée contre l'ancien régime" ("the first bomb directed towards the Old Regime", Lanson, 1910, p. 52). Voltaire's work was seen as an intervention in an emerging and changing public space. It not only provoked public reaction, but also participated in the construction of the public sphere as such. Thus it was, as a later critic, Shirley Jones, has put it, "a political act" (Jones, 1982, p. 149).

The *Lettres philosophiques* are imbued with a critical agenda. Under the pretext of describing the ways and customs of France's most important neighbour and political opponent in the European power play, the author represents England

in most ways as a positive contrast to France. Voltaire introduces a comparative figure, and a dichotomy of freedom and “unfreedom,” that would become a leit-motif in his works: England is, compared to France, the land of freedom. Its governmental system explains this freedom. Unlike France, England has not been subjected to an absolutist Prince. The country’s constitutional monarchy guarantees the freedom of its inhabitants by stimulating religious tolerance, commercial life, scientific progress, and intellectual achievements. In other words, the author represents the citizens’ freedom as founded in English politics. The comparative representation apparently makes England the home of the free while in France, in harsh contrast, unfreedom – such as religious persecutions and restrictions on the freedom of the press – reigns due to the absolutist regime. But it turns out that the dichotomy between freedom and unfreedom is not only a question of non-domination or domination. Even a state of non-domination, like the one found in England, may imply unfreedom.

In later editions of *Lettres philosophiques*, the author added a 25th letter which complicates the work’s overall significations. I would suggest that this letter is a key to get a grip on Voltaire’s discussion of natural liberty and its shortcomings. In the last letter, somewhat surprisingly entitled “On the *Pensées* of M. Pascal” (“Sur les *Pensées* de M. Pascal”), he leaves his main theme, England as France’s positive contrast, in favour of a dialogue ridiculing the Jansenist philosopher’s Augustinian theory of predestination. 20th century scholars seem to agree that this added letter serves to emphasize the work as, first and foremost, a religious critique: either as a commentary to the still ongoing quarrel between Jesuits and Jansenists, or as a critique of the Jansenist conception of human life, or finally as an attack upon Christianity in general (cf. Cassirer, 1968, p. 145-148; Desné, 1972, p. 43; Pomeau, 1995, p. 233-234). Still, this interpretation sounds less than satisfying as little in the earlier letters’ way of argument appears to convincingly anticipate such a critique as the work’s essential agenda.

“Tout le malheur des hommes vient d’une seule chose, qui est de ne savoir pas demeurer en repos dans une chambre” (“All of man’s misfortune comes from one thing, which is not knowing how to sit quietly in a room”), Blaise Pascal states in one of *Pensées*’ well-known dictums. In the 25th letter Voltaire, on the contrary, insists that man is born to act in society, not to contemplate in an ivory tower:

“Qu’est-ce qu’un homme qui n’agirait point, et qui est supposé se contempler? Non seulement je dis que cet homme serait un imbécile, inutile à la société, mais je dis que cet homme ne peut exister.” (Voltaire, 1994, p. 173)

“What sort of thing is a man who doesn’t act and yet supposedly contemplates himself? I say not only that such a man would be an imbecile, useless to society, but that such a man cannot exist.” (Voltaire, 1961, p. 132)

The citation activates two key motives not only in the Pascal letter, but also in the *Lettres philosophiques* as a whole: the importance and value of the civic virtues *action* and *usefulness*. I will suggest that the insistence on the ability to act in society as the human being’s most fundamental quality is not only a rejection of Pascalian theology; in addition, Voltaire, from the viewpoint of political theory, criticizes the notion of the passive subject. He argues that man is a political agent, defined by the liberty to take part in a political process. As such, the last philosophical letter invites its reader to consider the work on the whole as a discussion of the citizen’s relations to the *polis*. The letters discuss how England values certain social identities like intellectuals, merchants, and religious minorities differently than France. They reveal how the citizens’ freedom always depends upon how they are treated by their government. In addition to its insistence on England’s superiority, *Lettres philosophiques*’ central message is this: that freedom results from actions which are located within a political sphere. From the point of view of the Pascal-letter, a chief question in the letters consequently seems to be whether one is included in or excluded from the *polis*.

