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Cultivate my garden?: Central Philosophy in Voltaire's Candide

As human beings we often find ourselves questioning. Are our lives determined by fate beyond our control? Is everything predetermined? Sometimes we find that we are struggling with our lives because of our doubts, our anxieties, and our misfortunes. So, how do we cope with this? Are we optimistic or pessimistic, or is there an in between? These questions have been asked for centuries because there is no definite answer; however, the Enlightenment philosopher, Voltaire, comes close to solving the conundrum in his satirical novella, Candide (1759).

There are many interpretations of Voltaire's solution in Candide, and some critics even argue that there is no solution. Some critics, like C.J. Betts, argue that Voltaire may be an important historical figure; however he wrote for Europe's attention not to solve Europe's problems (284). From Betts's perspective, Voltaire presents the tensions of European life, but never presents a solution. Therefore, Betts makes the assertion that Voltaire liked being an entertainer of the upper class, and that was his sole purpose for writing. Postmodern critics like Helena Feder analyze Voltaire's works from a postmodern perspective or ecofeminist perspective saying that Voltaire was a rationalist, and he is just as important today as ever before (5). Unlike Betts, she believes Voltaire desired to inform and present Europe with a better belief system grounded in reason. This would solve many of the uncertainties circulating at the time including the doubts about following the church, social hierarchy, and government manners and laws. Giovanni Gullace argues that Voltaire's protagonist, Candide, only represents the everyday European individual who vows to continuously improve his capabilities in spite of those uncertainties (171). He believes there is nothing more to Candide than an everyday role model

and hero for Enlightenment individuals. Therefore, he is only an inspiration for individuals to strive for their best and not an inspiration for a philosophy. Historical critics add that through Candide, Voltaire was responding to the new views of life at the time, including Gottfried Liebniz's term "optimism," which involved looking at everything (even death) from a positive perspective (Adams 82). So, it seems there is more to Candide than meets the eye. Perhaps Voltaire really wanted to guide Europe towards a new lifestyle and perspective. Peter Kivy gives possibly one of the best interpretations of Voltaire's Candide when he asserts that Voltaire intended to test and perhaps confound Leibnizian optimists not disprove their theories. He concludes that neither optimism nor pessimism could ever be disproved by confrontation but rather confounded by comedy, and no one could do any better than Voltaire (224). In other words, the brilliant Voltaire knew what was possible, achieved it, and knew comedically ridiculing to confound an individual's belief would be stronger than bluntly refuting the belief. However, of all the possible approaches, this paper will justify that in Candide, Voltaire mocks determinism and ridicules both optimistic and pessimistic reasoning. By the end of Candide's journey, Voltaire fully reveals his central philosophy that one must "cultivate a garden" (74), using his or her own learned creativity (gained from experience and reason) to pragmatically cope with the uncertainties of life.

Through his satirical novella, Candide, Voltaire presents his central philosophy that pivots around the characteristics and uncertainties of life during the Enlightenment period. The church seemed corrupt, the social hierarchy seemed arrogantly inflexible, and the government seemed restrictive, domineering, and greedy. During his journey, the protagonist, Candide questions all the institutions of eighteenth century European society struggling to cope with its social, religious, and political uncertainties. At this time, most of Europe witnessed the

Enlightenment, a period in which educated individuals applied reason and observation (science) in search of an absolute truth. The Enlightenment is therefore characterized as the age of reason and optimism because man faithfully noticed progress and vowed to improve upon Classical times. As Candide explores Europe and the Americas in search of the absolute truth, he tests determinism, a belief that fate is beyond one's control. Voltaire points out that nothing happens for the best (optimism) or for the worst (pessimism). Nothing is predetermined.

Candide is the story of the journey of a young man named Candide. He is born noble and lives in a castle with his uncle, the Baron of Thunder-ten-tronckh. He knows nothing of the outside world until he is kicked out for falling in love with his fair cousin, Cunegonde. Unfortunately, the kingdom is at war; Cunegonde is captured by the enemy;Pangloss, his mentor, is presumed dead; and Candide must fight in an army. After the war, he faces many uncertainties, meets many interesting characters, forms several friendships, visits El Dorado (the perfect land of gold), and travels the world. At first the goal of his journey is to find Cunegonde, but then he finds the meaning of life, the absolute truth, that man must "cultivate a garden" (74). Therefore, he settles down with his friends, keeps to his promise and marries Cunegonde (though she has grown quite ugly), and lives a life of striving to be the best individual he can be in all the uncertainty.

