The ‘Problem of Evil’ in the Context of the French Enlightenment: Bayle, Leibniz, Voltaire, de Sade

“The very masterpiece of philosophy would be to develop the means Providence employs to arrive at the ends she designs for man, and from this construction to deduce some rules of conduct acquainting this wretched two-footed individual with the manner wherein he must proceed along life’s thorny way, forewarned of the strange caprices of that fatality they denominate by twenty different titles, and all unavailingy, for it has not yet been scanned nor defined.”

-Marquis de Sade, Justine, or Good Conduct Well Chastised (1791)

“The fact that the world contains neither justice nor meaning threatens our ability both to act in the world and to understand it. The demand that the world be intelligible is a demand of practical and of theoretical reason, the ground of thought that philosophy is called to provide. The question of whether [the problem of evil] is an ethical or metaphysical problem is as unimportant as it is undecidable, for in some moments it’s hard to view as a philosophical problem at all. Stated with the right degree of generality, it is but unhappy description: this is our world. If that isn’t even a question, no wonder philosophy has been unable to give it an answer. Yet for most of its history, philosophy has been moved to try, and its repeated attempts to formulate the problem of evil are as important as its attempts to respond to it.”

-Susan Neiman, Evil in Modern Thought – An Alternative History of Philosophy (2002)

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Abstract

The ‘problem of evil’ in its most general form concerns the question of the consistency of the mere existence of ‘evil’ in the created world with the characteristics attributed to its creator. Theists recognize this problem, and every major religion has produced a theodicy, -from the Greek theos (God) and dikê (justice)-, the technical term for the attempt to understand and reconcile the relationship of God to a cosmos that comprises ‘physical, and moral evil,’ and thereby to justify the ways of God to humans. The decades preceding and following the beginning of the eighteenth century saw the ‘problem of evil’ at the center of philosophical and theological debates. Bayle, Leibniz, Voltaire and de Sade’s sometimes ambiguous responses toward the ‘problem of evil,’ and even religion in general are, I believe, excellent avenues to understanding the multiplicity of attitudes in the period of the Enlightenment in regard to the issues surrounding the ‘problem of evil,’ such as the question of the existence of God, the relation between human beings and God, the doctrines of providence and moral freedom, the veracity of the Bible and of faith in general, and ultimately, the divine sanction for ethical values.

For Bayle, theodicy was impossible. Christian theologians could not reconcile God’s attributes of omnipotence, justice and benevolence with the fact of ‘evil’ in a world that God has created, -and thus responsible for its conditions-, without exposing themselves to great difficulties. Indeed, if we had to find an explanation, dualism was the most rationally satisfying explanation of ‘evil’ on offer as it explains the misery of human existence, and somehow manages to reconcile the belief in the existence of a ‘good God’ with the presence of ‘evil’ or imperfection in the cosmos. For Bayle, if we do affirm God’s goodness, it can only be through an act of faith, never as the result of a rational deduction.

Bayle’s work on the ‘problem of evil’ was closely followed by Leibniz who wrote his Theodicy largely as a response to Bayle, as he feared that Bayle’s dilemma represented a crisis in religious thought because not only a philosophical problem was at stake but also the very rationale for the existence of the Christian faith. Leibniz was confident that through the use of human reason, he could offer a coherent understanding of the world in which we live and of humanity’s place in it, thus provide an adequate, even though in some way incomplete explanation to the dilemma posed by the presence of ‘evil’ in the world. For Leibniz, God’s goodness and justice can be justified logically before the ‘evil’ of the world in light of a certain understanding of how God created the world: the omnipotent and rational God created the best of all possible worlds, -metaphysically speaking that is-, hence even ‘evil’ and suffering have their rightful place in a good order; however as finite beings, we are not capable of understanding the goodness of the totality.

In Candide, Voltaire parodied Leibniz’s ‘best possible world theory’ and tried to ridicule Leibniz’s views. For Voltaire, the amount of unhappiness in the world makes it ludicrous to believe that this is the ‘best possible world.’ While, in Candide, Voltaire
does not offer an alternative solution for the ‘problem of evil,’ one truth is certain: Optimism is a false answer; while ‘evil’ is incomprehensible, any minimization is an offense against those who suffer in the world. And if human beings are the victims of forces beyond their control, it is experience, not philosophical discussions that taught Candide that the potential for limited, but effective action, still lay within humanity’s grasp: Candide’s garden must be cultivated.

