

Candide and free will

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Voltaire's *Candide* is a novel that is interspersed with superficial characters and conceptual ideas that are critically exaggerated and satirized. The parody offers cynical themes disguised by mockeries and witticism, and the story itself presents a distinctive outlook on life narrowed to the concept of free will as opposed to blind faith driven by desire for an optimistic outcome. The crucial contrast in the story deals with irrational ideas as taught to Candide about being optimistic by Pangloss, his cheerful mentor, versus reality as viewed by the rest of the world through the eyes of the troubled character, Martin.

This raises the question of whether or not the notion of free will is valid due to Candide's peculiar timing of his expression for it. Some readers might think that Voltaire's novel *Candide* suggests that belief in free will is absurd. However, a close reading of the text suggests that Voltaire does not deny free will altogether. Candide is in complete control of his actions and ideas during times when an agreeable reality poses not to be enough, which explores Voltaire's message that true reality is the ability to identify the deficiency of human conventions.

Candide's journey to attain the balance between submitting his will completely to the opinions and actions of others and taking control of his own life through blind faith highlights the notion of free will throughout Voltaire's novel. Throughout the novel, Voltaire represents mankind as being consumed by immediate personal problems. When the characters of *Candide* virtually have no troubles or dilemmas, Voltaire illustrates how they do not express their happiness and contentment for it, but rather portray their

feelings of boredom and a desire to involve themselves within the complex social constructs of the world.

In chapter eighteen when Candide and his valet Cacambo enter the glorious city of El Dorado, Candide expresses the city's extravagance and how it is incomparable to any other, even when compared to his overvalued Westphalia. Voltaire described "the public edifices raised as high as the clouds, the market places ornamented with a thousand columns, the fountains of spring water...which were paved with a kind of precious stone which gave off a delicious fragrancancy like that of cloves and cinnamon" (45) to illustrate the decadence of El Dorado, and how it was virtually a utopia that no man could resist.

However, Candide held enough free will within himself by opting to leave the splendor in order to "recover Miss Cunegonde" (46). This event solidifies some readers' opinions that belief in free will is absurd, for Candide uses it for irrational and perverse means by hoping for a finer future. El Dorado serves as a symbol to Candide that there is more the world has to offer after having been taught that he was already living in the best of all possible worlds while in Westphalia.

The fact that he came across such magnificence paradoxically influenced his choice to leave since he thought he could find better than El Dorado, which demonstrates the faults of human conventions about how Candide could not distinguish between true and optimistic realities when he already had quite possibly the best world right in front of him. Once again, this substantiates readers' ideas that free will is outlandish and nonsensical. "If we abide here

we shall only be upon a footing with the rest, whereas, if we return to our old world...we shall be richer than all the kings in Europe" (46).

He is not aware of the ramifications of his actions, of his professed free will, and believes that only good things will come to him as a result of his foolish autonomy. Voltaire presents the characters as having emotional lives that shift between worries and boredom with almost no periods of prolonged happiness. Pangloss' influence instructs Candide to submit to blind faith that the outcome of all will be well, and that all events happen for a reason. " It is demonstrable that things cannot be otherwise than as they are; for all being created for an end, all is necessarily for the best end" (1).

Under these assumptions Candide says, " There can be no effect without a cause [...] The whole is necessarily concatenated and arranged for the best" (6). This philosophy that everything is fated to be good omits the validity of free will that Candide later claims to have since he is man and therefore above the animal world, because no matter what man does in part to shape the entirety of his future, Candide was taught that the outcome is predestined to yield an optimistic and hopeful reality. The belief that everything happens for a reason and where the reason is good is incompatible with the act of free will.

Therefore, any efforts of free will are futile because they cannot change the predetermined outcome, making its concept essentially nonexistent. This logical cycle strengthens and endorses readers' ideas that free will is incongruous with faith. Candide is a naive character that is in complete control of his ideas and actions despite the influence from others. In chapter two when he is captured by Bulgarians and given the choice between death

and running the gauntlet, he groundlessly uses his free will to receive an intense degree of torture and anguish. He was asked which he would like the best, to be whipped six-and-thirty times through all the regiment, or to receive at once twelve balls of lead in his brain. He vainly said that human will is free, and that he chose neither the one nor the other" (4). Candide tries to argue that having free will meant not having to choose, because being a human retaining that free will meant he had the choice not to make a choice. However, his attempts are thwarted when he is forced to make a decision for his fate, where " he determined, in virtue of that gift of God called liberty, to run the gauntlet six-and-thirty times. He bore this twice" (4).

During a time when death clearly presented itself as the unusual superior choice, Candide foolishly picked the lesser of the two options. By choosing " four thousand strokes, which laid bare all his muscles and nerves, from the nape of his neck quite down to his rump" (4), Voltaire proves to readers that having free will is an absurd notion. He reinforces readers' ideas that preserving belief for free will only leads to self-destruction due to Candide's imprudent use and inappropriate application of it. Voltaire's Martin provides a slightly more realistic albeit largely negative slant of the world that readers can more easily identify with.

Martin says that the world has been formed " to plague us to death" and that " it is a chaos - a confused multitude, where everybody seeks pleasure and scarcely any one finds it" (54-55). In chapter 21, Candide asks Martin if he believes " that men have always massacred each other as they do to-day, that they have always been liars, cheats, traitors, ingrates, brigands, idiots,

thieves, scoundrels, gluttons, drunkards, misers, envious, ambitious, bloody-minded, calumniators, debauches, fanatics, hypocrites, and fools" (55).

Martin is deeply struck with pessimism, feeling the world is doomed to evil and destruction, and responds with a valid question as an answer: " Do you believe hawks have always eaten pigeons when they have found them? " (55) Martin's insight to the fixed cycle of nature demonstrates how he perceives man's nature to be just like one of beasts. Candide firmly counters and says " there is a vast deal of difference, for free will" (55) Candide, though easily influenced, senses that there is something more which exists between the contrasting worlds that both Pangloss and Martin have presented to him, which is free will.

However, this claim is inconsistent with his belief that blind faith is the key to an optimistic reality, because once again, faith and free will are concepts that counteract and negate each other. At this point, readers' opinions that free will is a meaningless and hollow notion is underpinned because of the fact that it is the only aspect that Candide cares to explore as the sole difference between man and animal that ultimately proves to be insignificant since man does not use it wisely or properly.

In chapter two, Voltaire describes how " it was a privilege of the human as well as the animal species to make use of their legs as they pleased" to justify going for a walk (4). Here, Candide states that animals in fact have their own will to walk, which contradicts what he says to Martin in chapter 21 on the discussion about what differentiates man from animal. Throughout Voltaire's satirical novel Candide, readers are exposed to the two major

themes regarding fate and free will, and how each belief is exemplified through various hollow characters such as Pangloss, Candide, and Martin.

Candide frequently wavers between the two beliefs, and Voltaire ultimately comes to the conclusion that people have free will and must shape their own future based on their actions in the present rather than pursuing the idea that blind faith driven by desire will lead to optimistic results. In the end, Candide achieves equilibrium by accepting that he must exist between spiritual devotion and unpredictability through free will, when he says, " we must cultivate our garden," as Voltaire famously declares in the ultimate chapter (87).

This seemingly superficial parody engages the reader and makes them reflect about whether or not free will is actually free will and what aspect of Candide is in control of it. Readers perceive how human nature is incapable of constant happiness because of how desire handicaps free will, and are ultimately made aware of how Candide must create his own reality based on action rather than blind faith.