At the start of his journey, Candide only has an optimistic understanding of the world provided by his mentor, Pangloss. Having never left the security of Thunder-ten-tronckh, Candide innocently believes Pangloss' reasoning that "all is for the best" (2). Everything that has existed, everything that has happened, and everything that will happen serves to better mankind. Following determinism, Pangloss touts several examples of the circular reasoning of determinism, saying that "noses were made to wear spectacles...Stones were created to be hewn

and made into castles; His lordship therefore has a beautiful castle...," and he continues on (2). Everything serves a good purpose. It all comes together in the end to create a wonderful world. In this satire, Pangloss represents the philosophy of Liebniz and other philosophers of the Enlightenment period who believed that the world was perfect (perhaps because of a perfect God). Mainly, Pangloss believes if this world is the best one possible, then there is no reason to make any effort to change things perceived as evil or wrong. Otherwise, it would be nonsensical. Voltaire mocks this philosophy highlighting the naiveté of not striving for individual improvement and the ridiculous claims for such reasoning. Pangloss struggles to find optimistic justification often coming up with absurd claims. As an example, he concludes that syphilis needed to be transmitted from the Americas to Europe so that Europeans could enjoy New World delicacies such as chocolate (8). Voltaire could not have come up with a more ridiculous claim to comically confound optimists.

Although his claims are ridiculous, Pangloss' optimistic influence continues to affect Candide in almost every experience, even when Pangloss is presumed dead. Candide assumes that since the seas are calmer in the New World, the New World will be the "best of all possible worlds" (18). Taking Pangloss' reasoning, he defends his desire to marry Cunegonde when he faces her protective brother saying, "Pangloss told me that all men are created equal" (29). It is quite an optimistic thing for him to continue to believe after experiencing uncertainties; however, the desire to see perfection is a strong force. With each experience, Candide thinks about what his mentor, Pangloss, would say if he were there, sighing "Oh, Pangloss!... What kind of world is this?" (55). Out on a street, a religious character gives a speech about generosity and giving to the needy (34). Yet, he refuses to help the poor stumbling starving Candide (34). Not only is he a hypocrite, but he is greedily going against his own beliefs. During his journey Candide faces

starvation, duels with evil men, homelessness, deaths of innocent men and women, unchaste priests, and several other unfortunate subjects. He questions how Pangloss could see this and still believe the world is the "best of all possible worlds" (2). All the uncertainties he encounters, including the presumed death of Pangloss, fill Candide with doubts that "all is for the best" (18).

Missing a companion and in need of a different reasoning, Candide employs Martin, a pessimistic scholar, to journey with him. Martin is identified as "an honest man most unfortunate in the province and most disgusted with his situation" (42). Unlike Pangloss, Martin, believes that the world is naturally terrible, and God naturally left man there to suffer and die from imperfection (43). He has experienced so much suffering that he is unable "to think otherwise" (44). However, like Pangloss, Martin follows determinism, that fate is beyond man's control discouraging any active efforts to change the world for the better. Candide conducts discussions with Martin that last over extended intervals of time. After witnessing a shipwreck and the death of a "scoundrel,...they argued steadily for two weeks" about the suffering of the other passengers (44). Was suffering deserved, the work of the Devil, or was it for the best? Candide and Martin also debate about a possible change in the character of man. From a pessimistic view, Martin argues that if "hawks have always eaten pigeons," then "hawks have always had the same character;" therefore, man has never "changed [his]" (46). There is no hope for man to better himself. Unlike Pangloss' absurd claims, Martin's claims are more evident in science even though man is compared to an animal. Candide says, "Pangloss would be hard put to prove his system," after listening to Martin's ideology. However, Voltaire ridicules this pessimistic reasoning as well (46). If everything meant suffering, then an individual would not try to experience anything, and he would become unable to cope with uncertainties. Although

Candide recognizes the easiness of seeing the world pessimistically, he is still more "inclined" to Pangloss' system of optimism, the more common view of the enlightened time (43).