It is on this point that Voltaire’s Quakers become an interesting case. Following Arendt’s concepts as well as the 18th century discourse on political and natural liberty, I will in the following explore a significant differentiation in the work’s treatment of the republican notion of freedom as non-domination, namely the differentiation between non-political and political societies, and, consequently, between natural and political liberty. An analysis of the so called “Quaker letters” reveals that Voltaire seems to prefer the latter and it illustrates how he uses literary conventions to represent natural liberty as a state of unfreedom.

THE QUAKER LETTERS

Recent studies have demonstrated 18th century literature’s articulation and exploration of the historical emergence of the notion of human rights (Hunt, 2007; Maslan, 2004). In discussing the opposition between natural and political freedom within fictional frameworks and from a pragmatic point of view, Voltaire participates in this investigation. His representation of ideal societies – such as Eldorado or the London Exchange – demonstrates the shortcomings of natural liberty. The introductory letters in Voltaire’s *Lettres philosophiques* reveal that

the kind of freedom such societies embody, turns out to be useless – and hence in fact it ceases to be freedom – when facing the real world.

Voltaire entitled his first four philosophical letters “Sur les Quakers” (“On the Quakers”).³ Unlike the other letters, they constitute a continuous narrative in which the author explicitly becomes the personal narrator as well as one of the two main characters. The first letter opens *in medias res* as Voltaire visits a famous old Quaker who has retired to the countryside outside London. The old man invites the French *philosophe* into his home for a conversation. In the first and second letters, this particular Quaker and the Quakers in general are permitted to represent themselves directly through the old man’s participation in the dialogue. The third and fourth letters leave this dialogue in favor of a narrative mode. Assuming the role of a historiographer rather than a conversation partner, the author of the last two letters gives an account of the historical background, the status quo, and even a prediction of the Quaker society’s future.

In Voltaire’s discourse, the old Quaker is introduced in contrast to the Jewish-Christian culture in general, and in particular to the French ideal of courteousness. His physical appearance is noteworthy – he wears a strange hat and a coat without pleads or buttons – and he does not act in line with common social rules. While the author politely addresses the old man as “Vous” and “Monsieur”, the Quaker replies by calling his guest “friend” (*ami*) and “son” (*mon fils*). Still, his eccentric manners come across as admirable and the author positively describes his remarkable health and extraordinarily noble and appealing attitude. Despite the fact that the Quaker receives his guest without the slightest hint of a bow, it seems to be “plus de politesse dans l’air ouvert et humain de son visage qu’il n’y en a dans l’usage de tirer une jambe derrière l’autre et de porter à la main ce qui est fait pour couvrir la tête” (“more politeness in the openness and humanity of his expression than there is in the habit of drawing one leg behind the other, and of carrying in the hand what was made to cover the head”, Voltaire, 1994, p. 20; Voltaire, 1961, p. 3). The conventional rituals of politeness are revealed as ridiculous compared to this gentleman’s natural authority.

3 By introducing his letters with a story on the Quakers, a culturally significant but numerically marginal Christian community in the English society, Voltaire was in line with a conventional maneuver within the genre of French travel writing on England. The eccentric English Quakers constituted an object of fascination in French 17th and 18th century culture to such a degree that, as Edith Philips has put it, “[Q]uakerism was written of and defined in France almost before it was defined by its own people” (Philips, 1932, p. 2). The Quaker was thus already established as a literary type when Voltaire portrayed this peculiar group in *Lettres philosophiques*.

Nevertheless, the depiction of the old Quaker is eventually somewhat ambiguous, once the Quaker is subjected to Voltaire's familiar ironic distance. The author admires the Quaker so much that the latter almost gains superhuman qualities, explaining that the old man "n'avait jamais connu les passions ni l'intempérance" ("had always been a stranger to the passions and to intemperance", Voltaire, 1994, p. 20; Voltaire, 1961, p. 3), thus depriving him of two, in Voltaire's opinion, essential human traits. The author emphasizes the old man's idealness at the expense of his realness. Additionally, he stresses both his arrogant indulgence towards and skeptical distrust of his conversation partner by calling him a "holy man" (*saint homme*) and an "enthusiast" (*enthousiaste*), epithets with clearly negative connotations in the author's writings. Due to this distance, the glorified old Quaker simultaneously falls victim to the author's mockery and (faint) praise.

