

# Man's purpose in candide



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BUSTER**

One of the primary objectives of the Enlightenment was to promote reason and rationalism as a method of achieving social and political reform. However, Voltaire, a powerful and renowned philosopher and writer during the period, often criticized particular aspects of Enlightenment philosophy. In his short novel *Candide*, Voltaire rather sharply attacks the optimism that was so popular among philosophers such as Leibnitz, choosing instead not to ignore the pervasive presence of natural and human evil. In this work, the main character, Candide, undergoes drastic changes in thought and maturity. By the conclusion of Candide's geographical and philosophical journey, it is apparent that Voltaire wished to stress that man's purpose is not to idly speculate about philosophy. Rather, man should become an active member of a more realistic world that is better suited to his natural oscillation within physical and psychological states. It becomes evident early in the work that Voltaire wishes to promote both material and mental independence within the individual: a task that can usually be achieved through travel. The novel itself is based entirely on a dynamic and complex journey undertaken by Candide, as well as portions of the paths taken by others close to him. In fact, the point of view continuously shifts throughout the thirty chapters of the work, alternating narrators to encourage accessibility of travel to all men and women. As the plot develops, the events that take place at each location begin to speak to the universality of human suffering. This universality is a reality that Candide - and any other individual - must acknowledge to eventually reduce the amount of suffering they experience themselves. An old woman much more experienced in worldly affairs than Candide offers him insight on this concept, telling him that were he on a ship: " make each passenger tell you his story; and if there is one

who has not often cursed his life, who has not often said to himself that he was the most unfortunate of men, throw me head-first into the sea" (260). Indeed, virtually every chapter contains horrific tales of violence and misery that extends to members of every social and political class. Two other more experienced acquaintances, Cacambo and Martin, offer slightly different perspectives on the nature of human suffering. When Candide is shocked to learn that in a foreign country women have relationships with monkeys, Cacambo asks him: " why should you think it so strange that in some countries there should be monkeys who obtain ladies' favors? They are quarter men, as I am a quarter Spaniard" (269). As Candide experiences diverse forms of suffering, he begins to realize how travel promotes independence and acceptance, and himself states: " certainly, a man should travel" (277). Later, Martin contributes some of his own observations, telling Candide: " it is beyond my poor capacity to tell you whether there are more madmen in one country than in the other" (301). Thus, it appears that travel is a useful method of gaining exposure to and insight about similarities among diverse cultures, and particularly the invasive nature of human suffering within each population. Closely related to the acknowledgment of universal suffering is Candide's need to either accept or change certain evils in the world. Several Enlightenment philosophers promoted rational thought as a way to help ease the effects of evil, but Voltaire encourages Candide and his reader to concede that evil exists, and instead of embracing it, urges them to attempt to alleviate some of its effects by promoting change. There are two forms of evil - one that can not be changed by man (e. g. natural disasters), and one that can (e. g. warfare). Rather than speculating on the ultimate reason for these evils, Voltaire believes that man should cope with

them to the best of his abilities. He satirizes metaphysicians known for spending their time considering the reason for evil; in the beginning of the novel, when Candide is about to be brutally killed, the narrator says: "at that moment the King of the Bulgarians came by and inquired the victim's crime...he perceived from what he learned about Candide that he was a young metaphysician very ignorant in worldly affairs" (233). It is also clear that Voltaire highlights the cruelty of men that appears to perpetuate evil. For example, a certain learned character, Jacques, comments: "men...must have corrupted nature a little, for they were not born wolves, and they have become wolves. God did not give them twenty-four-pounder cannons or bayonets, and they have made bayonets and cannons to destroy each other" (239). While this metaphor obviously criticizes men for their savage violence, it also helps make the distinction between natural evils and those created by men. Throughout the rest of the novel, evil is commented on as Candide's journey allows him to evolve to a higher state of independence and maturity. The evil practiced by man is finally questioned by Candide, when he asks Martin: "Do you think...that men have always massacred each other...been liars, cheats, traitors, brigands, weak, flighty, cowardly, envious, gluttonous, drunken, grasping, and vicious, bloody, backbiting, debauched, fanatical, hypocritical, and silly?" Martin replies: "Do you think...that sparrow-hawks have always eaten the pigeons they came across?...well...if sparrow-hawks have always possessed the same nature, why should you expect men to change theirs?" (290). Observing this surplus of disagreeable traits recognized by Candide, it is obvious that he has already been exposed to evil in a wide variety of forms. In addition, Martin's logical response expresses a pessimistic view of human nature that often resulted from experiencing

