

## Philosophers and Money

By Dagmar Lorenz, Wiesbaden, Germany, © MoneyMuseum (Translated by Graham Pascoe)

Voltaire and Rousseau, the leading lights of the enlightenment, were well known to be intellectual opponents. And their attitude to money was just as different as their views of people.

### Opposites in book-keeping

Quote from a letter from a philosopher to his banker: "By my reckoning, Monsieur, the capital in your hands amounts to 524,000 *livres*, apart from the interest of 445,000 *livres tournois* [i.e. money minted in the French city of Tours]. ... Of my meagre savings there therefore remains to you only 340,000 *livres tournois*. Keep 300,000 of them at four per cent, and put aside 40,000 for current expenses and special wishes."

That was from a letter of May 1757 from Voltaire to his banker Jean Robert Tronchin, after Voltaire had informed him that he needed 50,000 *livres* for lottery tickets (for speculating with), and was also in the course of concluding a little deal with the Electoral Prince of the Palatinate, "which might easily run to a hundred and thirty thousand *livres*."

On the face of it, it's not surprising that a clever thinker had what it takes to make an astute businessman. And the biographies of a number of prominent philosophers – among them for example the German, Schopenhauer – reveal a fundamentally practical striving to earn money, which in many cases was what made it possible for many of them to indulge in philosophy in the first place, but which has usually been treated as a character defect by a posterity responsible for preserving fame unadulterated.

The romantic ideal of the lonely thinker exclusively committed to the creation of intellectual values has evidently survived tenaciously into our own times. But that view overlooks something that should go without saying: that a person's actions, including his treatment of money, reveal a great deal about his thinking – and vice versa.

That is especially clear in the case of two thinkers who have shaped European thinking (if there can be said to be such a thing as "European thinking") more than perhaps any others: François-Marie Arouet, alias Voltaire, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Those two philosophers represent, as it were, the two different directions in which the theory of the Enlightenment developed: the pragmatic realism of Voltaire as against the culture of sensitivity in the case of Rousseau; civilising commitment as against criticism of civilisation; urban *savoir faire* as against conscious retreat into rural hermitry, approval of modern productivity as against defence of agrarian self-sufficiency. The difference between the social ideas of the two philosophers reflects the difference between their life-stories and life programmes and also between the totally different way in which the two men, Voltaire and Rousseau, obtained money, how and for what purpose each used money, and what effect each had with his attitude to the use of money, both on his surroundings and indirectly on later generations. Their totally different relationship with the earning of money is not merely of anecdotal interest in their respective biographies. Voltaire, and Rousseau, two opposites in book-keeping, may serve as classic examples of two quite different types of behaviour towards economic matters, which can easily be found in our own day as well.

## Voltaire the miser ...

Hans Ziegler, author of a book on *The secret millions of the great poets, thinkers and inventors*, remarks with tongue in cheek that when Voltaire died, his debtors must have heaved a sigh of relief, since "all his life he demanded shamelessly high interest on money he lent – instead of the usual 5 per cent he demanded 12 per cent." Voltaire may have been a philosophical freethinker whose criticisms of authority in his youthful writings landed him in the Bastille, but he was widely regarded as a real miser. Many anecdotes recount his apparently insatiable rapacity, which was so great that he did not shrink from dubious transactions. He arranged deals between wealthy men – for a handsome commission, of course. Together with his financial partners, the banking brothers Pàris, he profited from the state bankruptcy that the "Sun King" Louis XIV left to his heirs – Voltaire participated in the hectic speculation in shares that followed several questionable attempts to reform the state's finances. At a dinner he once heard by chance from a mathematician a method of cleaning out the newly reorganised state lottery, whereupon he bought all the tickets – and won the ensuing court case instigated by the deceived lottery director to avoid paying. As a guest at the court of the Prussian king Frederick the Great in Potsdam, Voltaire participated in illegal speculative deals with state loans by the state of Saxony – and aroused the king's ire. And as a financial juggler, Voltaire was naturally also active in the global economy of his day: he made profits out of selling colonial goods of all kinds – including slaves.

## ... the squanderer ...

Voltaire's malevolent contemporaries portray him as a business-minded, tough, malicious, duplicitous, vain money-grubber – yet at the same time emphasise in what generous and noble ways such a miser was capable of squandering his hard-won gains. Voltaire financed the education of the niece of the dramatist Corneille and made sure that she received a handsome dowry out of the profits of a new edition of her uncle's works edited by Voltaire. He always paid the profits from the performance of his own plays to the actors. Such gestures did not arise out of a mere momentary charitable whim, as is shown by the public involvement of Voltaire in the celebrated Calas case, in which he championed the cause of a Huguenot family whose members had been unjustly accused of murdering a member of their family. There was no evidence of any murder, and what evidence there was pointed to suicide. The trial proved to be a farce; the judges were prejudiced, and the supposed crime served the propaganda purposes of the Roman Catholic Church. Voltaire, who was not personally acquainted with the Calas family, heard of the trial in far-away Geneva, familiarised himself with the facts of the case, and decided to act as a lawyer to the accused family and assist them in obtaining a fair trial. He shunned no costs or pains; he attracted the opprobrium of an influential elite and indeed ran considerable personal risks, all of which later contributed to his reputation as the advocate of those unjustly persecuted. Voltaire not only defended those he protected free of charge, but provided board and lodging and travel expenses for the members of the family, who had become destitute. He took trouble to obtain the support of influential circles at court and brought his business connections into play.

