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Candide, Beyond the Satire on Leibniz

Voltaire's *Candide* is largely a satire on the Leibniz-derived optimistic philosophy popular among Enlightenment thinkers in his day, but many features of the novella do not exactly translate into criticisms of Leibniz' view. These components of the story show the broader purpose of the *Candide*, offering a disillusioned perspective on the evils of men and promoting a lifestyle that restrains our wickedness. The story showcases the restlessness that is part of the human condition. Satisfying our anxiousness through contemplation or adventure proves futile, however. Instead, the story advocates a simple, peaceful lifestyle to bring us to true fulfillment. We must focus on self-improvement, rather than whatever is beyond our reality, to make the best of our world. Voltaire speaks through his character, Candide, when he says, "We must go and work in the garden¹" (Voltaire 144).

Candide's ultimate conclusion – that they must simply work in the garden – dismisses the absurd and backwards reasoning of his once beloved teacher Pangloss, an indefatigable optimist and philosopher. This final scene is one of many during which Voltaire expresses his clear disapproval of contemplation and transcendental reflection for its own sake, targeting more than Leibnizian philosophy alone. The structure of the novel itself often conveys the author's feeling. The characters in the story are frequently in the middle of metaphysical debates when the sentence trails off and cuts directly to the next chapter. For example, in the last lines of chapter 5, Voltaire writes:

'Free Will is consistent with Absolute Necessity, for it was ordained that we

¹ Voltaire, *Candide*, trans. John Butt (New York: Penguin Books, 1947)

should be free. For the Will that is determined...”

Pangloss was in the middle of his sentence when the officer nodded to his henchman, who was pouring him out a glass of port wine (Voltaire 35).

Similarly, at the end of chapter 21:

‘Oh, but there’s a great difference,’ said Candide; ‘for Free Will...’

They were still talking when the ship reached Bordeaux (Voltaire 96).

These interruptions of abstract philosophizing show that Voltaire finds Pangloss’ reasoning pointless and Candide’s discourse unimportant; he by eliminates the rest of the dialogue altogether and moves on with the narrative.

Voltaire’s disregard for metaphysical examination manifests itself literally in the structure of the text, as well as in the irony of the plot. One scene ends with conversation interrupted not by the next chapter but by tragedy. Pangloss is in the middle of pursuing his argument that private misfortune contributes to common good when their ship splits in two within sight of land. His speculation even proves destructive when he struggles to prove the necessity of an earthquake while Candide lies dying in the rubble. Voltaire strongly impresses upon the reader the futility of theorizing:

‘Our excellent Pangloss often proved to me,’ said Candide, with a sigh, ‘that worldly goods are common to all men, and that everyone has an equal right to them. That being so, the friar certainly ought to have left us enough to finish our journey. Dearest Cunegonde, have you nothing left?’

‘Not a farthing,’ she replied (Voltaire 47).

Candide is always trying to understand the nature of his circumstances in light of Pangloss’ views. This theory of equity is among many of Pangloss’ teachings that Candide once found

irrefutable. Candide felt Pangloss had proved his ideology without question, but the friar still took more than his assumed share. Voltaire's point is that it's fruitless to try to understand that which is beyond our control. His voice is heard through the Turk in the novel's conclusion, who slams the door in Pangloss' face upon his request to discuss "cause and effect, the best of all possible worlds, the origin of evil, the nature of the soul, and pre-established harmony" (Voltaire 142). Any unified underlying philosophy we try to apply to this world, Voltaire seems to suggest, will have exceptions, and we waste our time trying to define such a philosophy.

But still we desire to discuss metaphysics and morals as a way of satisfying our natural restless tendencies. Voltaire suggests this anxiety is part of the human condition. In *Candide* the characters are discontent even in the most rational, fortunate society of Eldorado. The city is governed by a logical, hospitable king and is full of people with no sense of greed or propensity for wickedness. In Eldorado, Candide and Cacambo would have everything they need, but what they want is diversity and inconstancy. Candide says, "If we stay here, we shall be no different from anybody else" (Voltaire 82). They could lead a good life, but no better than anyone else's in Eldorado, and their fortune is only valuable relative to the misfortune of others. They take some riches with them and go back to the real hazardous world, even at their own risk, just because they find the certainty and safety of Eldorado boring.

Intolerable boredom returns at the conclusion of *Candide* when the group settles on a farm in Turkey. They have no money and nothing to do, so they constantly debate metaphysics and morals. But still they find themselves dissatisfied and restless, so that even the old woman wonders:

'I should like to know which is the worst, to be ravished a hundred times by negro pirates, to have one buttock cut off, to run the gauntlet of a Bulgar regiment, to be

whipped and hanged at an auto-da-fe, to be dissected, to row in the galleys – in fact, to experience all the miseries through which we have passed – or just to stay here with nothing to do?” (Voltaire 140).