De Sade’s *Justine or Good Conduct Well chastised* can be read as a parody of Voltaire’s *Candide*. In his novel *Justine*, de Sade’s libertines appeal to the world’s ‘evil’ as a demonstration that belief in God’s goodness and in God’s providential care, -as traditionally conceived-, is no longer viable. Arguing the atheist’s case from the existence of ‘evil,’ de Sade will then attempt to explain ‘evil’ from a materialist and nihilistic view of the world with all its terrifying metaphysical and ethical implications. Without a supposedly perfect creator, there is no problem of trying to make sense of all the terrible things that happen in the world. There is just cause and effect and the laws of nature. There is no value-system at work behind the scenes, no force for ‘good or evil,’ and no altruistic concern for others working through the basic natural forces. For de Sade’s libertines, the ‘problem of evil’ is a liberating one: if there is no God and the material world is all that exists, human beings can free themselves from all idols, from all illusions concerning the original cause of things, and by doing so they can thus succeed in ordering and establishing the world according to their own ideas.
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Introduction

“\textit{The history of efforts to respond effectively to evils is largely a history of redefinition, amplification, modification, or subversion of inherited traditions.}^{1}\textit{”}

- Mark Larrimore, \textit{The Problem of Evil – A Reader} (2001)

‘Evil’ has always presented a unique problem for theists, in particular those of the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, because it poses a serious threat to the rational belief in the existence of the traditional biblical God, ultimately casting doubt about the validity of religious faith itself. How can the existence of imperfection, disaster, and apparently undeserved suffering in the world be reconciled with the belief that the world was created by a just, wise, good, omniscient, omnipotent, and free God? In \textit{The Many Faces of Evil}, Theologian John Feinberg writes:

“\textit{Times and cultures change, but some things remain constant. People continue to suffer and to wonder how there can be an all-loving and all-powerful God who allows such evil in our world. The problems that evil creates continue to engage philosophers and theologians as well as ordinary people who experience pain and evil. There is no evidence that these problems (and thinking about them) will go away anytime soon. They continue to be a major obstacle in the way of many people believing in any kind of theism, let alone any form of traditional, evangelical Christian theism.}^{2}\textit{”}

Despite the differences in experience and outlook, when one is confronted with some of life’s tragedies, whether it be the brutal death of a child, the witnessing of a gruesome act, or people’s lives being ruined by the destructive effects of a natural disaster, we find ourselves at a loss just like our predecessors did and equally unable to

\footnote{Larrimore, Mark (Ed.), \textit{The Problem of Evil – A Reader}, Blackwell Publishers, UK & USA, 2001, p.xi}

provide emotionally and intellectually satisfying solutions to the problem of the existence of ‘evil’ in the world. For instance, after the 1755 earthquake and subsequent tidal wave that destroyed the city of Lisbon and several thousands of its inhabitants, people everywhere asked what had caused the disaster and many started to wonder why God allowed these events to happen. Many clerics claimed that the earthquake might have been a judgment of God upon the Portuguese. After the 2004 Asian Tsunami, despite our progress in earth sciences, the same questions were posed and divine retribution was still given as a prominent explanation for the apparently arbitrary suffering caused by the natural disaster. This kind of theological understanding of ‘evil’ being, it seems, something to which human beings easily turn to when faced with grievous and devastating physical, natural or human ‘evils.’

The rationale for this present study is the belief that the large history of the ‘problem of evil’ can hopefully throw some light on the functioning, -or malfunctioning-, of familiar ideas about ‘evil,’ and help us come to term with these hard questions such as "Why do the ‘innocent’ suffer and the ‘wicked’ flourish?" "Why is not the world better ordered and more just?" "Why is there suffering and death at all in the universe?" “Why do we ‘do evil’?” There might be at least partial answers to these difficult universal human questions, or some insights to be found in the philosophers of the past, which might help us clarify much that is still puzzling in our contemporary ways of thinking about ‘evil,’ but also deal more adequately with debilitating life events, and keep us sane.

