

TOUT EST BIEN? NATURAL AND SUPERNATURAL CAUSES OF EVIL: PERSPECTIVES FROM HUME'S TREATISE AND VOLTAIRE'S CANDIDE

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Abstract

Evil and human suffering seem to be a perennial problem. Final answers to the enigma may be impossible, but we can endeavour to structure the debate and avoid increasing suffering by 'wrong' ways of thinking – our theories merely exacerbate the suffering. The question of evil, suffering and theodicy was dealt with extensively in the 18th century. This article revisits the ideas of Hume and Voltaire, representing much of 18th century thought on the subject, in order to determine its relevance to present-day thinking. Voltaire's Candide ridicules Lessing's idea that we have the best of all possible worlds. Thinking about evil and suffering is always causal: Why did it happen? Who/what caused it? In this regard Hume indicated that the 'necessary' connection we make between cause and effect is no more than a custom (operation) of mind, and often wrong. We establish causal patterns over a period of time and apply them uncritically and unscientifically in our daily explanation of events. This seems to be analogous to the naturalistic fallacy (Moore) of deriving an ethical 'ought' from an empirical 'is' (fact). Causal operation on a physical level is transposed to the moral level of human conduct. We establish a causal link between ethical conduct and what 'consequently' transpires in our lives. This explains why we attribute much of what happens in our lives to either God or the devil. The article challenges theology to engage with science and the natural explanations it offers, in a manner that maintains vistas of the transcendent, including the experience of awe, wonderment, respect and worship.

Key Words: Evil, Hume, Suffering, Theodicy, Voltaire

Introduction

The questions of evil, theodicy and natural disasters surfaced again after 24 December 2004 when the tsunami¹ hit the coasts of Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand, killing over

¹ Two giant tectonic plates, which have been pushing against each other for millennia, suddenly shift. The left plate has been sliding under the right at the rate of a few centimeters a year, but now the top plate suddenly springs up, lifting perhaps 60 feet along a 1,000-mile ridge. Above, the ocean surface hardly ripples. But the seismic bump was enough to displace trillions of tons of water in a few seconds. As it neared shore, the speed slowed, and large waves formed, in some places very large ones.

² The battle of Rossbach on 8 October 1758, killed 80 000 soldiers (20 000 Prussians and 60 000 French).

³ Some historians, following Troeltsch, regard the 18th century (rather than the sixteenth) as the beginning of modern history. In this view, the individualism and toleration of the Renaissance and Reformation did not lead to significant social, cultural, and political changes until the 18th century.

⁴ In the words of Saint Augustine (Confessions 1969:28): " ... Thee , O Lord, who teachest by sorrow, and woundest us, to heal; and killest us, lest we die from Thee."

200 000 people. This makes the Lisbon earthquake on 1 November 1755, which left over 20 000 dead, pale into insignificance. The influence of the Lisbon quake on mid-18th century thought is evidenced by a substantial volume of literature on the subject. This natural disaster apparently weighed more heavily on the European mind than all the soldiers killed in the Seven Years War (1756-1763).²

In mid-18th century Europe evil, theodicy, humankind's place in the grand order of the universe, and the of role of reason and science in obtaining the truth were hotly debated topics,³ which are still haunting us today. Rational explanations are inadequate in the face of traumatic events. We resort to strategies like interpreting the event as evil, then personifying evil and looking for reasons why the calamity befell us. Ultimately the cause of the catastrophic event is either God, the devil or (human) nature. The basically religious tenor of this sort of reasoning is that we are punished for our sins, individually or collectively;⁴ or, on a more 'positive' note, that our faith is tried and tested, that we pass through training sessions to make us stronger, humbler and more faithful;⁵ or simply that tribulations happen (naturally) and at such times the faithful are not alone but are accompanied by God, who suffers with them.⁶ Voltaire and his generation broke out of this paradigm, and focused on human responsibility for misery or its amelioration. The challenge was to 'naturalise' religious ideas without doing away with religion. They managed to do so by highlighting the deformed societal structures of mid-18th century Europe.⁷

Hume puts the quandary aptly in his *The natural history of religion* (1963:40f): "We are placed in this world as in a great theatre, where the true springs and causes of every event are entirely concealed to us; nor have we either sufficient wisdom to foresee, or power to prevent those ills, with which we are continually threatened. ... No wonder, then, that mankind, being placed in such an absolute ignorance of causes, and being so anxious concerning their future, should immediately acknowledge a dependence on invisible powers, possessed of sentiment and intelligence."

The phenomenon called spirituality elevates our lives above the mundane level (and science and technology are mundane), and is 'effective' only if we interpret events in the style described above. A spirituality that focuses solely on positive aspects like celebration of life, wonderment and awe, inspirational relationships with God and our fellows is not sufficient, since these things represent only half the story of our lives. The other half is represented by experiences of evil, suffering, sin and punishment.

The science and religion dialogue is about creating meaningful, complementary spaces for both the natural and metaphysical dimensions of human experience. Oviedo (2005:116) puts it thus: "...how can we still propose a theological understanding of human nature despite the continuous impact of science and alternative anthropological explanations, which impose ever more stringent limitations on the transcendental dimension that forms such an essential component of what theology has to contribute to the discussion?"

⁵ Peacocke (1984:68-69; 1986:132; 1993:126) argues that suffering occurs within the divine being. God himself suffers with creation. He suffers in, with and under the creative processes of the world with their costly, open-ended unfolding in time. See also Polkinghorne 1989:68.

