The Best of All Possible Worlds

Leibniz and Voltaire
In 1697, on the eve of the Enlightenment, the French philosopher Pierre Bayle famously entered some sharp criticisms of orthodox religious belief.

A God who could have created a world that contained fewer crimes and misfortunes — and chose not to do so — could be little more than a criminal.

For on the utterly innocent Jesus, Bayle added, this God had imposed as cruel a set of punishments as any human being has ever suffered.

And on human beings in the so-called “life” hereafter, God has imposed unimaginable suffering, while insisting that this suffering be borne eternally.
Ironically, this same God has created us sinful in the first place, before torturing us for our brief participation in these sins — a scandal still greater for Calvinists whose belief in predestination insisted that this punishment be meted out to unbaptized babies, noble princes, and brutal gangsters alike.

Far more sensible, Bayle concluded, were the arguments of the Manichaeans, which respected the intermingling of good and evil in the world, and concluded that our lives witness a perpetual struggle between them.
Leibniz’s *Theodicy* (1710) was simply a very long response to this work of Bayle. To this end, Leibniz had invented the word “theodicy” itself — i.e., to describe any defense of God in categories taken from legal discourse (after all, Bayle *had* charged God with a crime).

Leibniz’s intention, against Bayle, was to defend God by demonstrating the conformity of faith with reason.

This defense involved several steps:

- it is our Christian duty to be pious, and to be pious means to love God
- we clearly cannot love God unless we can understand Him
- to understand God, we must assume that God Himself is a rational creature
- if we are to understand such a rational creature, we too must exercise our faculty of reason
The “principle of sufficient reason”

From here, it was but a few short steps to Leibniz’ “principle of sufficient reason”:

• first, since God is omnipotent, it follows that nothing occurs through mere chance

• second, this means that for every event, there corresponds a cause, and that this cause is God’s reason for bringing this event — and not some other event — into being

• third, this means that we do not fully understand something until we perceive why the thing is exactly the way that it is — i.e., why God created it in its given as opposed to some other form
Leibniz and Newton

This argument led Leibniz into a famous quarrel with Sir Isaac Newton.

Briefly, Newton's law of gravity had claimed that everything in the universe attracts other things with a force that is:

• proportional to the product of their masses; and
• inversely proportional to the square of the distance between them

Newton was confident that this theory was correct because the results of his experiments corresponded with and thus verified it. But Leibniz attacked Newton for merely describing the manner in which bodies are attracted to each other and not explaining why they are attracted to each other the way they are.

Why, Leibniz asked rather querulously, is gravity inversely proportional to the square of the distance — e.g., instead of to the cube of the distance — between things?
Leibniz’ principle of sufficient reason also implied something like the Platonist conception of a world of ideal forms, from which the world of real things is derived:

- first, the existence of all finite things must in some manner be grounded in the rational order of Ideas — briefly, in the realm of Ideas which were present to God before the creation
- in creating finite things, God’s choice of these Ideas was necessarily guided by divine reason, not by will or random choice
- but further, any actual world created by God had not only been comprised of rationally-chosen Ideas, but also of Ideas that were “compossible” each with the others — i.e., of entities which, taken together, formed an internally coherent and compatible system
- before the creation, therefore, God was confronted with an infinite number of “models of worlds,” any one of which — but only one of which — was “the best of all possible worlds”
Before deciding which of all the possible worlds He should choose to make real, therefore, Leibniz’s God looked at all the Ideas, calculated which ones would fit best together, and chose the best of all the possible combinations.

- ironically, in doing so, he did what rationalism has often been accused of — i.e., of putting reason above God Himself, an element of presumption that the orthodox would eventually find unacceptable
- but at this early stage in the Enlightenment, reason was still viewed as the ally of faith — indeed, until the mid-18th century, each new scientific discovery seemed to prove the argument from design
- this helps to explain Leibniz’ confidence that science would eventually find the hidden connections between virtue and happiness that current experience had failed to show
“The best of all possible worlds”

- What if evil is only a part of the overall good and does not exist in itself? Leibniz suggests that if God is all perfect then any universe created by God cannot be anything less than perfect. If this is so then evil is not really evil at all but some necessary part or feature of the best of all possible worlds. From God’s infinite viewpoint, “evil” is simply a necessary part of the beautiful and good creation that is the "best of all possible worlds". The idea of "evil" is merely a human concept and only seems to conflict with God’s goodness. It is not an objective property of the universe, but is a result of man's distorted and limited understanding, an illusion in our minds.
The “Great Lisbon Earthquake” (1755)

This helps us to understand the historical significance of the “Great Lisbon Earthquake,” which took place on November 1, 1755, at about 9:40 am.