The question seems ridiculous, but the characters are honestly unsure which is worse. The group’s discontentment, summed up in the old woman’s question, is Voltaire’s disappointed observation concerning the absurdity of our restlessness. After all the horrific trials they all have undergone, each character is still ungrateful for the safety and simplicity of their little farm. The exaggerated circumstances in the story seem preposterous, but the characters’ anxious tendencies are not far from reality. Anyone who has witnessed or experienced a “mid-life crisis” can appreciate Voltaire’s critique of our innate tendency to do something outlandish when we’re stuck too long in a routine.

Instead of proposing something outlandish, Voltaire’s solution to restlessness is a peaceful, practical lifestyle, contrary to competitive society and idle philosophizing. In *Candide*, all the people of prominent standing – the old woman, the baron’s family, Pangloss the teacher – suffer the most as they fall out of high-standing. The old woman, who should have been a prestigious princess, has the most horrible story of them all. The entire honorable family of Thunder-ten-tronckh is brutalized and left with nothing. Pangloss, the “greatest philosopher of Westphalia”, is diseased, hanged, dissected, and imprisoned while he’s busy trying to prove his optimistic theories. But the simple Turkish farmer in the conclusion leads a pleasant enough life, finding that the labor of farming keeps his family from “those three great evils, boredom, vice, and poverty” (Voltaire 143). Candide recognizes that these are exactly the evils his group suffers from. Impressed with the Turk’s solution, Candide reflects:

‘That old fellow,’ said he, turning to Pangloss and Martin, ‘seemed to me to have done much better for himself than those six kings we had the honour of supping with’ (Voltaire 143).

Voltaire advocates simplicity over power, practicality over prestige. The patterns of demise of influential people in *Candide* – including the stories of the six dethroned kings – suggest we find satisfaction in peace rather than control over others. Candide finally recognizes the value of simplicity at the Turk’s words, and concludes that the group “must go and work in the garden” (Voltaire 144).

This final remark is open ended but suggestive. While Voltaire doesn’t necessarily offer an explicit alternative to the philosophy he so harshly criticizes, he clearly dismisses fruitless speculation and advocates an approach to life that is sensible and satisfying. Farming has been a most basic occupation since before the first civilizations. It provides the group with necessary food, but also fulfillment by allowing them to relish in the fruits of their labor. It also keeps them down to earth and out of what trouble lies beyond their little garden.

Unlike the adventures in the unforgiving world, where the connections between cause and effect can seem blurred, everything is clear and uncomplicated in the garden. They bear no witness to the seemingly purposeless disasters that devastate whole societies, like the Lisbon earthquake, and have no desire listen to the convoluted chains of events Pangloss conjures up (such as the necessity of syphilis.) Of course misfortune can still befall them – a drought, an infestation, a bad crop. But the simplicity of their new lifestyle takes away the risk of bizarre and horrible misfortune, and makes it easier to recover from adversity. Besides being a practical culmination of Candide’s life, working the garden has intuitively suggestive meanings that add to the overall purpose of the story.

The prevailing garden motif in *Candide* calls to mind the Garden of Eden. Much like Adam and Eve, Candide is kicked out of his paradise, the garden of Westphalia. After experiencing the indifference and cruelty of life, he finally finds peace in his final settlement, the garden. This is reminiscent of man's grueling journey through the trials of this world, hopefully ending with the happiness we were meant to have all along, before we sinned and ruined it for ourselves. The garden is salvation – literally saving them from boredom, vice, and poverty, but also metaphorically from the wickedness within themselves and in society.

Voltaire implies the evil in our society is not lessened but exacerbated by the authority we establish to control it. Government, business, and religion are all corrupt institutions that slowly and subtly erode rationality and replace it with hypocrisy. He does not condemn faith, only the bureaucratic organization of religion that wages war when it's supposed to bring peace and thrives on greed when it's supposed to be charitable. A glimmer of hope for humanity exists in Eldorado, where the people are governed democratically and rationally, and religion is based on universal belief, without ordained hierarchy. But Eldorado is a city no one can reach and a concept that never progresses to the rest of the world. The rest of civilization is simply not like Eldorado, so Voltaire's suggestion is to turn inward, to improve the world by focusing on ourselves rather than instituting an authority to improve the world for us.

Self-improvement is another implicit meaning in Voltaire's concluding words, that they must go work in, or *cultivate*, the garden. Cultivating the garden represents cultivating ourselves. If we can independently better our own behaviors and control our own tendencies, society will consequently improve. Voltaire's overall purpose is not necessarily to suggest a specific alternative philosophy or method to improve ourselves, just to advocate peace and rationality. Simple, reasonable people do not commit the sins that overwhelm our society. They

do not in vain try to understand or explain the world with metaphysics or suffer from restlessness that leads to strife. They work and live practically, concentrating internally on their behavior. Voltaire implies we were not after all meant to advance our world by creating business and government, but to refine ourselves individually, thus contributing to a better state for our world, be it the best of all possible or not.