⁶ Leibniz (1966: 41) says concerning physical evil "that God wills it often as a penalty owing to guilt, and often also as a means to an end, that is, to prevent greater evils or to obtain greater good."

⁷ Voltaire's satirical slant must be read against the background of the revolt against the ruling overwhelming influence of the church in his time. Today, according to Oviedo (2005:115), the challenge is to rescue the topic of sinfulness from an excess of naturalization, and to acknowledge a greater degree of influence from other factors: human decisions, social tendencies and cultural environments; factors decisive for a recovering of the Christian understanding of evil.

The Question of Evil in Nature Relates to Divine and Human Interaction with Nature

Nature is dynamic and subject to constant change. It has to do with undetected evolutionary processes in nature, as well as detectable changes that follow human interaction with nature. When human interaction has a harmful impact it may trigger processes beyond human control, like global warming, ecological disasters, the apparent impossibility to get rid of weapons of mass destruction, and the effects of technological (including genetic) intervention. These leave humans at the mercy of their own creations (Du Toit 2005:129-131). Unlike God, they – his co-creators – take control of evolution (Midgley 2005:278). God, on the other hand, allows the physical world to be itself. It is inevitably a world where order and disorder interlace each other and where chance exploration of possibility will lead to the evolution of systems of increasing complexity, but also of malfunctioning systems. God accords to the processes of nature the same respect that he accords human activity (Polkinghorne 1989:66-67).

In line with Polkinghorne, Peacocke (1993:154) argues that God's hand must be seen, not in isolated intrusions, not in any gaps, but in the ongoing process of creation itself. God created matter in such a way that it tends to assemble itself in increasingly complex ways, which eventually led to the emergence of intellectual and spiritual beings (Peacocke 1986:181). In a lawful world God does not intervene unlawfully or miraculously, which would be inconsistent with the whole process (Peacocke 1994:650). God imposes constraints on himself in creation and has a 'self-limited' omnipotence and omniscience. He actually put his ultimate purpose at risk by incorporating open-endedness, and eventually human freedom, into the created world (Peacocke 1993:123).

Good and evil are human constructs. Shermer (2004:68) categorically states that there is no such thing as absolute evil.⁸ The word 'evil' is a descriptive adjective that merely qualifies something else, like thoughts or deeds. The noun 'evil' implies an existence all on its own, which Shermer denies exists. Nature cannot be evil. The drives that lead us to sin are often found in other social animals, who manifest behaviour that, on the face of it, strikingly resembles some human behaviour (Midgley 2005:82). But animals don't sin. It is the experience of our fallible human nature that gives rise to the idea of fallen nature and natural evil. This is the reasoning behind the notion of original sin (*peccatus imputatim*), since we are born with it (see Midgley 2005:85). Evil as a physical concept requires human evaluation of behaviour and its effect on other humans. Nature including its disasters, is not evil. Humans are the only exception.⁹ Evil in humans takes the form of moral evil, and what is considered moral may differ from one age and culture to another.¹⁰

⁸ It may be good to be reminded of Augustine's view of evil as *privatio boni* (St Augustine 1969:107-108). Augustine refrained from the Manichean (1969:127-128) idea of two Gods – one good and one evil. He allots no substance to evil. Evil is corruption that diminishes the good. He states: "...therefore whatsoever is, is good. That evil then which I sought, whence it is, is not any substance: for were it a substance, it would be good. For either it should be an incorruptible substance, and so a chief good; or a corruptible substance; which unless it were good, could not be corrupted. Thou madest all things good, nor is there any substance at all, which Thou madest not. And to Thee is nothing whatsoever evil; yea, not only to Thee, but also to Thy creation as a whole, because there is nothing without, which may break in, and corrupt that order which Thou hast appointed it. But in the parts thereof of some things, because unharmonised with other some, are accounted evil." See also Hick (1977:179-187)

⁹ Nature itself is mindless. We may share 98% of the DNA of the chimpanzee, but the chimpanzee cannot lecture on the DNA that determines it.

¹⁰ Leibniz (1966:40) in his *Theodicy* says "evil may be taken metaphysically, physically and morally. *Metaphysical evil* consists in mere imperfection, *physical evil* in suffering, and *moral evil* in sin."

The problem of human interaction with nature lies on the level of values¹¹ and morals. Humans evolved to become the only moral and rational primates, distinguished by thought systems and values that divide their actions into (usually binary) oppositions of good or evil; right or wrong; just or unjust; religious or secular, and so on. There are many scales to assess what is good or bad, ranging from petty crimes, which most people are guilty of on occasion (like skipping a stop sign), to hard crimes that typify the transgressor as evil (e.g. murder) or radical evil (mass murder, holocaust, genocide, apartheid crimes, September 11).¹² At all events, as part of nature people can act in ways that affect their own nature (and lives) detrimentally.

Humans determine what is natural, taking their cue from what is often called natural law (*ius naturae*) in order to structure their lifestyle. Human morals, influenced by religion, custom and tradition, tend to reflect what humans consider natural and unnatural. What they consider unnatural is usually seen to be evil. What is natural is not scientifically deduced from nature. Nature is too wild and varied to provide guidelines for human living,¹³ but understanding human evolutionary and genetic development can help us to understand some of our drives and peculiarities. This understanding, however, plays a relatively minor role in shaping our morals.

How do we come to determine what is natural? Here we look to Hume for guidance.