Cacambo, Candide's honorable valet, reasons practically about the world with no foundation in determinism, but a foundation in experiences, which Candide chooses to follow in the end. Before becoming a valet, Cacambo, of mixed heritage, "had been a choir boy, a sexton, a sailor, a monk, a commercial agent, a soldier, and a servant" for many upper class men in the Americas (26). He is an individual who knows work and is open to many experiences, finding it an honor to serve as Candide's valet. Cacambo suffers fewer misfortunes than any other character because of his wit, and he especially gains Candide's trust when he rescues Cunegonde. More importantly, Cacambo reasons practically rather than trying to fit his experiences with absurd claims to support illogical philosophies founded on determinism. He relates to Candide that, "this hemisphere is no better than the other one," meaning that every place in the world has a mixture of fortunes and misfortunes (32). It is two hemispheres of one world, not two separate worlds. It is Earth. When Cacambo and Candide visit the King of El Dorado, Cacambo asks how they should greet the King (37). Due to his experience in traveling and pleasing others, Cacambo knows to ask a practical question in order to make a good impression on the King. Cacambo's influence causes Candide to reason similarly, throwing Pangloss' optimistic reasoning out the door and embracing the idea that "everyone ought to travel" (37). With such a logical foundation on each individual's own experiences, it is no wonder why Candide chooses to follow practical reasoning in the end. In fact, practicality is what drives him away from the perfect Utopia of El Dorado.

While the community welcomes his presence by supplying all his material desires (gold, jewels, and livestock), his emotional desires cannot be met. He could never have such passion in

El Dorado without Cunegonde (38). Although Cunegonde is his main motivation for leaving El Dorado, no critic has yet to present a possible supporting motivation. It is possible that the longer Candide stays in El Dorado, the more he realizes it is too perfect because there is no work to do there. All of the individuals in El Dorado are free and equal; therefore, if Candide stays he would feel like "everyone else" (38). Individuals need to feel valued, and their work helps them do that. The only reason the people of El Dorado do not need to feel this way is because they have lived for centuries in a society where they are not allowed to leave (38). If Candide were to stay, his work would be equal to everyone else's. Too much would be the same, and he would not have a sense of self-worth. While El Dorado is "the best of all possible worlds" realized, it is only so for the natives. Therefore, Candide leaves El Dorado with what riches he can take, increasing his material value in the outside civilizations (38). From experiencing El Dorado, Candide learns that individual work is necessary to be satisfied or an individual would not feel valued. Therefore, he returns to Europe to be with his darling Cunegonde and to strive for a life without uncertainty.

At the end of Candide, Voltaire fully reveals his central philosophy that one must "cultivate a garden," using his or her own learned creativity (gained from reason and experience) to pragmatically cope with uncertainties (74). From his worldly experience he learns that an individual needs to have an aspiration, which is his/her creativity. In other words, he/she needs to strive for his/her own duty. Finally, after all his travel, Candide decides to purchase a farm and settle down. Compared to all the experiences from his journey, the farm seems a reasonable option to purchase. After observing the productivity of a Turk's farm outside Constantinople, Candide pragmatically decides to put his own farm to work (72). Needing collaborators, as always, Candide invites his friends to live on his farm, each having his or her own honorable and

helpful job. Cunegonde bakes pastries, Cacambo cultivates the vegetable garden, and even Martin and Pangloss help earn money...(73) From his experiences with the uncertainties in European Society and stasis in El Dorado along with practical reasoning, Candide concludes that the answer to what they must do is "cultivate a garden."(74) Pangloss agrees saying that when man was placed in the "Garden of Eden,...he was placed there to work; which proves that man was not born to be idle" (73). Man needs to strive for something. Man needs this ambition. As long as they are working, they are building character, financing their lives, and doing what they know how to do from experience and reason. An individual's garden can be anything they want it to be, but they have to strive for it.

As an example, Cunegonde's garden in the end is her pastries and pastry creativity. Voltaire says, "she soon became an excellent pastry cook," meaning she has some skills to begin with, but she has to employ reason (the right ingredients), and experience (the right amounts) to create a masterpiece (73). This learned creative work will keep her busy; therefore, she will not have time to become peevish or question the uncertainties of the European society. She would cope pragmatically doing what she knows she is capable of from reason and experience.

Voltaire's garden metaphor applies to individuals. If an individual strives for success in whatever field they desire, as long as he or she has reason and experience, he or she might pragmatically accept the uncertainties in the world. There would be no philosophical speculation. An individual would have control over his or her destiny. This is the absolute truth Candide discovers at the end of his journey, and the absolute truth Voltaire tells his audience.

With his placement of the best philosophy and pragmatism in a servant, Cacambo, and the idea that an individual can rise, it might be that Voltaire was indeed pre-revolutionary in thought. One can even argue that he was proto-romantic for arguing that an individual can be

creative in making something for his life, in “cultivating a garden” (74). No matter what generation reads Voltaire, every generation understands that all the uncertainties can be dealt with pragmatically, and all one has to do is strive to be the person he or she desires to be. Looking back, isn’t that all anyone in the world ever wanted, to have ambition?

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