However, the main project of this thesis is about the ‘problem of evil’ as it was understood and wrestled with, in the context of the French Enlightenment, with particular attention being paid to the philosophies of Bayle, Leibniz, Voltaire, and de
Sade. According to modern scholarship, the decades preceding and following the beginning of the eighteenth century saw the ‘problem of evil’ at the center of philosophical and theological debates; the question of the human condition and its capabilities becoming central in mid-eighteenth century when the crisis in the great metaphysical systems of the past became clear. Bayle, Leibniz, Voltaire and de Sade’s sometimes ambiguous responses toward the ‘problem of evil,’ and even religion in general are, I believe, excellent avenues to understanding the multiplicity of attitudes in the period of the Enlightenment in regard to the issues surrounding the ‘problem of evil,’ such as the question of the existence of God, the veracity of the Bible and of faith in general, the relation between human beings and God, the doctrines of providence and moral freedom, and ultimately, the divine sanction for ethical values.

So why did I choose to focus on late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thinkers when trying to address the problems of today? Firstly, my belief is that even though our understanding of the nature of ‘evil’ and our formulation of the problems it poses has certainly varied from time to time, I cannot see a reason for making a sharp divide between studying the philosophies of the past and attempting to work out a philosophy for one’s own time. The primary assumption is that in many respects the philosophies of great thinkers such as Bayle, Leibniz, Voltaire, and de Sade have not dated, and that even today one may gain some great insight by a careful reading of their works. It may well turn out that there are ideas to be wrested from the study of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thought; ideas that have perhaps become hard to identify in reflection on one’s own place and tradition, and that might be

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relevant for contemporary discussion and worth trying to resuscitate. There is always
the possibility of finding a new angle or a slightly different perspective; my goal being
not to provide a final, definitive answer but to hopefully further the conversation on an
age-old problem. Indeed, as we will see, the Enlightenment value and concept of
‘humanity,’ for instance, emerges implicitly as the antonym of ‘evil,’ replacing the
tradition notion of the ‘good,’ thereby constituting what might be called an alternative
transcendental signifier to those of the Judeo-Christian tradition relied upon until that
point in time. Moreover, the Christian orthodoxy on evil, -as Job’s lot, original sin, or
God’s punishment-, is further undermined by a radical religious relativism dating more
or less from Bayle and taken further by Voltaire, and which might be seen as a
particular feature of French Enlightenment thought.⁴

For me the different setting is part of the interest, especially because I do find it easier
to think about a philosophical problem with some historical reference point. As much
philosophical writing is, I believe, a response to something written earlier, I will thus be
responding to what was written in a different age and culture, but with some of our
problems in mind. I do think that if we are to understand why we see the ‘problem of
evil’ as we now do, -or why, that is, we see ‘evil’ as a ‘problem’ in the first place-, it
might help us to know how we got to this point. And even though each author must be
understood as trying to make sense of some particular set of circumstances, in the
context of particular debates and challenges, the philosophical positions are
interesting quite apart from personal or historical considerations and might contribute
significantly to contemporary discussions in metaphysics, philosophical theology,

⁴ I would like to acknowledge here Dr David McCallam for his valuable comments.
ethics and what we might called ‘moral psychology.’ For instance, Bayle was near obsessed with the ‘problem of evil’ partly because of the circumstances of his own tragic life, and Voltaire was so disturbed by the event of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake that it caused him to doubt ‘Leibnizian optimism.’ Although I deal with these thinkers in roughly chronological order, my purpose is not to write an historical survey of what has been written about ‘evil’ since the end of the seventeenth century; I will however attempt to bring together in this project a variety of perspectives since the understanding of a text or a treatise can certainly be deepened by reading it in conjunction with the works of a philosopher’s immediate predecessors and contemporaries.

It is, it seems, difficult to justify one’s selection of certain figures, and certain works for detailed examination and one’s neglect of others. The obvious connections between these different writers was for me a great starting point for a discussion, -as Leibniz’s writing of the Theodicy was in part provoked by his ongoing dialogue with Pierre Bayle; as in Candide, Voltaire parodied Leibniz’s ‘best possible world theory’ and tried to ridicule Leibniz’s views; and de Sade’s Justine can be read as a parody of Voltaire’s Candide. And considering that Bayle, Leibniz, Voltaire and de Sade were complex human beings, whose ideas changed over time, I trust that, within the scope of this study, it was preferable to give the topic a sharper focus by limiting the discussion to a number of selected classical texts which in some way embodied a particular cultural and philosophical context, a particular angle or a particular response to the theodicy. Given my fundamental problematic, -the search for some clarity about ‘evil’ from our contemporary perspective-, the thinkers I selected have, I hope, something vital to contribute to the ongoing discourse of ‘evil,’ even when I think they are mistaken. As,
we will see, there are also aspects of their thinking that need to be criticized and even rejected, -such as for instance, de Sade’s challenging ethical views.