Hume (1711-1776) on Human Nature and Causality

Hume's *Treatise of human nature*, written in France, was published twenty years before the appearance of Voltaire's *Candide*. Hume's exposition of human nature laid the foundation for scientific methodology and empiricism. He is considered a proto-Darwinist, since he prepared the ground for the interpretation of nature on which evolution depends – and did so well over a hundred years before evolution was conceived of (Altmann 2002:71).

Hume has to enter into any discussion of Voltaire's *Candide* because of the light he sheds on the notion of causality as it operates in human thinking. The question of causality – who or what causes evil and misery, and why? – is basic to the question of evil and theodicy and typifies the main arguments in *Candide*. Causality as 'detected' in the physical world operates similarly in the world of morals and religion.

¹¹ See in this regard Keith Ward (2003:257) who stresses the idea of values when he says: "The reason why the universe exists is that God chooses to realize a set of distinctive values by creating it. The reason why the laws of nature are as they are is that they are necessary means to realizing the values God chooses."

¹² The idea of humans that embody radical evil is also contentious. The classic example is Hannah Arendt's coinage of the *banality of evil* in connection with the trial of Wichmann for his participation in the holocaust. Arendt said: "Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all" (quoted by Midgley 2005:98-99). In the words of Shermer (2004:74-75) "The mass murders, the brutality, the sadism- those were not what was unique about the Nazis. The brutal murder of whole populations has been with us since the beginning of recorded history." We all remember the words of the twelve year old Anne Frank, when contemplating her fate as Jewish refugee in the Netherlands: "Toch houd ik ze vast, (de dromen ideale, mooie verwachtingen) ondanks alles, omdat ik nog steeds aan de innerlijke goedheid van den mens geloof" Frank Anne 1947:218-219)

¹³ Nancy Murphy (2005:96) makes the interesting remark that Darwin took his cue for the survival of the fittest-idea (competition for food provides the mechanism for change), from Thomas Malthus who in his *Essay on the Principle of population* stated that population, if unchecked, will grow geometrically whereas food supply will increase, at most, arithmetically. Thus struggle, competition and starvation are the natural result. Darwin in his *Descent of Man (1871)* came to view sociality, rather than life-and-death struggle between individuals, as typifying the animal world. Murphy points out that economic and theological and biological theories, influence scientists' view of nature (2005:98,105).

We impose a causal relation between two events because of their contiguity. “*What is our idea of necessity, when we say that two objects are necessarily connected together? ... I perceive, that they are contiguous in time and place, and that the object we call cause precedes the other we call effect*” (Hume 1978:155). However, “...reason alone can never give rise to any original idea, and reason as distinguish’d from experience, can never make us conclude, that a cause or productive quality is absolutely prerequisite to every beginning of existence... [S]ince reason can never give rise to the idea of efficacy, that idea must be deriv’d from experience, and from some particular instances of this efficacy, which make their passage into my mind by common channels of sensation or reflection” (Hume 1978:157). Our ideas¹⁴ are copied from impressions (sense perceptions). We experience only particulars, so our ideas come from particular experiences. All ideas are determinate, while abstract ideas are indeterminate and therefore cannot exist. We cannot legitimately invoke metaphysical or supernatural concepts to describe something beyond physics and observation.¹⁵ All ideas are traceable to impressions and all my mental comparisons are necessarily comparisons of one idea with another idea (Radcliffe 2000:13-14)

Since we cannot see the ‘force’ or ‘power’ that we suppose to be responsible for causation, Hume reverted to custom to explain causation. Altmann (2002:93) stresses the importance of this notion: “It was Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) and after him Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727), who taught us that the primary task of science is to *observe and describe events* rather than explain their origins. ... Hume’s concept of causality permits us to consider an isolated state of motion (that is, disregarding the chain of states going back to its origin), and, because we observe force-free motion, we must conclude that *forces and motion are not causally related*. This allowed Newton to discover the correct effects entailed by forces, which would have been impossible if he had been involved in the fruitless Aristotelian search for first causes.”

Hume debunked the common idea of necessity as a modality of causal relations (see Locke). “In no single instance,” says Hume (1978:400), “the ultimate connexion of any objects is discoverable, either by our senses or reason, and we can never penetrate so far into the essence and construction of bodies, as to perceive the principle, on which their mutual influence depends. ’Tis their constant union alone, with which we are acquainted; and ’tis from the constant union that necessity arises. If objects had not an uniform and regular conjunction with each other, we shou’d never arrive at any idea of cause and effect.” The imposition of a causal relation¹⁶ between separate phenomena is mere custom or habit: “’Tis only from experience and the observation of their constant union, that we are able to

¹⁴ My thought of one idea moves on to another because of resemblance to it. Certain experiences are linked because they happened contiguously in the past, in close temporal proximity.

¹⁵ This is one of the reasons for Hume’s anti-religious sentiments. In the *Dialogues concerning natural religion* (1966:116), Hume, by word of Cleanthes, reduces all religious arguments to experience. The demonstration of the Being of a God cannot be done since arguments *a priori* or by abstract arguments without any recourse to experience are not allowed. Hume introduced the Deist machine metaphor for the universe. He says (1966:115): “Look around the world: contemplate the whole and every part of it: You will find it to be nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines, which again admit of subdivisions, to a degree beyond what human senses and faculties can trace and explain. All these various machined and even their most minute parts, are adjusted to each other with an accuracy, which ravishes into admiration all men, who ever contemplated them.” He saw the author of nature as resembling the mind of man (116).

