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Candide: A Satirical Critique of Optimism

Two radically different philosophies figure prominently in Voltaire's *Candide*. Dr. Pangloss believes in optimism and determinism, that "there is no effect without a cause … all things are necessarily connected and arranged for the best" (26), whereas Martin holds the cynical view that "man's origin is evil" (92). The novel's naive protagonist, Candide, initially agrees with the philosophy of his teacher Pangloss, but he encounters so much suffering, greed, and cruelty on his travels that he is forced to question his views. Voltaire creates a world full of misfortune in order to satirize Pangloss's philosophy and express his own viewpoint on the folly of such optimistic beliefs.

Dr. Pangloss initially serves as Candide's childhood teacher at Thunder-ten-tronckh, and Candide is greatly influenced by Pangloss's philosophy. Pangloss's opinion is that whatever events might transpire are ultimately arranged for the best; this view is both optimistic and fatalistic. He is said to have "proved uncontestably" that this is so, and both he and Candide are initially convinced, but his logic does not make sense. He transposes cause and effect, claiming for example that "our noses were made to carry spectacles, so we wear spectacles," and he claims that this must mean that the world is designed such that "all is for the best." (20). Pangloss justifies his beliefs with a jumbled, illogical proof, so the reader must question their validity. However, Pangloss holds true to these views, even when he meets with unfortunate circumstances. When Candide next encounters him after leaving the Baron's town, Pangloss is by now reduced to "a beggar covered with sores" with "lifeless" eyes, a mouth "all askew." a "sepulchral" voice, and a "violent cough"

(27). He is dying from a sexually transmitted disease obtained from the servant Paquette, and it has rendered him so disfigured that Candide has difficulty recognizing him. Even so, he still professes optimism. He ascribes a distinguished genealogy to his disease, claiming that he has received it "in direct line from one of the companions of Christopher Columbus," and claims that it is "a necessary ingredient," "indispensable in this best of all worlds" (30). He continues to assert that his disease and the storm and volcanic eruption at Lisbon are all parts of a larger design for the world that is somehow for the best. "Private misfortunes contribute to the general good," he claims, "so that the more private misfortunes there are, the more we find that all is well" (31). Neither his own suffering nor that of others shakes Pangloss's faith in optimism.

Pangloss claims that the world of *Candide* is the "best of all possible worlds." However, it is also shown to be filled with misery and suffering, which would appear to contradict Pangloss. Candide, who is initially a follower of Pangloss, begins to find the philosophy of optimism at odds with the reality he experiences. Nearly every character in *Candide* suffers some sort of unpleasant fate; the novel reads almost like a catalog of horrors. Candide is nearly tortured to death by the Bulgar army, and again by the Inquisition. Pangloss is disfigured by his disease, then recovers only to be flogged and hung by the Inquisition for his beliefs. The Baron and the Lady Cunégonde are ravished and disemboweled, and their manor destroyed. The Anabaptist James, one of the few characters who acts with honesty and charity, drowns in a storm. These events cause Candide's optimism to falter. When he learns of his love Cunégonde's death, he faints and exclaims "Oh, what has become of the best of worlds?" (29). As the story progresses, Candide continues to encounter similar misfortunes, and he struggles to reconcile them with Pangloss's view of the world. When he sees a ship sunk in a naval battle near France, Candide notes that the defeated ship was that of a pirate had who earlier robbed him and tries to claim that this was the pirate's inevitable fate in a just world: "crime is sometimes punished … that rogue of a Dutch captain has had the fate he deserved" (93). However, this claim is flawed, for as Candide's companion Martin

points out, the ship also contained hundreds of innocent passengers who were also killed. Candide comes to realize that "whatever Professor Pangloss might say, I often noticed that all went badly in Westphalia" (77). Indeed, even Pangloss has the same realization, though he clings more strongly to his views. When he returns at the end of the story, having survived his hanging only to be enslaved, he tells Candide that he "still hold[s his] original views," but only because "I am a philosopher [and] it would not be proper for me to recant" (136). Indeed, though he continues to halfheartedly express it, he no longer remains convinced of his original philosophy: "he still maintained [that everything would turn out right in some marvelous way], however little he believed it" (140). By depicting a world so full of evil and misfortune that not only Candide but also Pangloss must lose faith in optimism, Voltaire powerfully expresses his opinion that Panglossian optimism is foolish and unrealistic.