This thesis consists of five parts, or five chapters. In the initial phase of my investigation, I am discussing the relevance of my specific area of study for today’s world; starting with personal concerns and expanding to various contemporary (and not so contemporary) approaches on the issue. Further, I am also exploring the etymology of the word ‘evil,’ the issues surrounding the use of the concept itself, and discussing the emergence of the ‘problem of evil’ as a philosophical problem. I am also offering a brief historical overview of proposed solutions to the ‘problem of physical and moral evil’ in the Western tradition as well as a brief summary of the scientific and religious worldview prior to the Enlightenment. An important and necessary step I had to take to better understand the background from which the ideas expressed by late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophers emerged.

Chapter 2 is devoted to some of Pierre Bayle’s reflections and responses to the ‘problem of evil,’ and more specifically to the position of Manichaeism. Over the course of his entire life, Bayle repeatedly witnessed close-hand the cruel reality of religious intolerance and persecution; this made him very wary of dogmatism and superstition, and certainly drove him to question the possibility of reconciling the existence of an omnipotent, beneficent and infinite creator in the face of the ‘evils’ in the world. For Bayle, if we do affirm God’s goodness, it can only be through an act of faith, never as the result of a rational deduction. According to Bayle, since the belief in a single and perfect principle is incompatible with the existence of ‘evil,’ the belief in God cannot be based on reason but only on the authority of faith. Bayle denied that
any theodicy was possible, that is to say, any theory that would explain rationally how God’s omnipotence and goodness could be reconciled with the fact of ‘evil’ in the world; and much of his work, especially after 1685, was intended to demonstrate the impossibility of a rational, hence philosophical, solution to this dilemma. In this chapter, I will be specifically looking at Bayle’s controversial claim that the dualistic solutions to the ‘problem of evil’ proposed by those sects such as the Manichaeans that ascribed ‘evil’ to a rival power, because the simplest, or the best at explaining the facts of experience, was indeed the only true reasonable solution to the problem, but nonetheless fails on a priori level, since on the basis of the Scriptures (that is the claims of Divine Revelation), there is only one almighty and beneficent God, or one single unifying principle. The heart of his argument was that however mistaken the Manichaeans might in fact be, their view nevertheless appears to be borne out by everyday experience. For Bayle, the ‘pessimist,’ it was clear that the world is bad, that more ‘evil’ than good exists, and that human beings are a source of ‘evil’ and corruption. In the article “Manichees,” in the Philosophical Dictionary, he stated that the condition of humanity was one of misery and wickedness as he viewed history as nothing more nor less than a collection of the crimes and misfortunes of the human race. As we will see, Bayle was particularly brilliant at undermining all traditional attempts to solve the ‘problem of evil.’ Amongst Bayle’s most arresting ideas was the suggestion that morality was independent of religion, that atheists could be more virtuous than Christians, who were guilty of many crimes, and thus that a decent society of atheists was possible in principle. By demonstrating that nothing inevitably connected Christian belief with individual conduct, Bayle was openly asserting the independence of ethics and religion.
In chapter 3, I will be exploring the position of theism, -that is the theological and philosophical position that would recommend itself as both rationally and religiously acceptable in response to the ‘problem of evil’, as espoused by Leibniz in the *Essays of Theodicy*. Even though Leibniz was not French, the importance of his thought in regard to the ‘problem of evil’ and the influence of the *Theodicy* in France and especially in regard to Bayle and Voltaire’s ideas, make it necessary to include him within this project. Indeed, Bayle’s work on the ‘problem of evil’ was closely followed by Leibniz who wrote his *Theodicy* largely as a response to Bayle, as he feared that Bayle’s dilemma represented a crisis in religious thought because not only a philosophical problem was at stake but also the very rationale for the existence of the Christian faith. For the purpose of this chapter I will be mainly concentrating on Leibniz’s project of theodicy, his treatment of the question of God’s justice in regard to ‘evil’ as it is expressed in the creation of the ‘best of all possible worlds theory,’ and his adoption of the ‘consider the perfection of the whole’ approach to the dilemma of ‘evil.’ For Leibniz, the ‘problem of evil’ seemed to revolve around the following question: has God created the metaphysically best of all possible worlds? If so, then God is morally good, regardless of the amount of ‘moral’ and ‘physical evil’ in the world. If not, we will have to accept that God is ‘evil.’ Leibniz’s argument being that God’s goodness and justice can be justified logically before the ‘evils’ of the world in light of a certain understanding of how God created the world: the omnipotent and rational God created the best of all possible worlds, hence even ‘evil’ and suffering have their rightful place in a good order. However, as finite beings, we are not capable of understanding the goodness of the totality, -we can know neither all of the ‘evil’ which will ever occur nor all of the world’s good which might justify it. Ultimately, it probably can be suggested that Leibniz’s attitude was one of faith in the goodness, wisdom and
justice of God, and of belief that all actual ‘evil’ can be justified only if it is a necessary means to greater good, thus that there is no contradiction in asserting that an individual ‘evil’ or ‘the less good, in some parts’ may be connected with what is best on the whole. Leibniz kept his grounding in the Scriptural tradition. For Leibniz, the basic presupposition that was rooted in the teaching of Genesis was that, if God is the supreme Creator of all things, then everything that God creates is fundamentally good. Accordingly, this affirmation carried with it an extremely positive vision of reality; -for Leibniz, the ‘optimist,’ the world is not bad, and more good than ‘evil’ exists whereas for Bayle, the ‘pessimist,’ the world is bad, and ‘evil’ is much more prevalent than good.