¹⁶ Hume (1978:155ff) gave rules for the cause-effect relationship which include aspects like contiguity in time and space; the cause must be prior to the effect; there must be a constant union between cause and effect and the same cause must always produce the same effect, and the same effect never arises but from the same cause.

form this inference; and even after all, the inference is nothing but the effects of custom on the imagination" (Hume 1978:405; see also Altmann 2002:72-73).

From Causation in Natural Events to Causation in Human Conduct

Hume held the meta-ethical view that moral judgments principally express our feelings. He saw moral values as matters of social convention. Humans do not have a separate faculty of *moral* perception. Morals are attributable to our faculties of *sensory* perception. Hume sees the operation of the mind when viewing causality in nature and causality in human affairs (morality) as analogous: "We must now shew, that as the *union* betwixt motives and actions has the same constancy, as that in any natural operations, so its influence on the understanding is also the same, in *determining* us to infer the existence of one from that of another" (Hume 1978:404). Our mind cannot attribute necessity to the operations in nature and deny the same necessity in human operations: "Now moral evidence is nothing but the conclusion concerning the actions of men, deriv'd from the consideration of their motives, temper and situation" (Hume 1978:404). And in his *Dialogues* he writes: "What I have said concerning natural evil will apply to moral, with little or no variation; and we have no more reason to infer, that the rectitude of the Supreme Being resembles human rectitude than that his benevolence resembles the human" (Hume 1963:187).

The moral world mirrors the natural and philosophical worlds: "If this be the case in natural philosophy, how much more in moral, where there is a much greater complication of circumstances, and where those views and sentiments, which are essential to any action of the mind, are so implicit and obscure, that they often escape our strictest attention, and are not only unaccountable in their causes, but even unknown in their existence?" (Hume 1978:175). Hume anticipated the conciliation of the sciences as well. In the introduction to the *Treatise* he says: "In pretending therefore to explain the principles of human nature, we in effect propose a compleat system of the sciences, built on a foundation almost entirely new, and the only one upon which they can stand with any security. And as the sciences of man is the only solid foundation for the other sciences, so the only solid foundation we can give to this science itself must be laid on experience and observation" (Hume 1974:xvi).

The importance of Hume's ideas for our subject is the way humans observe events in physical reality, connect these events in a causal and necessary way and transpose this method of arriving at the truth to the level of human experience in general and morals in particular. We impose a causal link between a person's motive and the ensuing deed. As in the case of natural phenomena, the link between motive and deed on a moral level is established through custom (the way the mind operates).¹⁷ On a religious level we ultimately attribute whatever happens to the will of God. Nothing transpires unless God wills it. Bad experiences raise the question why God willed (allowed) that to happen to me. We then come up with all sorts of motives God could have had (sin, disobedience, a test, etc.) to inflict the event on us.

However, for Hume events on the moral level are typical of human nature and would be understandable if we had all the information available – which we rarely do. Virtue and

¹⁷ *Custom* is a principle of human nature. All inferences from experience are effects of custom, not of reasoning. Custom is one of the "principles of nature" which renders our experience useful to us, as providing a kind of pre-established harmony between the course of nature and the succession of our ideas (Altmann 2002:87,106). Custom, as used by Hume, is thus some feature of mind, not of the community. The capacity of the mind to use causal statements correlates, according to Altmann (1978:101), with physical properties that the brain acquired during the evolution of the species.

vice emanate from the same human nature.¹⁸ The problem lies in our conventions and mode of interpreting events. Hume (1978:474) views the sentiments of morality to be natural and typical of the world's nations. Virtue and vice are both natural.

Hume denies that we derive our sense of justice and injustice from nature. Nature is not just or unjust – it is simply nature. The notion of justice and injustice “arises artificially tho’ necessarily from education, and human conventions” (Hume 1978:483). Hume (1978:474) regards nature as natural, that is not miraculous, as opposed to the rare and unusual.

Hume on Evil

In his dialogues concerning natural religion Hume (1963:172), by word of Philo, discusses Epicurus’ old yet unanswered question: “Is ... [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?” When Hume answers the question about God or evil, he proceeds from sensory observation as the only ground for verifiable statements. Concerning the attributes of God, Philo says: “But there is no view of human life or of the condition of mankind, from which, without the greatest violence, we can infer the moral attributes [of God], or learn that infinite benevolence, conjoined with infinite power and infinite wisdom, which we must discover by the eyes of faith alone” (Hume 1966: 175-176). Hume maintains that we can only speak of God by analogy with humans. The alternative is to refer to divine attributes, infinitely perfect but incomprehensible (Hume 1966:172). “You are obliged, therefore, to reason with him merely from known phenomena, and to drop every arbitrary supposition of conjecture” (Hume 1966:178).

Hume stresses our will to find the agent causing happiness or misery: “As the *causes*, which bestow happiness or misery, are, in general, very little known and very uncertain, our anxious concern endeavours to attain a determinate idea of them; and finds no better expedient than to represent them as intelligent voluntary agents, like ourselves; only somewhat superior in power and wisdom” (Hume 1966b:54).

Hume continues to give four reasons for the existence of evil – reasons that are surprisingly familiar to present-day participants in the science-religion debate. “The *first* circumstance which introduces evil, is that contrivance or economy of the animal creation, by which pains as well as pleasures are employed to excite all creatures to action, and make them vigilant in the great work of self-preservation. The necessities of nature, such as thirst, hunger, weariness, may cause some diminution of pleasure” (Hume 1963:180). Yet there is a good reason why animals are susceptible to such sensations (pain, thirst, hunger).