The ambivalence of the Quaker figure is echoed by the paradoxical effect of the authorial distance in the first letter, a distance which eventually allows the Quaker to give an uninterrupted speech. Consequently, the dialogue turns into a monologue while the conversation's subject changes. From discussing curious theological and cultural historical details, the Quaker turns his attention to politics and ethics. The old man regards his French guest's polite manners as the direct consequence of a hierarchically structured community and explains that his own habits, on the other hand, imply a rejection to such a notion of society. He informs the reader that the Quakers' society is truly egalitarian. Due to this sense of equality, they always use the familiar forms, whether addressing kings or shoemakers, and it also explains why everyone, even women, is allowed to speak during services. The Quakers consider all human beings their brethren, he claims, and respect no authority but the law.

Through the old man's disapproval of anti-democratic norms, it is as though the distance between the author and the Quaker character disappears. In articulating the idea of a democratic (all human beings are equal), ethic (all human beings should be treated with respect and charity), and juridical (the authority is the law, not the Prince) society, the retired Quaker gradually becomes the implied author's mouthpiece. In consequence, the author and his manners, rather than the Quaker and his eccentric society, turn out to be the proper object of satire. The irony thus works two ways in the first two letters, as the ridicule strikes the Quaker, a superstitious freak, and the narrator himself, a representative of a hypocritical and hierarchical culture that the Quaker opposes.

Within the framework of *Lettres philosophiques*' dominating comparative figure, the contrast between England and France, the question is, however, whether or how the Quakers' societal ideal corresponds with the greater English

society. Rather than being an England in miniature, the Quaker society introduces a third alternative to the dichotomy between France and England, allowing a critical representation of England as well as of the Christian sect. The Quaker society functions as a vehicle for a double critique: On the one hand, by constituting a contrast to English politics, it reveals that England is not a righteous democracy. The Quakers point to a kind of unfreedom within the *polis*, that is, the fact that English politics brutally subordinates important democratic principles in order to enrich and expand its political territory. In this, England resembles France; it gains its strength through domination. On the other hand, the representation of the Quakers accentuates the necessary association of freedom and politics, showing the shortcoming of ethical ideals such as egalitarianism as long as they are not situated in a political sphere.

This double critique – of English politics and of the utopian aspect of the Quakers’ ethical ideals – becomes acute in the letters’ discussion of colonial politics. In the last paragraph of letter number one, the old Quaker expresses his egalitarian and cosmopolitan ethics within a specific political and historical context: the British colonization of America. The Quakers are a peaceable people; they refuse to engage in wars not because they fear death, but, as he explains, because:

“[...] nous ne sommes ni loups, ni tigres, ni dogues, mais hommes, mais chrétiens. Notre Dieu, qui nous a ordonné d’aimer nos ennemis et de souffrir sans murmure, ne veut pas sans doute que nous passions la mer pour aller égorger nos frères, parce que les meurtriers vêtus de rouge, avec un bonnet haut de deux pieds, enrôlent des citoyens en faisant du bruit avec deux petits bâtons sur une peau d’âne bien entendu; et lorsque après des batailles gagnées tout Londres brille d’illuminations, que le ciel est enflammé de fusées, que l’air retentit du bruit des actions de grâces, des cloches, des orgues, des canons, nous gémissons en silence sur les meurtres qui causent la publique allégresse.” (Voltaire, 1994, p. 24)

“[...] we are not wolves or tigers or watchdogs, but men and Christians. Our Lord, who has commanded us to love our enemies and to endure without complaint, certainly does not wish us to cross the sea and cut the throats of our brothers because some murderers dressed in red, and wearing hats two feet high, are enlisting citizens by making a noise with two little sticks on the tightly stretched skin of an ass. And when, after battles won, all London glitters with lights, when the sky blazes with fireworks, and the air resounds with the noise of thanksgiving, of bells, of organs, and of cannon, we mourn in silence over these murders, the cause of public gaiety.” (Voltaire, 1961, p. 7)

According to the old man, the Quakers are first and foremost human beings (*hommes*) and Christians (*chrétiens*) and, thus, they regard Native Americans as their brothers (*nos frères*) instead of barbaric foreigners. Consequently, they differ from the ideal of the patriotic British citizen whose primary civic virtue is the love of his own country and fellow citizens. Instead of representing the Quakers as a part of British society and the English national character, the old man emphasizes their place outside of, and in opposition to, England and its politics – they refuse to take part in the conquering of the New World. In this passage, the Quakers become the incarnation of an ethical ideal and as such, they reveal the unethical aspects of colonial politics by showing that the British Empire is far from unfamiliar with domination, and, indeed, dependent on subordination of other people.