various forms of wrongdoing. Another character, Cunegonde, expresses similar disappointment in her experiences, referring to her old optimistic philosopher: " Pangloss deceived me cruelly when he said that all is for the best in the world" (248). However, a wise man, Dervish, reminds the reader that it is futile to simply consider the origin of evil. When Pangloss attempts to discuss philosophy with him, Dervish asks: " what does it matter...whether there is evil or good?" and tells Pangloss that he should simply " hold [his] tongue" (326). Thus, it appears that Voltaire encourages man to acknowledge the existence of evil, but not to attempt to reason about it. Instead, he guides the reader to follow the message found in the rest of Candide's journey, which suggests that humans should respond to evil by trying to bring about change. As Candide's experience continues, a particularly important motif in human behavior emerges: it appears that humans do not plainly desire a pure state of happiness, but rather are accustomed to fluctuating between states of boredom, indifference, and suffering. This idea is presented most unexpectedly when Candide and Cacambo decide to leave Eldorado, an oasis filled with riches and free of violence and persecution. Candide reasons: " if we remain here, we shall only be like everyone else; but if we return to our own world with only twelve sheep laden with Eldorado pebbles, we shall be richer than all the kinds put together," to which the narrator comments: " Cacambo agreed with this; it is so pleasant to be on the move, to show off before friends, to make a parade of the things seen on one's travels, that these two happy men resolved to be so no longer" (279). The men radically go against what most would expect, particularly the King of Eldorado, who says that " when we are comfortable anywhere we should stay there" (279). Departure from the oasis may be

Voltaire's way of suggesting a reason why humans continue to suffer at the hands of one another. It may also be a commentary on the need for competition and variation among individuals, since Candide's primary reason for leaving is to escape uniformity in exchange for a new status among his peers. An experienced old woman encountered soon afterwards suggests that the behavior is developed in the novel to emphasize a peculiar weakness in human nature. After telling a horrendous story involving a lifetime of suffering, the woman states: " a hundred times I wanted to kill myself but I still loved life. This ridiculous weakness is perhaps the most disastrous of our inclinations; for is there anything sillier than to desire...to caress the serpent which devours us until he has eaten our heart?" (259) The Biblical allusion to the serpent may even suggest that this flaw in human nature was initiated by original sin. In either case, it is clear that this curious human behavior is reiterated in the rest of the novel. A conversation with a Venetian lord later in the novel provokes an interesting observation from Candide, who asks Martin: " is there not pleasure in criticizing, in finding faults where other men think they see beauty?" to which Martin agrees: " that is to say...that there is pleasure in not being pleased" (312). This behavior persists throughout the remainder of the novel. In the conclusion, the main characters have settled on a small piece of land where they live free from the majority of the evils encountered earlier in the novel. However, the narrator still describes a continuation of the trait seen in both the old woman and Martin. Voltaire may be attempting to strengthen the validity of the behavior by manifesting it in the two characters who have proven to be particularly learned and mature. The narrator states: " when they were not arguing, the boredom was so excessive that one day the old woman dared to

say...’ I should like to know which is worse...to endure all the miseries through which we have passed, or to remain here doing nothing?’” and “ Martin especially concluded that man was born to live in the convulsions of distress or in the lethargy of boredom” (324-325). It is clear that Voltaire believes that humans are naturally inclined to exist in a state that oscillates between boredom and suffering. An interesting conclusion may be drawn by combining the aforementioned aspects of Voltaire’s work. An individual must first achieve maturity by experiencing different cultures and making inferences about human behavior. These experiences, in turn, help an individual make decisions about the presence of evil, allowing one to acknowledge the existence of evil without having to philosophically speculate about it. In addition, individuals often come to realize that, by nature, they constantly fluctuate between boredom and distress. Based on these premises, individuals may conclude that to avoid some of the evils perpetuated solely by humans (but without wasting time on speculation), one may perform useful labor. Practical work can keep individuals away from some evils, and help them to avoid extremes of boredom or anguish. This idea is subtly hinted at early in the novel, when Cacambo departs from Candide. The narrator says: “ Cacambo...was in despair at leaving a good master who had become his intimate friend; but the pleasure of being useful to him overcame the grief of leaving him” (283). In this case, useful work allows Cacambo to avoid the undesirable feeling of despair. By the end of the novel, this idea is fully evolved, and stated bluntly by a Turk farmer nearby Candide’s farm: “ I have only twenty acres...I cultivate them with my children; and work keeps at bay three great evils: boredom, vice, and need” (327). Candide, Pangloss, and Martin make similar conclusions about their

own lives. Candide states: " we should cultivate our gardens"; Pangloss says: " when man was placed in the Garden of Eden, he was placed there...to dress it and to keep it; which proves that man was not born for idleness"; and finally, Martin agrees: "'tis the only way to make like endurable" (327). Another Biblical allusion strengthens this argument by indirectly proposing that God created humans to follow this particular path and lifestyle. In addition, useful work is the first step towards bringing about change that may prevent the perpetuation of evil by human beings. Thus, constructive physical labor offers an alternative to lifestyles involving philosophical debates or ignorant attempts to reason about the origin of evil and human behavior. Voltaire suggests that this conclusion may be reached though a personal physical and psychological journey by demonstrating how Candide has achieved it in precisely that manner.