Candide’s Garden
by Robin Bowman

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“Cela est bien dit, mais il faut cultiver notre jardin.”

Debates over this sentence, the last of Voltaire’s satirical masterpiece *Candide*, have raged for centuries. The main character of the work, Candide, tells the philosopher Pangloss, “That is well said, but we must cultivate our garden” (94). After a whole book of wandering the globe and philosophizing, Candide has decided that the search for answers that can never be found holds no value, and he devotes his efforts toward physical labor instead. This is the literal summation of the ending, but there have also been innumerable interpretations made by critics over the centuries. David Siegel summarizes the major dispute between Voltaire scholars over the ending of *Candide* in his article “Voltaire”: “The meliorism advocated in the conclusion of *Candide* has sparked much debate because Candide’s admonition that one must cultivate one’s garden is ambiguous: it may be read as both an argument for philosophical quietism as well as a call for political and social reform” (336). The contrast Siegel articulates has sparked many questions about *Candide* since it was written: Was the ending meant to be optimistic or pessimistic? Allegorical or literal? Melioristic or fatalistic? Meliorism is the belief that the world can be made a better place by people’s actions, while fatalists (the base of this word is not “fatal,” but “fate”) accept all things as inevitable, and the conflict between these two interpretations has driven centuries of debate. Despite the volumes of writing on the subject, critics remain quite divided on the correct way to interpret the ending of *Candide*. Dozens of books and hundreds of articles have been published, each with its own interpretation of Voltaire’s intentions.

However, it seems to have escaped everyone’s notice that Voltaire may not have known his own intentions. Voltaire may have purposely left the ending of *Candide* ambiguous because he himself was conflicted on many of the fundamental issues discussed therein. In parts of *Candide*, Voltaire seems to reject philosophy in its entirety, exhibiting a viewpoint known as nihilism—the idea that existence is senseless and useless. However, in other parts he expresses a hopeful desire to change society for the better by speaking out against intolerance and cruelty. Voltaire seems to have held two contradictory ideas simultaneously, and so it’s no wonder there is ample support for both sides of the meliorist/fatalist de-

Portrait of Voltaire (1735) by Maurice Quentin de La Tour.
bate. Like many authors, Voltaire uses his writing as a tool to work out his own confusion, and he leaves the ending of *Candide* ambiguous on purpose because at the time he wrote it he was not wholly convinced of either side of this argument. In fact, when all is said and done, the final lesson Voltaire conveys is that *it's okay not to know*. In a sense, the fierce academic arguments on this subject are rather ironic, because through *Candide* Voltaire argues that the energy devoted to scholastic debate would be much better devoted to cultivating one's garden.

*Candide*, the full title of which is *Candide, ou L'Optimisme* [or Optimism], is a satire of a great many things, but chief among them is the philosophy of Optimism, which originated with Gottfried Leibniz. Optimism (note that the word “optimism” here is used in the sense of optimal, not in the mood-related sense of being hopeful) tries to justify the evils of the world by claiming that it is the best among all possible worlds. Leibniz said that this must be the best possible world, because it was created by an all-powerful and all-knowing God, who would not create this world if a better world could be known to him or could possibly exist. Critics frequently assume *Candide* is pessimistic because it seems that pessimism would logically follow the rejection of optimism. This viewpoint is asserted in numerous texts, like Philip Stewart’s *Cambridge Companion to Voltaire*: “Hence Voltaire's putative gloom… propelled the narrative in an ever downward spiral toward the constricted, ‘pessimistic’ conclusion which *Candide* is presumed to be expressing at the end” (135). The garden itself, which out of context seems like a positive thing, is interpreted by Paul Hazard in “Probleme du mal,” as “a symbol of our limitations, a stopgap, an admission of defeat, a way to shrink, to shrivel, to give less power to evil triumphant” (qtd. in Bottiglia, 94). Both of these are highly pessimistic interpretations, and they leave little room for positivity in *Candide*’s conclusion.