Voltaire's Quakers have occasionally been compared to another ideal people in French 18th century literature, the Troglodytes in Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721). Both Montesquieu's archaic people and Voltaire's religious sect are associated with a moral ideal of humanity, and both groups are configured as enclaves outside of the greater society. There is, however, an important difference between the two ideals. Montesquieu situates his Troglodytes in a pre-historic, mythological and allegorical context, letting them represent a number of different social organizations, while Voltaire takes the Quakers out of the realm of the ideal and shows that the moral which they represent may be realized in a historical context (cf. Wellington, 1994, p. 37). In other words, the Quakers' ethics become a matter of politics. This "politicization" takes place in the third and fourth letters, which have resemblances to the genre of historiography, particularly in the representation of the Quaker colony.

We are told that, in 1680, William Penn, the son of a wealthy English Vice admiral, became the sovereign of a Quaker state: Pennsylvania, a truly ecumenical society and an exceptional American colony. As its chief-legislator Penn actually made a political alliance with the natives, stating they were brothers and equals:

"Il commença par faire une ligue avec des Américains ses voisins. C'est le seul traité entre ces peuples et les chrétiens qui n'ait point été juré, et qui n'ait point été rompu." (Voltaire, 1994, p. 38)

"He began by making an alliance with the Americans, his neighbors. This is the only treaty between these people and the Christians that was never sworn to and has never been broken." (Voltaire, 1961, p. 18)

Pennsylvania becomes the historical manifestation of an actual *polis* where all inhabitants enjoy both natural and political liberties. The old Quaker's cosmopolitan ethics – his ideal of democracy as well as his imperial critique – merge in the Quaker colony, wherein the egalitarianism of the Quaker Church seems to be implemented in a political community.

Pennsylvania resembles a kind of cosmopolitan state. It is built neither on a differentiation of citizens and foreigners nor social hierarchies. This is a historical innovation, the author claims:

“C’était un spectacle bien nouveau qu’un souverain que tout le monde tutoyait, et à qui on parlait le chapeau sur la tête, un gouvernement sans prêtres, un peuple sans armes, des citoyens tous égaux, à la magistrature près, et des voisins sans jalousie.” (Voltaire, 1994, p. 38)

“It was quite a new sort of spectacle: a sovereign whom everyone familiarly *thee’d* and *thou’d*, and spoke to with one’s hat on; a government without priests, a people without weapons, citizens all of them equals – magistrates excepted – and neighbors free of jealousy.” (Voltaire, 1961, p. 18-19)

Pennsylvania is perfectly democratic and tolerant. Its inhabitants feel secure. And it also seems like the colony is fulfilling the rights of man and the natural liberty that Jaucourt defined in the *Encyclopédie*; a liberty implying that the individuals “ne sont pas soumis à la puissance d’un maître, & que personne n’a sur eux un droit de propriété” (“are not subject to the power of a master, and no one else has a proprietary right over them”, *Encyclopédie*, Louis de Jaucourt, LIBERTÉ NATURELLE).

To Voltaire, the American colony appears almost too good to be true. The author emphasizes his incredulity by concluding that Pennsylvania – in contrast, we may add, to *Candide*'s well-known Eldorado – is a rare case of a historically realized utopia: “Guillaume Penn pouvait se vanter d’avoir apporté sur la terre l’âge d’or dont on parle tant, et qui n’a vraisemblablement existé qu’en Pennsylvanie” (“William Penn could boast of having brought forth on this earth the Golden Age that everyone talks so much about, and that probably never was, except in Pennsylvania”, Voltaire, 1994, p. 38; Voltaire, 1961, p. 19). Despite the state’s historical existence, Voltaire describes it as a Golden Age and thus as a cultural phantasm. This utopian description of Pennsylvania constitutes a turning point in the Quaker narrative. It hints at the conclusion of the Quaker letters, which makes clear that the Quakers’ community is not sustainable in real life.