The second reason for apparent ‘evil’ is “the conducting of the world by general laws” (Hume 1963:180).¹⁹ This reason relates to the first one, since human life depends on what

¹⁸ This idea facilitates a feeling of fatalism as far as human conduct is concerned. Mary Midgley (2005:82) says that the acceptance of human natural motives like aggression, territoriality, possessiveness, competitiveness, and dominance, creates a feeling of fatalism because we shall be committed to accept bad conduct as inevitable. All these power-related motives are important also in the lives of other social animals, and appear there in behaviour which is, on the face of it, something strikingly like much human behaviour

¹⁹ Hume is, once again in line with present-day natural scientific thinking. An example of a present-day natural scientific explanation is given by Worthing. Mark Worthing (1996:146) refers to the influence the discovery of the second law of thermodynamics and the concept of entropy had on the theological discussion of the problem of evil. He refers to Rob Russell who said that entropy is a refiguring of evil on the physical level. Evil is likened to a disorder, a dysfunction in an organism, an obstruction to growth or an imperfection in being. This must be understood anthropomorphically. We cannot imagine development in nature without and increase in entropy. Tillich has indicated that destruction has no independent stand in reality as a whole and depends on being. This begs the question whether order and good are not conversely dependent on entropy and evil for their existence (Worthing 1996:147). This idea finds consonance in Philip Hefner who alleges that

we call 'accidents'. We may think that the world could be a much better place if pleasing and fair attributes were distributed abundantly everywhere, but there are good reasons why they are not: "Some small touches, given to CALIGULA'S brain in his infancy might have converted him into TRAJAN: one wave, a little higher than the rest, by burying CAESAR and his fortune in the bottom of the ocean, might have restored liberty to a considerable part of mankind. There may, for aught we know, be good reasons, why Providence interposes not in this matter; but they are unknown to us... If every thing in the universe be conducted by general laws... it scarcely seems possible but some ill must arise in the various shocks of matter" (Hume 1963:181).

The third reason is the great frugality with which all powers and faculties are distributed to every particular being. All animals are well adapted to their environment. "Every animal has the requisite endowments; but these endowments are bestowed with such scrupulous an economy, that any considerable diminution must entirely destroy the creature. Where-ever one power is increased, there is a proportional abatement in the others. Animals, which excel in swiftness, are commonly defective in force... Nature seems to have formed an exact calculation of the necessities of her creatures" (Hume 1963:182). Hume stresses the idea of work and industry (on the principle: If you don't use it, you lose it). Humans can attain much more (improvement of the arts and manufacture; perfect cultivation of land; exact execution of every office and duty) through hard work and industry (Hume 1963:183). "The *fourth* circumstance, whence arises the misery and ill of the universe, is the inaccurate workmanship of all the springs and principles of the great machine of nature" (Hume 1963:184). Hume appreciates the way all parts of nature hang together and are accurately adjusted. If any small part is touched, it affects the whole. "Thus, the winds are requisite to convey vapours along the surface of the globe, and to assist men in navigation: But how oft, rising up to tempests and hurricanes, do they become pernicious? Rains are necessary to nourish all the plants and animals of the earth: But how often are they defective? What more useful than all the passions of the mind, ambition, vanity, love, anger? But how oft do they break their bounds, and cause the greatest convulsions in society?" (Hume 1963:184-185). He considers the a priori of a deity that could have created all for the better, but immediately discards the idea as too presumptuous for blind creatures. Nature has to be as it is. "The whole presents nothing but the idea of a blind Nature, impregnated by a great vivifying principle, and pouring forth from her lap, without discernment or parental care, her maimed and abortive children" (Hume 1963:186).

The World of Voltaire

Voltaire's age is typified as *l'âge de lumière, l'âge philosophique, siècle de la bienfaisance, siècle de 'humanité'*. It is broadly co-extensive with the 18th century, beginning with the Revolution of 1688 and the writings of Locke and Bayle, and ending with the American Declaration of Independence of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789. In general terms, the period was characterised by the optimism of Leibniz²⁰ and Pope, a shift of emphasis

creation and chaos belongs together by nature (Worthing 1996:48). With reference to Leibniz, CF von Weisäcker says that there are possibilities in the world, but not possible worlds. The world's characteristics are the conditions of its existence. Departing from the idea of the present world we distinguish possible other worlds which are fictitious worlds. Our world becomes the only possible world because it is the only real world (Worthing 1996:153-154). Barrow and Tipler find support in Leibniz's "best of many possible worlds" argument for their own version of the many-worlds hypothesis of quantum mechanics (Worthing 1996:154).

²⁰ Leibniz published his *Théodicée* in 1710 in which he focuses on the problem of moral evil. He cannot regard moral evil as an imperfection staining the Creator's own activity, and he prefers to interpret it as due to metaphysical evil, the imperfection characteristic of all finite existence. Leibniz' appeal here is to his principle of

from old to new anthropological metaphysics, from a preoccupation with natural science to the life sciences, a turning away from dogma and traditional conventions, and critical reappraisal of established authority in religion, politics, philosophy and the arts. The aim was a secular, social ethic which could be defended 'by reason' without invoking supernatural revelation, and which would therefore be universal and secure (Adams 1966:82). The human situation and human liberty, humans' place in society, the interrelation of social and natural phenomena became the guidelines of thought.