And still the positive side of the debate has gathered much more support in recent decades. William Bottiglia, the foremost modern scholar on *Candide*, provides a useful survey of the optimistic argument in his book, *Candide: Analysis of a Classic*. Among many other critics, Bottiglia cites Edme Champion, author of *Voltaire: études critiques*, who asks “Is it really so desperate, so sorry, this tale, which after an irresistible appeal for tolerance, justice, pity, ending, as the life of the Roman emperor, with the slogan salutary: *Laboremus*?” (qtd. in Bottiglia, 95). By laboremus, Latin for, “may we toil/endeavor/strive,” Champion means that the narrative ends with a demand for hard work, and his rhetorical question implies that there is nothing pessimistic about that ending. Bottiglia himself, after a staggering number of quotes like those above, finally voices his own opinion: “And yet it is possible to show that the finale of *Candide* is clear enough in its meaning… and that the interpretations of Bellessort, Champion, Petit, Naves, Lanson, Havens, and Brailsford are in concordance with the author’s full intention” (97). Every one of the listed names references a melioristic interpretation by a different scholar, and Bottiglia uses all of these sources to support his own opinion—that the ending of *Candide*, when interpreted symbolically, has a positive outlook on humanity and is meant as an expression of hope.

The biggest problem with the melioristic vs. fatalistic debate is that both sides act as though Voltaire had a single unwavering opinion on the issue at hand, which is simply not the case. Derek Parker, author of *Voltaire, the Universal Man*, references in passing the transition that Voltaire underwent a philosophical shift from a fatalist to a meliorist perspective around the time that he wrote *Candide*. I also found several analyses of Voltaire’s body of work which note that over the course of his life, Voltaire’s writing also shows this transition from a more negative to a more hopeful outlook. However, no source that I’ve found has addressed the fact that in order for this
conversion to occur, at some point Voltaire must have been torn between the two sides. This period of inner turmoil is evident in the text of *Candide*, and also in a biographical analysis of Voltaire himself. In the end, Voltaire used *Candide* to illustrate a viewpoint that is melioristic, but in a different way than most critics realize.

Throughout *Candide*, and indeed in all his writings, Voltaire consistently satirizes every belief system he comes across, from Catholicism to Mancheanism to Franciscan theology. Voltaire was famous for his criticism of established religion, especially the Catholic Church, and he was exiled from Paris more than once because of this criticism. Stewart claims that Voltaire’s own religious philosophy:

confirm[s] the deistic conviction that while God exists, he has no relationship to us and we can never know his designs. Suffering exists not because it is deserved, nor because God allows or is unable to prevent it, but because God, like his universe, is oblivious to it. If there is a purpose in anything, it is inaccessible to human reason (126).

If Voltaire believed that life’s purpose was inaccessible to human reason, then his nihilism is perfectly understandable from both a personal and literary point of view. At the very end of *Candide*, the group meets a dervish who expresses much the same deistic views as Voltaire. This is the climax of the story: all of Candide’s adventures have led him to Constantinople, he has finally been reunited with his long lost love, the group of people with him have each suffered enough for one lifetime, and finally their adventures are over. In this moment, they approach the dervish to ask him the meaning of life, and he treats them like the fools they all are: “When his Highness sends a ship to Egypt, does he worry whether the mice on board are comfortable or not?” (92). This metaphor serves both to demean the nature of men (here compared to mice), and to purport the deist philosophy that, while God created the world and set it on its path, he neither knows nor cares about the troubles of men. The dervish is terse, disdainful, and, most importantly, he holds the same deist philosophies as Voltaire. When Pangloss asks him what they are to do, the dervish simply replies, “Keep your mouth shut” (92), preaching philosophical quietism in appropriately few words. This is the philosophical climax, the point where the author’s true meaning breaks through the satire and makes itself known. If the rest of the things said by the dervish are direct reflections of what Voltaire would say in the situation, it shows that Voltaire also believed, at least partly, in this idea of quietism.