Similarly to Montesquieu's Troglodyte fable, Voltaire's Quaker narrative is not only the story of a society's rise and prosperity, but also of its degeneration. The fall is a consequence of isolation. Neither the English nor the Pennsylvanian Quakers exist in a vacuum. They are parts of the larger political community of 18th century imperial England. In this historical context it is as if the Quakers are deprived of the right to existence. Despite the fact that the British Toleration Act (1689) gave all dissenters, and thereby the Quakers, political liberty, that is, access to the Parliament, the Quakers continued to voluntarily exclude themselves from the *polis*. Their consequent resistance to act in Arendt's sense of the word, to participate in the political society, causes their shortcomings in *Lettres philosophiques*. This self-imposed isolation puts their ethics – moderation, incorruptibility, pacifism – in another, and more critical, light. These qualities are not only moral or ethical ideals; they also imply what we, following Arendt, may call a resistance to take part in the political community. The ideals are not situated and realized within a political sphere. Therefore they are morally deficient and even though the Quakers are certainly not dominated, they are not really free.

The letter that succeeds the four Quaker letters opens by claiming that “un Anglais, comme homme libre, va au Ciel par le chemin qui lui plait” (“An Englishman, as a free man, goes to Heaven by whatever road he pleases”, Voltaire, 1994; p. 42; Voltaire, 1961, p. 22). But in spite of religious freedom, each individual and each sect necessarily exists within larger communities: the nation and the world. The first four letters deal with a specific situation that defines the Quakers: the fact that they are a minority that only exist in the margins of the large *polis* of colonial England. This very situation, it seems, leads to their final setback in the Quaker narrative's very last paragraph:

“Par tout pays, la religion dominante, quand elle ne persécute point, engloutit à la longue toutes les autres. Les quakers ne peuvent être membres du Parlement, ni posséder aucun office, parce qu'il faudrait prêter serment et qu'ils ne veulent point jurer. Ils sont réduits à la nécessité de gagner de l'argent par le commerce; leurs enfants enrichis par l'industrie de leurs pères, veulent jouir, avoir des honneurs, des boutons et des manchettes; ils sont honteux d'être appelés quakers, et se font protestants pour être à la mode.” (Voltaire, 1994, p. 40)

“In every country the dominant religion, if it does not actually persecute all the others, swallows them up in the end. Quakers cannot be members of Parliament, nor can they hold office, for in either case one must take oath, and they refuse to swear. They are reduced to making money by means of commerce. The children, made rich by the industry of their fathers, want to enjoy themselves, to acquire honours, buttons and cuffs. They are ashamed to be called Quakers, and are turning Anglican to be in style.” (Voltaire, 1961, p. 21)

In the four Quaker letters, the author presents a society that, despite its moral idealness and utopian conceptions, necessarily confronts the utterly prosaic laws of history. The Quakers are overtaken by the reality that they are a part of the English political sphere, and the ideal of an ethically motivated withdrawal from politics appears to be impossible. Denying modernization, development, and, most of all, action within a larger political context, collides with the notion of political liberty – the idea that, as Arendt claims, an individual’s freedom depends on citizenship and the ability, or in this case, rather, the will, to act in the *polis*. The Quakers’ refusal to participate in colonial wars in the first letter may certainly express an ideal pacifism and an admirable rejection of imperial politics from the point of view of a cosmopolitan ethics. Nevertheless, it also implies a self-destroying passivity towards the larger political community in the sense that the rejection leaves the small Quaker society susceptible to the actions of stronger forces. Opposition to general European manners and customs, as well as refusal to act politically (to be politicians, or hold public positions in the English society), in fact, threaten their identity.

