

The Riddle of Epicurus

In David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and Voltaire's *Candide*, the characters struggle to reconcile the existence of evil with the existence of an omnipotent and benevolent God. "Epicurus's old questions", cited by Philo, aptly summarize the problem of evil: "Is he [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able to? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?"¹ The ways in which the characters confront these questions reflect their convictions about the nature of God.

Demea believes that God is incomprehensible to man, and so His justice is not our human justice. The evil of this world are rectified in the grander scheme of Providence. In fact, Demea feels man is led to religion not by his reasoning but by his misery, for God is the only possible source of Hope. The jansenist philosopher Pascal expresses a similar conviction in his *Pensées*, depicting the "misery of man without God" in the first half of the book, and "the felicity of man with God" in the second half.

Cleanthes, the proponent of the Argument from Design, believes we can understand God by reasoning about the world. He cannot contend with Demea's views on the incomprehensibility of God and Providence, because "if we abandon all human analogy,

¹ Hume, David. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. First published 1779. London: Penguin Classics, 1990. (pp. 108-109)

[...] we abandon all religion and retain no conception of the great object of our adoration.”² He accuses Demea of “building entirely on thin air; and the utmost we ever attain, by these conjectures and fictions, is to ascertain the bare possibility of our opinion; but never can we, upon such terms, establish its reality.”³ Cleanthes admits the impossibility of humanly reconciling an infinitely powerful and benevolent God with the existence of evil. Cleanthes wants to keep the “human analogy” in the equation, and so, as a compromise, he explores reducing the nature of God from infinitely perfect to finitely perfect. “A less evil may then be chosen, in order to avoid a greater: Inconveniences be submitted to, in order to reach a desirable end: And in a word, benevolence, regulated by wisdom, and limited by necessity, may produce just such a world as the present.”⁴

Pangloss’ philosophy of “the best of all possible worlds” resembles Cleanthes’ new theory, at least as a caricature. In face of the devastation of Lisbon, Pangloss concludes, “For all this is a manifestation of the rightness of things, since if there is a volcano at Lisbon it could not be anywhere else.”⁵ When confronted with any misery, Pangloss finds “the sufficient reason” to preserve his extreme optimism. Even at the end, Pangloss justifies his philosophy: “There is a chain of events in this best of all possible worlds; for if you had not been turned out of a beautiful mansion at the point of a jackboot for the love of Lady Cunégonde, and if you had not been involved in the Inquisition, and had not

² Hume. (p. 113)

³ Hume. (p. 110)

⁴ Hume. (p. 113)

⁵ Voltaire. *Candide*. Translated by John Butt. London: Penguin Books, 1947. (p. 35)

wandered over America on foot, and had not struck the Baron with your sword, and lost all those sheep you brought from Eldorado, you would not be here eating candied fruit and pistachio nuts.”⁶ Pangloss’ reasoning is comical, as if the present pleasures of eating fruits make up for all the past miseries! Voltaire satirizes the notion that our joys eventually compensate for our pains. In face of all the miseries of the world, how can one reason that this world is “the best of possible worlds”?

Philo precisely asks the question: can we *infer* from the world the existence of a powerful and benevolent God? Philo doesn’t deny that the world is *consistent* with such a God. He rephrases the question as: “Is the world, considered in general, and as it appears to us in this life, different from what a man or such a limited being would, *beforehand*, expect from a very powerful, wise, and benevolent deity?”⁷ If so, the world “can never afford us an inference concerning his existence.” Philo exposes the four circumstances of evil, arguing, that, from our limited view, none of them appear necessary or unavoidable. Ironically, to Demea’s consternation, he points out that the most probable hypothesis we can infer is that God is indifferent to evil.

For a few characters in *Candide*, the duality or indifference of the deity is the most reasonable explanation for the evil of the world. Martin is a Manichean, believing there are two opposite deities, one good, the other, evil. (Philo actually notes that Manichaeism

⁶ Voltaire. (p. 144)

⁷ Hume. (p. 115)

gives “a plausible account of the strange mixture of good and ill”⁸ but rejects it because of the “perfect uniformity and agreement of the parts of the universe”.) While Martin and Candide discuss evil at sea, they witness a fight between two boats and the sinking of the ship whose Captain had robbed Candide earlier. Candide says to Martin: “You observe that crime is sometimes punished. That rogue of a Dutch captain has had the fate he deserved.”⁹ Martin replies: “Yes. But why should the passengers have perished too? God has punished a scoundrel, but the devil has drowned the rest.” In the last chapter, Candide and his companions consult the “famous dervish, who was reputed to be the greatest philosopher in Turkey”¹⁰ Candide remarks, “There is a great deal of evil in the world.” In response, the dervish’s image ironically fuses Demea’s idea of God’s higher plans and Philo’s idea of God’s indifference, dismissing evil as a lower-level detail: “And what if there is? When His Highness sends a ship to Egypt, do you suppose he worries whether the ship’s mice are comfortable or not?”

In Voltaire’s *Candide*, the characters finally enjoy a limited peace by cultivating the garden: through their work, they control their own destiny, alleviate their miseries, and forget about the miseries of the world. In Hume’s *Dialogue Concerning Natural Religion*, each character settles the riddle of Epicurus, by tweaking the assumptions that best fit their idea of God. For Demea, God is incomprehensible, and so are His reasons for evil. For Cleanthes, God is accessible to human reason, and, so the evil of this world is the

⁸ Hume. (p. 122)

⁹ Voltaire. (pp. 93-94)

¹⁰ Voltaire. (pp. 141)

least possible evil. As a skeptic, Philo's role in the *Dialogues* reminds us of Hume's contributions as a philosopher. Like Hume, Philo dissects the limits of human reasoning. Philo argues with Cleanthes and not Demea, because Demea appeals to faith while Cleanthes appeals to reason. Philo demonstrates that religion cannot be based entirely on reason. Religion needs faith. Pascal would agree: "Reason's last step is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it. It is merely feeble if it does not go as far as to realize that..."