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### Exploring the Philosophy of Purpose in Voltaire's *Candide*

Voltaire's *Candide*<sup>1</sup> is a brilliant satire that humorously criticizes Leibniz's vision of a world in which everything is for the best. However, the intention of the novel is not simply to mock Leibniz's optimism. Instead, Voltaire presents many world views, including both pure optimism and pure pessimism, which are embodied by various characters, and shows that these extremist beliefs are not useful approaches to life. Instead, Voltaire puts forth a new philosophy that people can only be content if they avoid boredom by having a purpose in their lives. He uses Candide's experiences in Eldorado and Turkey to demonstrate that humans can only achieve happiness by taking action and working hard towards concrete goals.

The protagonist and title character of the novel, Candide, begins life with "unaffected simplicity" (19) and an open mind. Two of the characters who influence his views, Dr. Pangloss and Martin, hold opposing yet equally foolish views. Both men are unwise because they interpret events to fit their own philosophies instead of learning from their mistakes and misfortunes. For example, Pangloss contracts a terrible disease and loses an eye and an ear, but still claims, "[The disease] is indispensable in this best of worlds. It is a necessary ingredient" (30). His view is ignorant and irresponsible because it justifies the chain of immoral sexual encounters through which the disease spread instead of condemning and trying to prevent further vice. When James the Anabaptist falls overboard, Pangloss refuses to rescue him because he believes that "Lisbon harbour was made on purpose for this Anabaptist to drown there" (33), again adapting the event, upgrading James's death from a possibility to a necessity, to fit his philosophy. Finally, even after being "hanged, dissected, and beaten unmercifully," Pangloss still holds his original views.

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<sup>1</sup> Voltaire. *Candide*. Trans. John Butt. London, England: Penguin Classics, 1947.

He tells Candide, “I am still a philosopher. It would not be proper for me to recant...” (136).

Through these words, Voltaire implies that only proud and silly men like Pangloss would ignore all their experiences just for the comfort of maintaining a consistent belief system.

Another character, Martin, has exactly opposite views. He has no faith in people and even believes that “man’s origin is evil” (92). Although Martin’s opinion is also extreme, Voltaire does not ridicule him as much as Pangloss. One reason is that the many misfortunes in the story support Martin’s worldview. For example, Martin’s pessimism is best justified through the story of Pacquette and Brother Giroflee, who manage to become “even more unhappy” after Candide gives them money (117). Their fate suggests that humans are inherently evil and unable to refrain from sinning, but Voltaire does not completely support this idea, and therefore does not completely support Martin. In the story, sometimes Martin’s gloomy predictions do not come to pass. For example, he does not believe Cacambo will ever bring Cunegonde back to Candide (113), but in this case he underestimates the servant’s loyalty and the goodness of human nature. In addition, Martin is not a good role model for Candide simply because, as a pessimist, Martin is not happy. He cannot enjoy life and does not see any point in even trying. While Candide and Martin travel around Europe, Candide looks forward to exploring new cities (or at least to finding Cunegonde in one of them), but according to Martin, Paris is “chaos, a mob of people all out for pleasure, and scarcely a soul who finds it,” Venice is “no place to live in unless you are a Venetian nobleman,” and England is full of people with “a most serious and gloomy temperament” (95, 110). He has nothing good to say about any of the places they visit, even though the cities have rich cultures and interesting people. While Pangloss is unreasonably happy because he thinks all the events in his life have some divine purpose, Martin is very unhappy because he thinks the events in his life have no purpose at all. Interestingly, these opposing views

lead both philosophers to be too passive—Pangloss because he doesn't need to take action, and Martin because he sees no point in doing so. Therefore, both scholars are not learning from their experiences, and they are not contributing to the world around them.

A philosophy different from both Pangloss's and Martin's is that of the old woman, Cunegonde's companion. She says that although she has met "a vast number of people who detested their existence," she has found that people still cling stubbornly to their lives, no matter how terrible, as if "to fondle the snake that devours us until it has eaten our hearts away" (57). In one sense, she is superior to both the learned scholars because she has gained her knowledge not by thinking or by reading other people's books, but by living through tragedy and asking about others' misfortunes. She says, "I am a woman of experience: I know the world" (57). Her ideas are the best and most useful because they stem from the events of her own life. Unlike Pangloss and Martin, she is also a useful person because in addition to being a good maid, she cleverly helps Candide and Cunegonde to escape from Portugal (46). Slowly, Candide learns to follow the old woman's example. At first he blindly follows Pangloss's teachings, declaring that "Things could not have happened otherwise" when he is forced to beg for food (27), but after listening to his fellow travelers' tales of woe, he thinks, "It would have puzzled the great man [Pangloss] to make a case for his theories...If all goes well, it is in Eldorado, but nowhere else in the world" (90). Candide's thoughts demonstrate that he is beginning to reject Pangloss's complete optimism and to realize that the universe may not be perfectly arranged after all.