Voltaire’s fourth philosophical letter, the last Quaker letter, concludes that, from an empirical point of view, the Quakers, with their ideal claims, have no chance to survive other than as a minor religious group with decreasing influence. Even their own children dissociate themselves from the Quaker identity by preferring the norms of wider society. And, with no political freedom to act, to take part in the general will of the *polis* they are a part of, the Quakers will, in the long run, be totally “swallowed up” by the outside world. In that case, their ideals of egalitarianism, tolerance, and pacifism become worthless. Their ethics have no political impact. From their location outside of the English *polis*, they appear to be just as “unreal” and just as excluded from historical reality as *Candide*’s Eldorado, the land of gold and perpetual peace that *Candide* and his companion chooses to leave in order to act within the global *polis*, i.e. to participate in the European politics of trade and colonialism.⁴

CONCLUSION

The Quakers have a double function in Voltaire’s *Lettres philosophiques*. They become a complex and ambiguous figure as they embody an ideal democratic society, while at the same time they illustrate the unfreedom that follows from

4 Cf. the discussion of colonial politics in my article “Cosmopolitan, slaves, and the global market in Voltaire’s *Candide ou l’optimisme*” (Kjørholt, 2012).

being excluded from and not taking part in the *polis*, i.e. the unfreedom of natural liberty as far as it is not situated in a concrete political sphere. Thus, the Quakers incarnate both a critical opposition to and a destructive exclusion from the *polis* they are related to: England and its colonies. The opposition makes them free in the sense that they actively refuse to behave according to the predominant societal constraints and norms. By turning their back on politics, the Quakers show that they are not dominated; they protest against status quo in a way that echoes *Lettres philosophiques*'s representation of the English political order as an alternative to that of France. However, the refusal to participate as citizens within the Commonwealth implies an unfreedom, as the Quakers thereby reduce themselves to a party without any influence on its surroundings. Their voluntary withdrawal from the *polis* makes them unfree in the sense that they never reach the level of the political agent, *bios politikos*, and instead remain passive subjects deprived of the right to act.

Following Arendt's concept of politics and 18th century discourses on political and natural freedom, I have argued that the Quakers illustrate the shortcomings of natural liberty. Their ethics and ideals of egalitarianism and pacifism are short-lived in the real world. The Quakers refuse to act and refuse to change, and are therefore a more or less meaningless part of the political England. They thus illustrate a general maxim in Voltaire's work: the primacy of politics to ethics. The only freedom that matters in real life is political freedom, which allows the individual to act as a citizen in order to influence society's constitution. Ethics have no functionality outside a political sphere, and according to Voltaire, in this respect politics is the premise of ethics. Ethical ideals should thus be pragmatically adjusted to political reality.

A liberal concept of freedom as non-interference becomes inadequate in discussing Voltaire's Quakers. The Quaker letters reveal the necessity to examine the author within a republican tradition, while they bring his political realism to the fore. Several scholars have discussed his realistic and pragmatic notion of politics which differs from the more well-known political thinkers of the French Enlightenment, Montesquieu and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (cf. Gay, 1965; Perkins, 1965; Pomeau, 1970). As one critic has put it: "as a political thinker he tended to respond to events rather than metaphysical abstractions" (Williams, 1994, p. xiii). Voltaire's pragmatic, realistic and situational approach to political subjects makes his literature an extraordinary archive for the study of early modern politics. To quote Nicholas Cronk:

"True, no single one of Voltaire's writings on political theory is as celebrated as Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* or Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Contrat social*; on the other hand,

his voluminous political writings – and activities – had an immediate and practical impact which arguably the works of Montesquieu and Rousseau did not.” (Cronk, 2009, p. 4)

The practical and immediate scope allows a focus on the functionality of republican concepts such as natural and political liberty, or the distinction between man and citizen, in the century that paved the way for the French Revolution and its *Déclaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen de 1789*. Using Arendt’s concept of the political as an analytical tool, I have suggested that *Lettres philosophiques*’s main concern is the investigation of the relations between individual identity, ethics, and politics, and thus my aim has been to call attention to this functionality.

The Quaker letters reveal that it is only as political liberty that freedom may be realized in a historical society. Last, but not least, they demonstrate the crucial importance of politics in Voltaire’s literary work. The representation of the Quakers is only one of numerous examples of the author’s tendency to emphasize the constraints of reality at the expense of the ideal, or the historical fact rather than the utopian imagination.⁵ The focus on political reality thus affected Voltaire’s poetics, a fact that scholars seem to have surprisingly left unexplored, and which deserves further attention in academic research. Hopefully, this article provides one possible example of how this political poetics could be approached.

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5 Another obvious example is the representation of the utopian Eldorado in *Candide* (cf. Kjørholt, 2012).

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