The body of citizens with a say in public affairs included the new bourgeoisie with its growing affluence. The new middle class was imposing its values on society, using commerce and education as vehicles of social change. The hold of the clergy lessened, as did papal domination. Dissent was thriving in the new, less hierarchical society; religion gained new and deepened meaning in various social strata, from philosophical deism and Rousseau's *religion de Genève* to popular revival movements like Pietism and Methodism. A spate of printed material circulated: Periodicals, encyclopaedias, novels, histories, newspapers, as well as book clubs and circulating libraries. Voltaire's books sold one and a half million copies within seven years. On the whole universities were not instrumental in fostering change, largely because of their ties with the established churches.²¹ Intellectuals overcame their isolation by forming circles and meeting in coffee houses and salons. Thus the French *philosophes* combined to produce the Enlightenment's prime enterprise, the *Encyclopédie* edited by Diderot and D'Alembert from 1751 onwards (*Dictionary of the history of ideas*, vol. 2, 2003: 91-92).

Continental thinkers like to see the starting-point of modern thought as humankind's three 'humiliations': The recognition that the earth is not the centre of the universe; that humans, rather than being created in the divine image, are creatures of nature like other animals; and that human reason is subject to passions and subconscious urges. To this one should add the human addiction to religion or drive towards metaphysical explanatory principles. In the view of the Enlightenment these 'humiliations' were intellectual conquests dictating the human race's peculiar responsibilities: Pursuing scientific truth, individual happiness in a viable society, and the conditions and limits of liberty. Instead of a static, immutable divine order comes a new sociological perspective; society and culture are regarded as products of history (i.e. of the free, creative human will) and as subject to change (*Dictionary of the history of ideas*, vol. 2, 2003: 92).

the "compossibility" of God's attributes. God in His omniscience recognizes what we ourselves must understand, that any created world would have some imperfection. In His infinite goodness he has chosen the least imperfect world, and by his omnipotence he has created it, "the best of all possible worlds." Leibniz states it as follows (1966:73) "Nevertheless, when one says that the *goodness* alone determined God to create this universe, it is well to add that his *GOODNESS* prompted him *antecedently* to create and to produce all possible good; but that his *WISDOM* made the choice and caused him to select the best *consequently*; and finally that his *POWER* gave him the means to carry out *actually* the great design which he had formed." For Leibniz (1966:79) God's wisdom only shows the best possible exercise of his goodness: after that, the evil that occurs is an inevitable result of the best. He continues: "I will add something stronger: To permit evil, as God permits it, is the greatest goodness (79-80). Leibniz' theodicy was judged as precarious in its theological implications. If our woes and sins are basically due to our essential imperfections as God's creatures, we cannot complain of the Creator; but can He then rightly condemn us for being such as He has created us? Leibniz' reduction of the moral antithesis, good-evil, to a metaphysical one, infinite-finite, has been criticized as compromising ethical judgment and all basic valuation, human or divine. Voltaire's irony may be recalled here: "If this is the best of all possible worlds, what must the others be like?"

²¹ Where these commitments were loose, as in Scotland and Göttingen, they played a leading role.

Candide (1759)

Voltaire's *Candide* was the bestseller of the 18th century. The reason lies beyond the story, in the ideas it reflects – ideas for which the 18th century reader was more than ready. *Candide or Optimism*, to give the book its full title, endeavours to ridicule the optimism of philosophers like Lessing, Rousseau, Pope – the poet, and Shaftesbury. The late 17th and early 18th century saw the rise of 'Pelagianism' or 'Socianism' (more often called deism), rational Christianity or natural religion, which had close affinities with 'philosophical optimism' and 'systematic idealism'. Its exponents often tried to justify social attitudes like submission and benevolence without recourse to traditional theological sanctions.

Voltaire ridicules Leibniz and Pope's 'Whatever is, is right'. *Candide* travels to many countries and comes face to face with evil in every one of them – Westphalia, Prussia, Holland, England, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Paraguay, Surinam, Cayenne, Russia, Turkey. Eldorado is the sole exception. The experience of evil is universal: The Lisbon earthquake, murder, rape, hunger, cold, castration, venereal disease, mutilation, plague, flogging, execution, torture, cannibalism, shipwreck, assassination, civil war, prostitution, the Inquisition, the Jesuits of Paraguay, slavery, judicial corruption, religious intolerance and the suffering of the innocent.

Pangloss ('all tongues') and his student *Candide* maintain that "everything is for the best in this best of all possible worlds". This idea is a reductively simplified version of the philosophies of a number of Enlightenment thinkers, most notably Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz. To these thinkers, the existence of any evil in the world would necessarily signify that God is either not entirely good or not all-powerful, and the idea of an imperfect God is nonsensical. In their view people perceive imperfections in the world only because they do not understand God's grand plan.

Master Pangloss taught the metaphysico-theologo-cosmolo-nigology. He could prove to admiration that there is no effect without a cause; and, that in this best of all possible worlds, the Baron's castle was the most magnificent of all castles, and My Lady the best of all possible baronesses. "It is demonstrable," said he, "that things cannot be otherwise than as they are; for as all things have been created for some end, they must necessarily be created for the best end. Observe, for instance, the nose is formed for spectacles, therefore we wear spectacles. The legs are visibly designed for stockings, accordingly we wear stockings. ... Swine were intended to be eaten, therefore we eat pork all the year round: and they, who assert that everything is right, do not express themselves correctly; they should say that everything is best" (Ch 1:1-2).