Out of the very many lands mentioned and visited throughout the novel, only one seems to fit the design of a perfect world – Eldorado. However, this episode in Candide's journey is full of contradictions. One obvious one occurs when the king allows Candide and Cacambo to leave his kingdom because "all men are free" (83). The statement sounds just and benevolent, but none

of the native inhabitants of Eldorado are allowed to leave the area, so the king's ruling is somewhat hypocritical. In addition, Eldorado seems as plentiful and flawless as the Garden of Eden, and so fails to obey earthly rules of reality. The country has no courts of law and no prisons (and therefore no crime) (82), and when Candide and Cacambo consult an old scholar about religion, he says, "We never pray... we have nothing to ask of God, since He has given us everything we need. But we thank Him unceasingly" (79). All the citizens appear perfectly satisfied with their lives, yet there is still inequality in the settlement. Candide and Cacambo approach "the largest house in the village" upon their arrival, and the landlord tells them, "this is a poor village" (76-77). These qualifiers illustrate that although every person in Eldorado is wealthier than the rest of the world put together, some are still wealthier than others. Therefore, Eldorado is not as perfect as it appears, showing that it is unrealistic to fantasize about a utopian world.

Nevertheless, even if Eldorado is as wonderful as Voltaire describes, in the end Candide and Cacambo still decide to leave. They have various motives: they crave adventure, Candide is still madly in love with Cunegonde, and, less nobly, "They were both anxious, also, to show their friends how rich they had grown and to boast about what they had seen in their travels" (82). In this passage, Voltaire illustrates human bravery and devotion, but also greed and pride, illustrating that people are neither entirely good nor entirely bad.

Furthermore, Voltaire writes that "these happy men decided to be happy no longer and to take leave of His Majesty" (83). The statement is contradictory because it seems illogical that anyone would purposely give up happiness, but perhaps the true meaning is that riches and comfort alone cannot make someone happy. Instead, man's motivation comes from many other things, such as pride (for example, Candide and Cacambo want to "be richer than all the kings of

Europe put together” (82)). They are also motivated by goals, which would have been harder to find had they stayed as guests of the king forever. Later in the novel, Candide’s “one great advantage over Martin” is that “he kept hoping to see Lady Cunegonde again, whereas Martin had nothing to hope for” (91). This shows that his hopes are an important part of Candide’s motivation—he is happier than Martin because he has something to live for and an end result to look forward to. Therefore, Voltaire is suggesting that humans need to have purpose in their lives to attain peace of mind and contentment.

The last portion of the novel, describing Candide’s life in Turkey, further illustrates Voltaire’s belief that people need goals to be happy. At first, it “would be natural to suppose that, after so many disasters, Candide should lead the most pleasing life imaginable” (139), but it soon becomes clear that Candide is not satisfied with his life because having finally found his lady and his friends, he no longer has any concrete goals. He, Pangloss, and Martin continue to seek truths about the world, ignoring or misinterpreting the truths they can draw from their own wide-ranging adventures. Finally, a not-so-friendly neighborhood dervish shows them that their inquiries are too abstract. When asked “why such a strange animal as man was made,” he replies, “Is it your business?” (141), implying that it is not. In addition, when asked to justify the amount of evil in the world he says, “When His Highness sends a ship to Egypt, do you suppose he worries whether the ship’s mice are comfortable or not?” (141) The dervish’s answers, which poke fun at the self-centeredness and egoism of the human race, suggest that perhaps men are not as important to God or to the overall design of the universe as they believe themselves to be. By discouraging the philosophers from focusing on these huge, insubstantial truths, he is guiding them to find more concrete purposes in life to make them happier.

Soon after taking leave of the annoyed dervish, Candide meets a Turk who seems perfectly content with his life. He tells Candide, “work banishes those three great evils, boredom, vice, and poverty” (143). Interestingly, he lists boredom first, reminding readers of a character from earlier in the novel, Count Pococurante. Pococurante is a wealthy man with a beautiful house, rare paintings, and excellent books, but he appreciates none of these things. His paintings “give him no pleasure at all,” he thinks opera is “a monstrosity that utterly disgusts me,” and even Homer “bores [him] to distraction” (119-120). Although Pococurante has everything a man could want, he is still unhappy (except for “a pleasure in not being pleased” (124)) because he does not need to earn a living or improve his taste (since his taste is already beyond the world’s best offerings), so he has no concrete goals and is plagued by boredom. On the other hand, the Turk has “only twenty acres,” by no means “a magnificent estate,” but he is much happier than Pococurante because he has a clear purpose in life and is far too busy to become bored.

After learning this lesson, Candide and his friends finally manage to improve their tortured lives through therapeutic hard work and the sense of accomplishment their efforts bring. Pangloss even mentions that man was put in the Garden of Eden to “dress it and to keep it” (143). Pangloss’s insight that man’s purpose on Earth is to do useful work is significant because in the rest of the novel, the philosopher usually picks passiveness over action, reasoning that whatever happens to him is a simple necessity of the universe. In accepting that weed invasion does not contribute to the best of all possible worlds and should actually be actively prevented, Pangloss is taking a huge step forward and finally learning from his experiences instead of always falling back on eternal optimism. In the end, Candide finds that Eldorado, the perfect city, fails to provide as much happiness as an unremarkable farm in Turkey simply because it does not provide him with tangible goals. The famous last sentiment, “we must go and work in

the garden,” sums up the entire message of the novel, that people need a purpose in life to be happy (144). Voltaire is satirizing philosophers and their ideas not because he hates philosophy itself, but because he knows that the best path to a good philosophy is not to reason about life and to try to classify various parts of it, but to actually venture into the world and live it.