

Candide: Optimism or Pragmatism?

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The rudimentary laws of physical existence discovered during the Age of Enlightenment brought to the forefront of human consciousness the concept of an ordered and highly structured universe. Much as the great mathematicians and scientists of the era correlated diverse physical phenomena with Newton's inviolable axioms of universal gravitation, philosophers and intellectuals strove to rationally analyze and classify human existence and social interaction. The vista of the omnipotent, sacrosanct Supreme Being, although acknowledged extant, gradually faded and fell by the wayside as the Philosophes embraced Deism and subscribed to the belief that humankind is basically alone and unassisted as it determines its own fate within the universe. Even so, the "best of all possible worlds" doctrine of philosophical optimism promulgated by Leibnitz was rejected by many of his contemporaries as too esoteric and abstract to be of much practical significance. Voltaire, in particular, was opposed to the stricture of harmonious universal order that the individual spheres of consciousness, or "monads," of Leibnitz were purported to collectively represent. In his satirical *Candide or Optimism*, Voltaire portrays evil and man's inhumanity to man, not as constituents of a universal beneficence or grand scheme, but rather as the more ruthless by-products of humankind's innate desire for self-gratification. The character of Candide, in essence, becomes his blank slate upon which these iniquities of life are to be written.

As the tale begins, Candide is described as being gentle, forthright, and inexperienced in the ways of the world. Voltaire is quick to point out that even though Candide has been raised within the confines of the German aristocracy and accorded many of its benefits, he is not of noble lineage and therefore does not share the stature, privilege, and wealth of the illustrious Thunder-ten-tronckh dynasty. Nevertheless, with no needs and cares to speak of, and no experience to the contrary, Candide both subscribes ex cathedra to Dr. Pangloss's optimistic philosophy and succumbs to the fair Cunegonde's charms. In this first glimpse at Candide's simple and insouciant outlook on life, Voltaire provides a neutral reference point from which to analyze the trials and tribulations he has yet to encounter. A useful analogy might be that of an unborn child, still in the womb, conscious only of its own safety and well being, as yet ignorant of the trauma of life it is soon to experience. Voltaire models this initial quasi-utopian existence of Candide as a microcosm of the Leibnitzian philosophy, and then, to dispel any doubts as to its absurdity, wryly ejects him from it "by kicking him in the backside frequently and hard" (Voltaire 3).

Throughout Candide's exploits, as he continues to play the foil to life's injustices, his basic belief in "the best of all possible worlds" philosophy inculcated by Dr. Pangloss shows amazing resiliency. His expulsion from the castle and subsequent thrashing by the Bulgarian regiment notwithstanding, Candide converses with an orator and, mimicking Pangloss, declares that "everything is necessarily linked up and arranged for the best" (Voltaire 8). Unfortunately, his expression of ignorance regarding the pope is taken as effrontery by the orator's wife and in the heat of religious fervor, he is summarily doused with the contents of a full chamber pot.

Although he is quick to vacillate in the face of adversity and despair, as he does before his auspicious meeting with the old woman, Candide is continually brought back into the optimistic fold, albeit in an increasingly half-hearted manner as the story progresses. Despite his hasty murder of the Jew and the Inquisitor, the remarkable restraint Candide displays in not resorting to the tactics of treachery, cruelty, and deceit that he confronts at every turn flies in the face of basic human nature; even the most stoic of individuals could not help but become jaded and retributive if placed in similarly pernicious situations. Treasure from Eldorado soon mitigates his misfortunes, though, and enables him to improve his circumstances and maintain them throughout the remainder of the tale.

After heaping a plethora of physical abuse upon Candide and his optimistic outlook, Voltaire begins to transform his anxieties to the intellectual sphere by introducing characters of alternate philosophical leanings. In an attempt to sway Candide, and at the same time, the reader, Voltaire unveils in Martin the antithesis of Pangloss. Whereas Pangloss sees a general good in all events, Martin believes “God has abandoned [the world] to some evil creature” (Voltaire 69). The subsequent introductions of Lord Pococurante, the six kings, the Dervish, and the Turk all tend to reinforce Martin’s attitude and suggest to Candide that philosophic optimism is something less than universal truth. The remarks of the Mussulman, in particular, appear to cause consternation. Pangloss’s absurd reasoning at the end of chapter thirty prompts Candide to state, for the second time, that “we must cultivate our gardens” (Voltaire 115). In view of its juxtaposition to this final statement of illogical optimism by Pangloss, the utterance most likely is to be taken with at least a modicum of pessimistic resignation, a more common metaphoric interpretation of which might be: “We have made our beds, now we must lie in them.”

In *Candide or Optimism*, Voltaire takes the title character if not from the realm of the optimist to that of the pessimist, then certainly to that of the pragmatist. When analyzed in the light of current events, the work serves to illustrate that a concise formulation of social interaction remains as elusive and unattainable today as it did during the Enlightenment. Voltaire’s *Candide*, in helping to divorce the concepts of natural and social law, was instrumental in promoting the notion of humanity, with all its faults, as being firmly in control of its own destiny. It will undoubtedly continue to be read, influencing many generations yet to come.

Works Cited

Voltaire. *Candide or Optimism*. Ed. Norman L. Torrey.
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