



The Story of a Good Brahmin

VOLTAIRE

Plain English Translation

MOUSEIA



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Translated by Michael Berardi

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THIS EDITION

Complete machine-assisted Plain English translation made independently and directly from the French of the complete ten-paragraph tale, Beuchot edition (1829), not from the Musean edition. Later editorial notes are omitted.

TRANSLATOR

Michael Berardi

THE WORK

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SOURCE

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GAPS AND UNCERTAINTIES

The source edition dates the tale 1759; the acquisition brief gives 1761. The period follows the edition, not an independently established first-publication date.

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On my travels I met an old Brahmin, a very wise, intelligent, and learned man. He was also rich, which made him wiser still: since he lacked nothing, he had no need to deceive anyone. Three beautiful wives managed his household very well and tried hard to please him. When he wasn't enjoying himself with his wives, he spent his time thinking about philosophy.

Near his beautiful, well-decorated house with its lovely gardens lived an old Indian woman. She was fanatically religious, stupid, and rather poor.

One day the Brahmin told me, "I wish I'd never been born." I asked him why. He answered, "I've been studying for forty years, and those forty years have been wasted. I teach others, yet I know nothing. This situation makes me feel so humiliated and disgusted that life is unbearable. I was born and live in time, but I don't know what time is. I find myself at a point between two eternities, as our wise men say, and I have no idea what eternity is. I'm made of matter, and I think, but I've never been able to learn what produces thought. I don't know whether my understanding is simply an ability in me, like walking or digesting, or whether I think with my head as I grasp things with my hands. Not only do I not know what causes my thoughts; what causes my movements is equally hidden from me. I don't know why I exist. Yet every day people ask me questions about all these things. I have to answer. I have nothing worthwhile to say. I talk a lot, and after I've spoken I feel confused and ashamed of myself.

“It’s much worse when they ask whether Brahma was produced by Vishnu or whether both are eternal. God is my witness that I don’t know the first thing about it, and my answers make that clear enough. ‘Oh, reverend father,’ they say, ‘teach us why evil floods the whole earth.’ I’m just as puzzled as the people asking me. Sometimes I tell them that everything is as good as it could possibly be. But those ruined and mutilated in war don’t believe it at all, and neither do I. I go home overwhelmed by my curiosity and ignorance. I read our ancient books, and they leave me twice as much in the dark. I talk to my companions. Some tell me to enjoy life and laugh at people. Others believe they know something and lose themselves in wild ideas. Everything adds to the pain I feel. Sometimes I’m close to despair when I think that, after all my research, I don’t know where I come from, what I am, where I’ll go, or what I’ll become.”

This good man’s condition truly saddened me. Nobody was more reasonable or honest than he was. I realized that the more understanding he had in his mind and feeling in his heart, the more unhappy he was.

That same day I saw the old woman who lived nearby. I asked whether it had ever upset her not to know how her soul was made. She didn’t even understand the question. Never for a single moment of her life had she thought about any of the questions tormenting the Brahmin. She believed wholeheartedly in Vishnu’s transformations. As long as she could sometimes get water from the Ganges to wash in, she considered herself the happiest of women.

Struck by this poor creature’s happiness, I went back to my philosopher and said, “Aren’t you ashamed to be unhappy when right outside your door there’s an old machine who never thinks about anything and lives contentedly?” “You’re right,” he answered. “I’ve told myself a hundred times that I’d be happy if I were as stupid as my neighbor. Even so, I wouldn’t want that kind of happiness.”

This answer from my Brahmin made a deeper impression on me than everything else. I examined myself and saw that I too would not want to be happy at the price of being stupid.

I put the question to some philosophers, and they agreed with me. “Still,” I said, “there’s a huge contradiction in thinking this way. After all, what’s the point? To be happy. What does it matter whether we’re intelligent or stupid? There’s more: people content with their existence are quite sure they’re content, but people who reason aren’t so sure they reason well. So clearly,” I said, “we ought to choose to have no common sense if that common sense contributes at all to our unhappiness.” Everyone agreed with me. Yet I found nobody willing to accept the bargain of becoming stupid in order to become content. From this I concluded that although we value happiness, we value reason even more.

But on reflection, preferring reason to happiness seems very unreasonable. So how can this contradiction be explained? Like all the others. There’s plenty to talk about there.