Because Voltaire does not accept that a perfect God (or any God) has to exist, he can afford to ridicule the idea that the world must be completely good, and throughout the novel he heaps merciless satire on this notion. In his essay, *Bien, tout est bien* (Adams 1966:86-91), Voltaire indicates that the idea that all is well may rest on the idea of a perfect God, on unalterable physical principles, on general laws, but "in fact one shouldn't grudge anyone the consolation of accounting as he can for the flood of evils that overwhelm us... The system of *all is well* represents the author of all nature as a potent, malicious king, who never worries if his designs mean death for four or five hundred of his subjects, and poverty and tears for the rest, as long as they gratify him" (Adams 1966:90-91).

The optimists, Pangloss and *Candide*, suffer and witness a wide variety of horrors, which do not serve any apparent greater good, but point only to the cruelty and folly of humankind and the indifference of the natural world. Voltaire expresses many of the same sentiments that Hume substantiated philosophically. Pangloss's optimism is based on abstract, supernatural arguments rather than real-world experience, which prevents him from

making sound judgments of the surrounding world and taking positive action to redress wrongs. He is meant to lampoon Leibniz's blind optimism and excessive abstract speculation.

Pangloss struggles to find justification for the terrible things in the world, but his arguments are patently absurd, as when he claims that syphilis needed to be transmitted from the Americas to Europe so that Europeans could enjoy New World delicacies such as chocolate. What Pangloss intimates is that in order to attain the good we often have to pay a price, albeit often without any reward.

In chapter 4, on hearing the news of Cunegunde's death, Candide cries:

"O sage Pangloss, what a strange genealogy is this! Is not the devil the root of it?" "Not at all," replied the great man, "it was a thing unavoidable, a necessary ingredient in the best of worlds; for if Columbus had not caught in an island in America this disease, which contaminates the source of generation, and frequently impedes propagation itself, and is evidently opposed to the great end of nature, we should have had neither chocolate nor cochineal (ch 4:9)."

Candide's optimism prevents him from giving up his sentiments even in the absence of any reward.²² While Jacques drowns, Pangloss stops Candide from saving him "by proving that the bay of Lisbon had been formed expressly for this Anabaptist to drown in". While Candide lies buried under rubble after the Lisbon earthquake, Pangloss ignores his entreaties for oil and wine and instead struggles to prove the causes of the earthquake. By the novel's end even Pangloss is forced to admit that he doesn't "believe a word of" his own earlier optimistic conclusions.

Candide rejects Pangloss's philosophies in favour of an ethic of hard, practical work. With no time or leisure for idle speculation, he and the other characters find the happiness that has so long eluded them. This judgment against philosophy that pervades *Candide* is all the more surprising and dramatic given Voltaire's status as a respected Enlightenment philosopher.

Eldorado, on which Candide and his friends accidentally stumble, represents utopia. But for all its wealth and comforts, absence of crime and abundant food and knowledge, life lacks verve. If our world was the best of all possible worlds, mirroring Eldorado, the question is whether this boringly perfect, almost eventless world would not have been worse than real life, rife with challenge, passion and suffering. Kahn (quoted in Adams 1966:187) said: "The trouble with any 'perfect' or 'best' world is precisely that it does not leave room for amelioration or for activity, social or otherwise. Paradise, Eden, City of God are places of rest, not to say of otiosity, because they are perfect. As Faust knew so well, if all human needs and wants are satisfied – as they are in Eldorado – life is at a standstill. Science, too, is a museum-like 'palais des sciences', seems to require no further work, for its already existing perfection."

When Candide acquires a fortune in Eldorado it looks as if the worst of his problems might be over. Arrest and bodily injury are no longer threats, since he can bribe his way out of most situations. Yet his new-found wealth brings him misery, as it brings out the worst in people and attracts false friends. In fact, Candide's optimism seems to hit an all-time low after Vanderdendur cheats him; it is at this point that he chooses to make the pessimist Mar-

²² A present day example of this is the *New age* so-called idea of *synchronicity*. The basic idea that everything is related may be true to some extent, but the 'method' used in determining these links and how the individual is affected by it, depends of wild flights of the imagination, utilising every possible association and connotation that come to mind (See James Redfield 1993).

tin his travelling companion. As terrible as the oppression and poverty that plague the poor and powerless may be, money and wealth (the perfect world?) clearly create at least as many problems as they solve.

Candide and his companions find happiness raising vegetables in their garden. The symbolic resonance of the garden is rich and multifaceted. As Pangloss points out, it is reminiscent of the garden of Eden, in which Adam and Eve enjoyed perfect bliss before the fall. However, in *Candide* the garden marks the end of the characters' trials, while for Adam and Eve it is where their troubles begin. Moreover, in Eden Adam and Eve enjoyed the fruits of nature without having to work, whereas the main virtue of Candide's garden is that it forces the characters to perform hard, humble labour. In the world outside the garden people suffer and are rewarded for no discernible cause. In the garden, however, cause and effect are easy to determine: Careful planting and cultivation yield good produce. Finally, the garden represents the cultivation and propagation of life, which, despite all their misery, the characters choose to embrace. The symbol of the garden urges us to work without rationalising, the only way to make life bearable (Adams 1966:131).

Evil and the Belief that All is Well

Nature is not evil. What we interpret as evil in nature is part of the natural environment. Many species are sacrificed in the evolutionary process for it to arrive at a species that survives in its environment. But is human evil natural? This is less easy to answer. The Anabaptist James tells Candide:

Men must, in some things, have deviated from their original innocence; for they were not born wolves, and yet they worry one another like those beasts of prey. God never gave them twenty-four pounders nor bayonets, and yet they have made cannon and bayonets to destroy one another.