Estimated by modern geologists at near 9 on the Richter scale, it was immediately followed by a tsunami and numerous fires, which caused the near-total destruction of Lisbon and killed as many as 100,000 people.
The “Great Lisbon Earthquake” (1755)

The earthquake was also a shock to Western European thought and, more specifically, to our understanding of the problem of evil:

- Portugal was among the most Catholic countries in western Europe, and thus presumably one highly-favored by God
- but the earthquake took place on the morning of All Saints Day, when the churches were filled with families of worshippers — a fact which accounted for the extremely high death-toll (paradoxically — for those convinced of the ultimate convergence of virtue and happiness — Portugal’s brothels remained largely unscathed)
Some of the greatest writers of the Enlightenment — including Rousseau and Kant — thus felt compelled to respond to the Lisbon earthquake in their work; but forever, the Lisbon earthquake will be linked to a Frenchman named François-Marie Arouet — better known by the pen name, Voltaire — and a brief satire entitled *Candide* (1759).
Twelve years before *Candide*, Voltaire had written *Zadig*, the story of an adventurer who, like Candide, suffers inexplicable reversals of fortune, seemingly unjustifiable suffering, and the wickedness of malevolent strangers in the effort to be reunited with a distant love.

Near the end of the story, a bewildered Zadig is told by an angel that the universe, despite its apparent lack of meaning, purpose, order and justice, was indeed created by a supreme wisdom.

As if to belie his own claim, the angel then destroys the house of a generous host and drowns an attractive youth — acts of what seems to be gross injustice.

When Zadig protests, the angel then explains that a treasure lay beneath the house that would otherwise have gone undiscovered, and that the boy would have murdered his aunt the following year — and Zadig himself the year after!

Zadig’s virtues thus grant him access to truths that are hidden from the rest of us and — like Job — he is richly rewarded at the end of the story.

*Zadig, or Destiny (1747)*
Conditions leading up to *Candide*

The story told in *Candide* is rather different, reflecting an altered conception of the problem of evil, meaning, and suffering.

How are we to account for the difference?

- one answer is that Voltaire himself had experienced some acute personal suffering
  - e.g., his beloved mistress the Madame du Châtelet had died in childbirth
  - e.g., he had experienced a falling out with his close friend, Frederick the Great of Prussia
- more decisive, of course, was the Lisbon earthquake (see chapter 5 of *Candide*) — indeed, virtually all of the events described in *Candide* are taken from actual events described in the newspapers of the period, which had led Voltaire to a fear of his own complacency in the face of the abundance of very real suffering in the world.
Voltaire’s *Poem on the Lisbon Earthquake* (1756)

“Leibniz can’t tell me from what secret cause
In a world governed by the wisest laws
Lasting disorders, woes that never end
With our vain pleasures real sufferings blend;
Why ill the virtuous with the vicious shares?
Why neither good nor bad misfortunes spares?
I can’t conceive that “what is, ought to be,”
In this each doctor knows as much as me …
If in a life midst sorrows past and fears,
With pleasure’s hand we wipe away our tears,
Pleasure his light wings spreads, and quickly flies,
Losses on losses, griefs on griefs arise.”

This adherence to concrete reality, of course, extends to using real people as the models for at least some of the major characters in the story. Some are more obvious and less controversial than others, but a few of those more commonly mentioned and discussed include:

- Pangloss, whose constant references to “the best of all possible worlds” guarantee that Voltaire has Leibniz in mind
- Candide, whose provincial, almost “deer in the headlights” naiveté has suggested to some the character of Rousseau
- Conégunde who, perhaps indirectly, has suggested to some the character of Thérèse Levasseur (Rousseau’s mistress)
- Martin, the Spanish amateur philosopher and Manichaean, who in all likelihood represents Pierre Bayle

Who is whom?
First and foremost, of course, *Candide* is about suffering.

Jean Starobinski, the author of *Blessings in Disguise: The Morality of Evil* (1993), has described it as “the first global vision of suffering.”

Mutilations, castrations, disembowelments, amputations, and rapes are everywhere; indeed, every form of human debasement, from slavery to war to unbearable loneliness, is represented.
Candide is thus a catalogue of human suffering, comparable to Dante's *inferno* in its comprehensiveness; but unlike Dante's vision, Voltaire's is one of suffering that is singularly pointless and without meaning.

Not only does it take place in this life rather than the next, but Voltaire never suggests that any particular instance of suffering has any point whatever, or that things might possibly be better in some world yet to come.
Second, of course, *Candide* is also enormously funny, and the reasons why it remains so funny benefit from some reflection. This effect is achieved through a variety of means, but none less than the ironic juxtaposition of:

- human suffering
- the intellectual and institutional means by which human beings have attempted to comprehend it (e.g., theology, intellectual speculation, etc.)

For Pangloss, for example, it is more important to prove his theory of the causes of the earthquake than to save its victims; that the bay of Lisbon had been formed expressly for Jacques the Anabaptist to drown in; that syphilis had to be transported from the Americas to Europe so that Europeans might enjoy chocolate; and so on.

Throughout the work, there is literally no authoritative European institution— theology, philosophy, politics, education, commerce, the class structure, the military, sexual morality and the family—that survives unscathed.
What is *Candide* about?

Third, this means that Candide is more about moral evil than its natural counterpart.

As Susan Neiman has pointed out, Candide’s education is designed to make him resemble the critical, self-made bourgeois liberal who is the hero of the Enlightenment.

- his life begins without any doubts about the sources of authority, comfortable in the aristocracy and its Panglossian assurances of meaning and order
- during the hero’s journeys, he is exposed to everything that makes such authority look ridiculous and, by the end, he has learned that authority comes from humanity, and that labor is the only real foundation of order or respect
- *Candide*, in short, is a description of the path from the feudal to the modern social order