Chapter 4 is devoted to Voltaire, and more specifically to Voltaire’s Candide. In this work, Voltaire tells of the difficulties of finding happiness in a world ravaged by cruelty, violence, ambition, suffering and disappointment, and thus questions Divine Benevolence, rejects rationalism, especially the so-called philosophical ‘Optimism’ and urges practical activity. For Voltaire, if a theodicy is viewed as an undertaking with exclusively theoretical implications, it is not much help to one’s suffering. Indeed, Voltaire spoke impatiently and indignantly against the kind of theorizing which, he felt, ignored reality, had no concern for the individual and justified suffering to the point of claiming not only that God allows it but even wills it. In this chapter, I will be assessing Voltaire’s claim that the amount of unhappiness in the world makes it ludicrous to believe that this is the ‘best possible world,’ and I will also be exploring in some way the position of deism, -that is the theological and philosophical position that claims

5 I am, and will be, using the term ‘pessimist’ to qualify Bayle’s outlook in the psychological sense of a personality trait characterized by negative thinking and discouragement, and an inclination to emphasize the worst rather than the best, believing in failure rather than success.
that any supernatural source of the universe there may be is unconcerned with the fates of living things, indifferent to pain and suffering. Voltaire’s *Candide* is presented as a love story in which the reader follows Candide in his travels halfway around the world in his quest for his beloved Cunégonde; the survey of the world’s ‘evils’ is thus made possible by the experiences and adventures of the hero. Candide’s world is a world filled with catastrophes, -sometimes natural but mostly human-made-; reality is ‘bad’ but, for Voltaire, the denial of that reality and the Optimistic pretence of cheerfulness is even worse. Basically, the world contains a stupendous amount of ‘evil’ and the human condition is one of misery, so let us at least not pretend that ‘all is good,’ for that will not help us to cope with it. While, in *Candide*, Voltaire does not offer an alternative solution for the problem of the origin of ‘evil,’ one truth is certain: Optimism is a false answer; while ‘evil’ is incomprehensible, any minimization is an offense against those who suffer in the world. And if human beings are the victims of forces beyond their control, it is experience, not philosophical discussions that taught Candide that the potential for limited, but effective action, still lay within humanity’s grasp: Candide’s garden must be cultivated. Thus, for Voltaire, the point of thought is action, -even if we are limited in our ability to create our own destiny-, not the construction of inconclusive speculative systems. In response to the question of ‘evil,’ there are no adequate theoretical answers, and thus there is no possibility for rational theodicy: “*Let us work without philosophizing, [...] it is the only way to make life bearable.*” For Voltaire, our quest for a justification of a ‘God’ which is acceptable to the human conscience and to our powers of reason is a futile and absurd pursuit. Humankind cannot justify the ways of God. Theodicy is inherently flawed as it requires

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us to be articulate, rational and reasonable in the face of the unspeakable; as for Voltaire, words could not express the reality of the unspeakable and only trivialized the pain and suffering in the world.

