

Discussion and Notes

Candide or the Great Unchained Being

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Voltaire's *Candide* is a riposte to the absolute logical determinism inherent in the philosophy of Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, which asserts that the divine will is inexorably determined and must *necessarily* create the best of all possible worlds. Never mind that such a will would not be one at all. The optimism of the eighteenth century extends a long tradition of deterministic thought which Arthur O. Lovejoy has traced through Plato, Plótinus, Abélar, Bruno, and Spinoza.¹ Its premise is that in order for this to be the best of all possible worlds, the one that the supremely wise, absolutely perfect, and eternally sufficient Lord of the Universe would be infallibly inclined to create, it must be replete. Thus the principle of plenitude is claimed as the *sine qua non* for a perfect world, and the perfect world is one that contains all possible degrees of imperfection. As Alexander Pope argued in his *Essay on Man*: Static

Of systems possible if 'tis confessed
That wisdom infinite must form the best,
Where all must full or incoherent be,
And all that rises, rise in due degree.

The notion of coherence inherent in the deterministic view of the world was an important one to the eighteenth-century mind, one of whose overriding concerns was to understand the causal relationships that govern a rational universe. Its logical alternative is a metaphysics of Caprice, an existential philosophy of the absurd, in which randomness, fortuity, and chance, all daughters of chaos, become the unfathomable masters of an incomprehensible universe. Anything could be or come to be, and no one thing would be more probable than any other. In an age that prided itself on being that of Reason, such an unknowable universe was obviously anathema. However, one of the concomitant conclusions of the logic of plenitude, and one which Voltaire implicitly rejects in *Candide*, is that historical progress is made a metaphysical impossibility. If the universal good requires that the world contain all possible evil, and if the universe is and has always been perfectly good, then we cannot expect ever to diminish the evil of the world. Thus the notion of plenitude constitutes a universal principle for the "Conservation of Evil."²

This doctrine was intended to beget reasoned acquiescence in the face of the inevitable and provide intellectual consolation for the evil of the world. Thus, in *Candide*, after the earthquake of Lisbon Pangloss consoles the victims "en les assurant que les choses ne pouvaient étre autrement" (189). However, his argument that this is the best of all worlds should not be construed to mean that all is well within it. On the contrary, he asserts, "ceux

qui ont dit que tout est bien ont dit une sottise: il fallait dire que tout est au mieux" (180). He does not claim the absolute goodness of this world, only that any other world would necessarily be worse. As Lovejoy observes: "Those who suppose that the world might have been better fashioned do so because they fail to see that the best world must contain all possible evil" (64).

The concept of progress was a dear one to Voltaire, and he believed improvement possible not only in man's institutions, but in his nature as well. He found the optimistic doctrine that represented evil as an inevitable and inherent feature in the structure of the universe to be depressing, and he rejected the Spinozan idea that everything is bearable once we realize that it could not have been otherwise. He believed that there is a moral side to history and that mankind should be able to learn from its teaching. This is demonstrated not only in his histories, but in his *Lettres Philosophiques* as well. His sojourn in England (1726-1729) had taught him that despotic institutions can be reined in, and that government can have its hands free to do good at the same time that they are tied to do ill.

The presence of EI Dorado in *Candide* poses a dilemma to the doctrine of determinism, which must argue either that the utopia is not good, at least not as good as a world replete with evil, or that a good system need not contain so much evil. It could be argued, however, that EI Dorado is not really of this world. Upon arriving there Candide wonders about a land where "toute la nature est d'une espece si différente de la notre" (217). Thus it is within the structure of his own world with all of its evil that Candide must sow the seeds of change, and it is for this reason that he must leave the golden utopia. Despite the counsel of his two philosophizing friends Pangloss and Martin, whose advice, though fundamentally different in mood—Pangloss's optimism is opposed to Martin's pessimism—is equally deterministic. Candide never abandons hope that there may indeed be some good in the best of all worlds. His garden may not be a prelapsarian paradise of innocence, but with sweat and toil it produces the fruit that vanquish the great evils of boredom, vice and need.

Notes and References

¹With respect to the classical origin of the notion of determinism, which Lovejoy traces back to Plato's *Timaeus*, it is of interest to note that Voltaire says in his *Melanges* that ancient Greece was the "berceau de l'art, et de l'erreur".

²Lovejoy coins this phrase in the *Great Chain of Being*, and the pseudo-scientific twist he gives it enhances the force of the irony.

Work Cited

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