Martin has a different philosophy. He has suffered much, and he believes that the state of the world can be explained by his belief "that man was created by the forces of evil and not by the forces of good" (92). This, he claims, explains why so much cruelty exists that he has "scarcely seen a town which does not seek the ruin of a neighbouring town, nor a family that does not with to exterminate some other family" (92). Unlike Pangloss's theory, Martin's is consistent with what Candide and Martin experience on their travels. In many of the countries they travel to, barbaric wars are being fought. When Candide is conscripted into the Bulgar army, he sees the "beauty and brilliance" of uncountable thousands of soldiers being killed on the battlefield. By satirically glorifying this "heroic butchery," Voltaire is not only commenting on the savagery of war but also noting that such brutality has become commonplace and accepted. In England, the situation is even more extreme: Candide and Martin witness the public execution of a British admiral "because he had not enough dead men to his credit" (111). In Paraguay, Candide encounters an example of humans acting as animals quite literally, when he finds the "two girls fondly embracing the two monkeys" that were their lovers (69). These examples support Martin's philosophy that humans

tend to be cruel and evil. Similarly, Martin describes Paris as "chaos, a mob of people all out for pleasure … [a] whole warren of intrigue and fanaticism," and this is essentially what he and Candide find when they arrive in the city (94). As soon as Candide and Martin set foot in the city, they are besieged by crowds who attempt to steal Candide's wealth through card games and impersonation of Lady Cunégonde. In Paris, everyone Candide meets is motivated by greed and self-interest, which also supports Martin's views about the nature of humanity.

Voltaire is particularly critical of institutions of religion. Throughout the novel, members of the clergy are responsible for immoral acts. For example, both the Grand Inquisitioner and the Jew, Don Issachar, have enslaved Lady Cunégonde, making "a bargain by which [she] should belong to both of them in common, to the Jew on Monday, Wednesday, and Sabbath days, and to the Inquisitor the other days of the week" (42). Of course, the auto-da-fé and execution of Pangloss are obvious examples of other immoral acts committed by the Inquisitor in the name of religion. The old woman who cares for Candide tells of being nearly killed by soldiers who will massacre soldiers, sailors, women, and everyone else, yet "will not miss one of the five daily prayers prescribed by Mahomet" even as they create "a heap of corpses" (52). Voltaire's indictment of the immorality prevalent in the religious system is an important theme by itself. However, it also furthers Martin's view about the evils of human behavior. Religious leaders are traditionally perceived as models of morality, yet in *Candide* even they are responsible for cruel and inhumane acts.

Candide finds this suffering and cruelty in every part of his travels except one: the country of Eldorado. This contrast between it and the rest of the world makes Eldorado especially significant. In Eldorado, gold and jewels, "the least of which would have been the grandest ornament in the Mogul throne" are so commonplace that they are treated as garbage, and exquisite luxuries are available freely (75). There are neither courts nor prisons nor formal institutions of

religion, and it is a fundamental Eldoradan belief that "all men are free" (83). Even the King of Eldorado treats Candide and his servant Cacambo with equality and respect. In short, Eldorado is a utopia. This would seem to lend credence to Pangloss's philosophy, for if there is a best of all possible worlds, it must be this utopia; Candide observes that "everything is so different from what we are used to. It is probably the country where all goes well" (77). However, Eldorado is an insular community, isolated by giant mountains from the rest of the world. Candide and Cacambo find that, before long, they must leave, both so they can rescue Cunégonde, and because "they were anxious, also, to show their friends how rich they had grown and to boast about what they had seen" (82). They are struck by the enormous riches available to them, but they realize that in Eldorado this confers upon them no special status, because everyone else has access to the same wealth. Thus, it is their greed that forces them to leave. In essence, Voltaire uses the setting of Eldorado not merely to discredit the existence of a Panglossian "best of all possible worlds" but to claim that it is not possible for ordinary humans such as Candide and Cacambo to be a part of this perfect world because they suffer — as Martin would say — from the human faults of greed.

Candide criticizes Pangloss's philosophy that everything is arranged in a grand design which is ultimately for the best. Rather than argue directly against it, Voltaire instead presents Pangloss's philosophy then discredits it by demonstrating that it cannot possibly apply in a world filled with such cruelty and misfortune. This criticism is made especially effective through the author's use of satire; the reader finds Pangloss's ideas laughable when events routinely contradict them. Voltaire then introduces a new philosophy, Martin's notion that humans are evil rather than good, and proves that in the world of *Candide* this theory is more credible than Pangloss's optimism. By presenting his argument in the form of a story, Voltaire is able to use exaggeration to emphasize his points. The tragedies he depicts, such as the destruction of Lisbon, the Inquisition, and the wars, are based on historical events. However, while many of the events are realistic and plausible, it would certainly seem unlikely that one individual could encounter each of them. Voltaire has depicted a disproportionately large amount of evil and misfortune in the world he

creates, and this negativity contributes to his argument. He intends for the reader, like the naive Candide, to come to realize that the world cannot be explained by Pangloss's beliefs. Panglossian optimism is based on a philosophy common in Voltaire's time, that of Leibniz, so the novel is intended to criticize Leibniz as well. However, the use of exaggeration strains the credibility of the analogy between the novel and reality. The world of *Candide* is an especially negative version of the world Voltaire lived in, and Pangloss's optimism is an overly simplified version of Leibniz's philosophy. Thus, while Voltaire makes a mockery of Pangloss' philosophy, his criticism of Leibniz is not as effective.