

## Notes from the Philosophy Meeting 19th March 2015

**Topic:** - "I do not agree with what you have said, but I shall fight to the death to protect your right to say what you want". - Voltaire

**Background:** - Voltaire was the pen name of François-Marie Arouet, born in 1694: philosopher, novelist, playwright, all-round troublemaker and virtuoso of equal-opportunity ridicule. Since the early 20th century, he has also been doomed to be misquoted by those using him as a weapon in the free-speech wars. He never actually wrote "I disagree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it" – this excellent formulation was, rather, the work of his English biographer, Evelyn Beatrice Hall (who also used a pseudonym: SG Tallentyre), who used it to describe his "attitude" in her 1906 biography, *The Friends of Voltaire*.

From - <http://www.theguardian.com/books/shortcuts/2015/jan/18/beginners-guide-voltaire-philosopher-free-speech-tolerance>

In the wake of the Charlie Hebdo massacre, books by Voltaire were brandished by participants in the Paris rallies of 11 January, whilst processing along Le Boulevard Voltaire.

**Leader's Introduction:** - Christopher reminded us that the group is intended to stretch our minds and encourage critical thinking. He encouraged us to give each other space and respect, but said that he and others may sometimes say something contentious, to spur a conversation. Christopher said that it is never his intention to upset or offend anyone. He encouraged us all, if someone says something contentious, to feel free to challenge it within the group.

### Thoughts from the Group on the topic

#### Effect on others

There should be freedom of expression, but there is a need for responsibility in what we say and do.

Mills distinguished between things likely to cause physical harm and those that will hurt feelings

It is wrong to cause harm, but hurtful statements can lead to counter arguments

Emotional hurt can be worse than physical injury

It is wrong to incite violence

Voltaire didn't distinguish between hurt and harm

If someone is doing something wrong, you should be able to say something, even if it could offend

With speech intonation is important; with the written word, the same words can be taken differently

The Elton John/Dolce & Gabbana feud illustrates this problem

#### Motive

The motive is important; sometimes we don't mean to offend

You can't predict the ramifications of what you say

Often you do know that what you say will cause harm

It is wrong to go out of your way to upset someone

There's a line between poking fun and inciting hatred

There is a difference between bad taste and being offensive.

Salman Rushdie didn't deliberately set out to offend anyone

Some comedians observe the audience and try not to offend anyone, but offend everyone

Other comedians set out deliberately to offend

Many of the older generation use racially offensive words out of habit in care homes

In free speech the intention and motives are important

#### Responsibility

We have to act responsibly as individuals

Charlie Hebdo should have considered the potential harm to its workers

We can articulate why we disagree without speaking of hatred  
Freedom should be used with respect

### **Law**

People should be prosecuted for being offensive, not defended.  
Free speech is being eroded  
We have to have rules to prevent abuse  
There is a narrow margin between freedom and restriction  
There are laws about some types of speech, such as incitement to hatred  
The Public Order Act made it illegal to intend to cause harassment, alarm or distress  
Should we have laws or should individuals take responsibility?  
I thought you could say what you like at Speakers' Corner (You can't, the law applies)  
In the US constitution freedom of speech is an unalienable right that can't be changed by State laws

### **Satire**

The French have a history of satire e.g. Voltaire's Candide  
The French tradition of satire goes back to pamphlets about Marie-Antoinette pre the Revolution  
The Danish also have a tradition of satire  
English satire, such as Private Eye, differs from that of the French and Danish.

### **Religion**

You don't see cartoons of Moses or Jesus, only Mohammed  
There are cartoons of Jesus and The Life of Brian was a caricature of Jesus  
In Islam, it is the Prophet that is sacrosanct  
Was Galileo imprisoned for attacking the Pope or removing the Earth as the centre of the universe?

### **Changes in acceptable terms**

Some companies do not allow the use of Asian etc. in descriptions  
Words used to describe shouldn't be considered offensive  
Acceptable terms change over time e.g. Native American and First Nation

### **Freedom and its consequences**

We are lucky to be able to speak freely in this country  
Has it gone too far, are we making a rod for our own backs?  
The burning of poppies on Remembrance Day and mourning of Charlie Hebdo assassins are proof  
We have freedom, therefore unrest

### **Other Topics covered**

There was discussion about the causes of extremism, the history of Islam and the role of the Muslim community in preventing radicalisation.

### **Conclusions**

There seemed to be a general consensus in the group that we value free speech, but believe that it should be used responsibly, taking into account the effect it may have on others. There also seemed to be a consensus that it is necessary to have laws to prevent abuse of free speech, by those who deliberately setting out to cause harm to others.  
You are free to say what you like, but should you be responsible for the outcome of what you say?