Candide asks Martin whether human nature had always been as corrupt and cruel as it is now.

“Do you believe,” said Martin, “that hawks have always been accustomed to eat pigeons when they came in their way?” “Doubtless,” said Candide. “Well then,” replied Martin, “if hawks have always had the same nature, why should you pretend that mankind change theirs?” “Oh,” said Candide, “there is a great deal of difference; for free will –” (ch 21).

In 1752 Voltaire wrote that the time-worn question of moral and physical evil should only be revived when one has something new to say (Morize 1966:105). The Lisbon quake, as presented in *Candide*, offered just that. On 16 December 1755 the *Poème sur le Désastre de Lisabonne* was printed, depicting God as indifferent, even cruel to humanity. Voltaire writes that the conclusion is simple: The catastrophe immediately raises the question of good and evil. What must one think of it? Admit two principles? Believe that all is well? The philosophers offer a priori solutions, metaphysical and absolute. The optimism of Pope²³ and Leibniz is nothing but discouraging fatalism; physical and moral reality give it the direct lie (Morize 1966:106).

²³ Pope, in his *Essay on man* (1733-34) emphasized the duty of man to “submit” because “whatever is, is right” and everything which seems like “partial evil” is really universal good. Pope seemingly holds that evil is an illusion – the unreality of evil theodicies. When seen from a larger, or divine perspective, it has a different character (Vicchio 1989:116-118, 208). In his Epistle 1 of his *Essay on Man* Pope (Croly, 1835 Vol.I:26) writes:

*Cease, then, nor order imperfections name,
Our proper bliss depends on what we blame.
Know thy own point: this kind, this due degree*

Conclusion

Theology must find space in a world increasingly populated with secular, non-theological ideas. The evolutionary traces of morality and religion are becoming increasingly evident. For Shermer (2004:149,251) evolution generated moral sentiments because it needed a system to maximise the benefits of living in small bands and tribes. Evolution created and culture honed moral principles because of the further need to curb the passions of body and mind. And culture, primarily through religion, codified those principles in moral rules and precepts.

Perhaps a commodious attitude is the best way to deal with theodicies. Within this relationship there must be space to say: "Let science be science and theology be theology." The beauty of metaphysical systems lies in the game it permits within their confines. To end the narration of our joy and sorrow, our fear and hope would be to kill the passion of our metaphors and myths. The same goes for the genre of theodicy. To let go of human teleologies would be to violate hope. The credibility of our hope requires, however, a critical teleology.

We cannot consent to 'bad theodicies'. Vicchio (1989:208-209) has indicated that theodicies must be logical, true to the form of life out of which it arises, and must take the individual sufferer seriously. We cannot evade the fact that we humans always perceive the world as already interpreted within a specific anthropomorphic²⁴ frame of mind. Hence what science may interpret as natural may become evil in a human context. Science could rid us of improper and superstitious interpretations, of myths and metaphysical theodicies that keep us in bondage – but would this not leave us detached, emotionless observers, uninterested in the world around us, resigned to cultivating our own little garden? While our theodicies or unrealistic optimism may serve as a panacea for the human predicament, they simultaneously render us immobile.

The value of Hume's work is that it makes us aware of fallacies of the mind, especially when imposing unwarranted causal relations and causal necessities on events. This becomes acute on the level of interpersonal relations and morals. We are aware of the limitations of the idealism of thinkers like Hume and Berkeley. Idealistic critique must be combined with realistic notions in what we call critical realism. But we need more than just critical realism. We need a critical values approach, which combines the insights of natural science and philosophy with human values. These values must be critically scrutinised to rid them of cultural and religious idiosyncrasies that run counter to the insight of our time.

*Of blindness, weakness, Heav'n bestow on thee.
 Submit. In this, or any other sphere,
 Secure to be as blest as thou canst bear:
 Safe in the hand of one disposing Pow'r
 Or in the natal or the mortal hour
 All nature is but art unknown to thee;
 All chance, direction which thou canst not see;
 All discord, harmony not understood;
 All partial evil, universal good;
 And spite of pride, in erring reason's spite,
 One truth is clear, Whatever is, is right.*

²⁴ Hume (1963:41-41), says in this regard: "There is an universal tendency among mankind to conceive all beings like themselves, and to transfer to every object, those qualities, with which they are familiarly acquainted, and of which they are intimately conscious. We find faces in the moon, armies in the clouds; and by a natural propensity, if not corrected by experience and reflection, ascribe malice of good-will to everything, that hurts or pleases us."

The preservation of our planet, human dignity, the will to believe, hope and be committed are some of the commonalities that could unite us in a critical values approach.

Candide urges us to move beyond self-deceptive rhetoric and face up to the fallacies of our time.

Voltaire sought to redress the wrongs of his world and initiate reform on all levels of human life. This is a legacy worth pursuing. Any theology that keeps its followers immature renders them a disservice. Voltaire's satire betokens humankind's coming of age.

On the more 'serious' level of the science-religion interaction we have to deal with confronting worldviews. Theology cannot simply be relegated to poetry or metaphysics. Good theology must consistently juxtapose different interpretations of worldview and trust religious intuition to evolve in this context. The challenge for theology is to engage with nature, especially in its techno-scientific mode, in a manner that opens up credible vistas of the transcendent, comprehending the experience of awe, wonderment, respect and worship.

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