## ... and the cautious businessman

Voltaire not only invested his material and creative fortune in such individual cases; he also acted as the wealthy organiser of a small community. He purchased the estates of Ferney and Tournay, which lay in the strategically important area of the border with Switzerland. Voltaire was now over

60, and was an urbanite *par excellence*, but he set out to lay the foundation for the prosperity of his new estates and their inhabitants. He was not enthusiastic about nature, in contrast to his opponent Rousseau, but he made use of natural conditions to benefit the local population. He went out into the fields himself, selected seed plants and supervised the planting. To increase the prosperity of the area he introduced the culture of silkworms, set up a silk factory and promoted the silk stockings manufactured by the factory among his influential friends in Paris. He made skilful use of those connections to achieve improvements for the inhabitants of Gex: he obtained relaxations of rules on trade and taxation, and freedom from compulsory military billeting. Voltaire also promoted improvements in hygiene and the introduction of vaccination, and he founded lace factories and clock-making workshops whose workers were recruited from dissatisfied Genevan immigrant families. He promoted sales of his clocks in Paris and at all the major European courts – timepieces made in Ferney found a ready market.

Voltaire the miser as a squanderer of money – the solution of this apparent paradox is explained convincingly by Pierre Lepape in his book on Voltaire. Voltaire, says Lepape, pursued his financial deals with the aim of being independent, which at that time meant independent of aristocratic patrons, of the fickle favour of the royal court and immunity from persecution by those wielding political power. It was the miser Voltaire who made possible the existence of Voltaire the squanderer, and it was his unscrupulous striving for profit that made it possible for him to allow others to share in his riches.

### Rousseau, or poverty as a moral programme

How different was Jean-Jacques Rousseau's attitude to money! Rousseau fled from Paris high society and lamented the distance of man from what he took to be his natural state, so he made no financial deals. He lived from the irregular and meagre gifts of his aristocratic patrons. He lived for a while in a summerhouse placed at his disposal by wealthy admirers, but he mostly moved around, driven by material want and by fear of persecution and frustrated self-pity. If he simply did not have enough to live on, he copied out music manuscripts at so much per page. It was of course not enough to rear a family on; his loyal partner bore him five children, but although he had argued in his writings for a natural upbringing for children, he abandoned his own children to the foundling-hospital. Whether he really suffered under all those hardships, however, is a moot point – he undoubtedly enjoyed the role of the misunderstood outcast.

His autobiographical writings make it clear that his lack of material success filled him with a defiant pride – it demonstrated his incorruptibility to the corrupt world of fashionable Paris. His downtrodden, poor, ascetic life served him, the truly Calvinistic son of a Genevan clockmaker, as a proof of his moral virtue. And he roundly attacked all those who looked askance on his role, such as his opponent Voltaire, who wrote: "We admit with blushing shame that he is a man who still wears the dark marks of vice and moves from village to village, from mountain to mountain, dressed as a buffoon, who drags that unfortunate woman with him whose mother he brought to an early death and whose children he laid at the door of a foundling-hospital, rejecting all the help offered him by a merciful person ..." That was malicious, but more or less corresponded to the truth, comments the historian Jean Orioux sarcastically.

It was not only the corrupt world of big money that Rousseau shunned all his life. For him, the very idea of money had an unpleasant taint to it. Enjoyment obtained through money is no longer

direct and pure, but poisoned from the start – money, says Rousseau in his *Confessions*, intrudes as an abstract medium between things themselves and the people who have need of them.

Pierre Lepape says that by deciding to live poor and outcast, Rousseau invented the figure of the ostracised writer, who makes himself the spokesman of authentic truth against the world of fashionable society, which is dominated by decadence and the lust for power and wealth. Rousseau, who despised luxury in the name of "naturalness," was appealed to in later centuries by strict utopians, from Robespierre, the avenger in the name of virtue, to terrorist utopians of modern times. Rousseau castigates the rule of a monetary economy by making himself and his family into martyrs of what he took to be a true, unfalsified existence. Such a martyrdom was entirely foreign to Voltaire, the socialite with the manners of a nobleman. Voltaire made a profit for the purpose of personal enjoyment – and to extend that enjoyment to others.

### Between stock exchange and rural idyll: the economics of the Enlightenment

The stock exchange and global trade – those are the two futuristic forces which in Voltaire's eyes promoted the Enlightenment ideals of freedom, independence and tolerance, since "the trade that made Britain's people rich also worked to make them free," as he says in his *Philosophical Letters*. Voltaire regarded the stock exchange as the very epitome of tolerance: "... you will find there the emissaries of all nations assembled for the good of mankind: there, the Jew, the Muslim and the Christian negotiate together as if they belonged to one and the same religion, and the only ones they call 'unbelievers' are those who go bankrupt," says Voltaire in the *Philosophical Letters* about the London stock exchange.

Rousseau, of course, saw things quite differently. Against Voltaire's glorification of international trade he put the ideal of self-sufficient frugality. In his *Nouvelle Héloïse* he developed, as Jean Starobinski notes in his biography of Rousseau, the ideal of autonomous autarchy, which assumes the form of a closed society that provides for its own needs, by producing not for trade but exclusively for its own consumption. And naturally Rousseau points to the rural situation: the idealised heroes of his novels do not increase their capital, and they even shun the purchase of things for daily use that were not produced by themselves. Instead of all that, they prefer barter.

The final irony: it was Voltaire, of all people, who made his estates into production centres for international trade, and thereby proved that the dream of a self-sufficient society was a thing of the past even in his day.

### Future prospects: the point of earning money

But let us return to our own day. Even in Voltaire's times, the world learnt that stock exchanges and global trade do not guarantee global prosperity. But it also learnt that prosperity cannot be based on the moral dreamings of one such as Rousseau. So what are we to do? Perhaps it is time to take a look at our squandering miser. His example shows us that the point of earning money is not the earning of money itself, and that the role of the apparently miserly and the apparently selfless man cannot necessarily be identified at first glance. The contrasting "financial personalities" of Voltaire and Rousseau prove that convincingly.