And yet, for all the things that Voltaire is famous for, keeping his mouth shut is not one of them. On the contrary, he was an outspoken activist for freedom of speech and religion, as well as for general human rights. For example, when Voltaire visited England he made a friend in Admiral John Byng, who was later court-martialed and publicly executed for insufficiently engaging the enemy. Before Byng’s execution, Voltaire tried to intercede on his behalf, and afterward, incensed by the injustice of Byng’s execution, he spoke out against those responsible. He even put a short, satirical version of the event in *Candide*: upon arriving in England, Candide witnesses Byng’s execution and is offered no other explanation than “he did not get enough people killed when he had the chance… it is considered useful now and again to shoot an admiral, to encourage the others” (69). By speaking as though human life is worth nothing, useful only for getting results out of other people, Voltaire takes the stance of those he is satirizing to a heartless extreme, and through this satire reveals the real Admiral Byng’s death as a tragic waste of life. According to Cuffe’s translator’s notes, the last part of the quote above—“to encourage the others” —is the second most famous line in *Candide*. And the incident with Byng was only one example of Voltaire’s activism. So, in light of this, it seems strange that the final moral of *Candide* would be “keep your mouth shut.” Most critics resolve this
issue by claiming that Voltaire aimed this only at philosophers (the “philosophical quietism” mentioned by Siegel), not at those that would speak out against injustice. That’s a fair point, but it doesn’t resolve the inherent conflict between fatalism and meliorism. Voltaire’s Deism led him to believe that he could not make a difference in the world, and yet if he were truly committed to that idea he would not have been so vocal a dissenter.

Although Voltaire clearly had a problem with the particular philosophy of Optimism, in Candide he uses it more as a vehicle to mock philosophy in general. He thoroughly ridicules Optimism by giving it to the most foolish of characters, Doctor Pangloss. Through Pangloss, Voltaire reduces the philosophy of optimism to the absurd and, in the process, makes a more generally derogatory statement about philosophers. Over the course of the narrative, Pangloss loses an eye and an ear to syphilis, is hanged (but survives), vivisected (by someone who presumed he was dead), beaten, and enslaved. Even after this, when asked if he still believes in optimism, he says, “I hold firmly to my original views… I am a philosopher after all: it would not do for me to recant, given that Leibniz is incapable of error” (88). The only justification that Pangloss can give for optimism is that he would rather pontificate about dogmas he doesn’t believe in than admit that he or his intellectual idols were ever wrong. Pangloss’s absurd and stubborn adherence to his views, despite experiences which prove them to be flawed, satirizes both optimism and the behavior of Philosophers in general. The nihilistic deist in Voltaire believed that because the answers to all the major philosophical questions (what is the meaning of life, why is there suffering in the world, etc.) are unknowable, philosophy in itself is a waste of time.

In a sense, meliorism has two components: philosophy and practice. The philosophy of meliorism is the opposite of fatalism. It is the existential belief that it is possible to improve the world through our own actions. A philosopher could argue ad nauseum about metaphysics and religion and the existence of free will, but he would not be practicing meliorism. In practice, meliorism means trying. It means working hard to improve your own life and the lives of those around you, helping people who cannot help themselves, speaking out against injustice, and fighting for a better world. This was the meliorism that Voltaire believed in. Though he wrestled with the philosophical implications of meliorism, which conflicted with his Deistic beliefs, he never stopped trying to improve society. And, eventually, his struggle with philosophy ended when he decided that the answers didn’t matter. Candide was content to lay his philosophical queries to rest in favor of cultivating his garden, and so was Voltaire.

Overall, Candide seems to encompass both sides of a philosophical argument, but that was because the author was conflicted between the two. He felt that fatalism went hand in hand with his religious views, but he also hoped that people could make the world a better place through their independent efforts. Most literary critics throughout history have seen only one of these two views in Candide, and it seems that much like the phi-
losophers Voltaire mocks in his masterpiece, these critics have lost sight of the real point by focusing too much on the argument itself. In the end, Voltaire didn’t know if work could make the world a better place, and he knew there was no way to know. And, most importantly, he knew it didn’t matter. Spending all one’s time arguing philosophy wouldn’t improve society, even if one eventually came to the conclusion that his efforts theoretically could improve society. The fundamental conflict expressed by Siegel in the first paragraph of his analysis: “it may be read as both an argument for philosophical quietism as well as a call for political and social reform,” is not a problematic ambiguity, as Siegel says it is, but a succinct summary of what Voltaire wants from us as readers. Siegel (as well as the majority of Candide scholars) implies that Voltaire’s two philosophical positions are mutually exclusive: a person can either talk or not talk, but Voltaire actually says, talk about this, instead of that. Devote your energies toward improving the world we live in, rather than searching for answers for questions that can never be found. And that includes the question of whether the ending of Candide is ultimately fatalist or philosophically meliorist.

Works Cited