In chapter 5, I will be exploring the position of atheism as expressed in de Sade’s novel *Justine, or Good Conduct Well chastised* (1791). In *Justine*, de Sade will adopt the position of atheistic materialism and moral ‘nihilism7’ with all its metaphysical and ethical implications. With Voltaire the step from Christianity to ‘natural religion’ was made; with de Sade, it led further to a ‘religion of Nature’ itself, -and for de Sade, of a ‘malevolent’ Nature. In response to the ‘problem of evil,’ the Marquis de Sade opted for the position of atheism and took it to its outer limits. Indeed, in *Justine*, de Sade’s words describe a sense of hopelessness from the very first page; believing in the inherent ‘evil’ nature and isolation of human beings, de Sade’s Justine lives in a world where one must constantly be on guard for the next ‘monster’ in human form to round the corner and cross one’s path. Justine’s hope for the reward of a better future (in heaven if not on earth) is dismissed by de Sade and his libertines as pure fantasy and thus doomed to failure. ‘Look around,’ says de Sade, ‘a world that contains so much imperfection, injustice and intense suffering is totally at odds with the possibility of its having a creator who is omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good.’ There is no possibility of believing in any kind of traditional theism. In his novel *Justine*, de Sade’s libertines appeal to the world’s ‘evil’ as a demonstration that belief in God’s goodness and in God’s providential care, -as traditionally conceived-, is no longer viable. Arguing the atheist’s case from the existence of ‘evil,’ de Sade will then attempt to explain ‘evil’ from a materialist view of the world. In *Justine*, de Sade’s primary intent is to

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7 See p.182 for definition and clarification for the use of the term ‘nihilism’ in the context of de Sade’s thought.
demonstrate over and over again that there can be no God in a world where Virtue is seen to be punished every time, and Vice is rewarded. And subsequently, that theistic ideas that try to account for the world’s ‘evil’ by asserting that each and every instance of ‘evil’ that exists is necessary for the existence of a ‘greater good’ (or the prevention of greater ‘evil’ that God could not bring about without the ‘evil’ in question), are sophistries which can only lead to radical egotism. Without a supposedly perfect creator, there is no problem of trying to make sense of all the terrible things that happen in the world. There is just cause and effect and the laws of nature. There is no value-system at work behind the scenes, no force for ‘good or evil,’ no altruistic concern for others working through the basic natural forces. For de Sade’s libertines, the ‘problem of evil’ is a liberating one: if there is no God and the material world is all that exists, human beings can free themselves from all idols, from all illusions concerning the original cause of things, and by doing so they can thus succeed in ordering and establishing the world according to their own ideas. By inviting humanity to imagine a world without God, de Sade’s libertines offer to Justine and the readers what they see as a morally compelling vision: a world in which humanity could think and do as it pleases without having to look over its shoulder at some disapproving deity. So, this chapter deals with both the big issue of what so often seems like brutality, destructiveness, and ultimate purposelessness in the natural world, but also with ‘evil’ in the private world, with those who commit ‘evil deeds.’ Indeed, de Sade’s Justine addresses the problem of the rules of conduct in which ‘good and evil,’ ‘right and wrong’ have collapsed into purely subjective questions of pleasure and pain. De Sade’s Justine can be seen as a key text which might help us to understand more about the motives or intentions of the perpetrators of ‘radical evil.’
Chapter 1: Problems of ‘Evil’

“[...] While the world is full of troubles
And anxious in its sleep.
Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world’s more full of weeping than you can understand.”

-W.B. Yeats (1865-1939), The Stolen Child

Aims and Opening considerations

Preamble

“[…] I want to emphasize that the problem of evil is not just a speculative problem: it calls for a convergence between thought, action (in the moral and political sense) and a spiritual transformation of one’s feelings.” – Paul Ricoeur, Evil: A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology (2007)

The idea of this thesis was born out of my concerns with the world around me and out of my belief that, even though the search for answers to the ‘problem of evil’ is timeless, it does belong firmly in our modern era. If it is an undeniable fact that most of human history has been marred by the more or less frequent occurrence of war and murder, and by countless other forms of conflict, the last hundred years has emerged as the most violent period of all. For instance, in “War-Related Deaths since 3000 BC.,” Bulletin of Peace Proposals (December 1991), William Eckhardt, contrary to the assumption that war-related deaths had been of the same intensity throughout historical time, estimated that 73% of all war-related deaths since 3000 BCE actually

occurred in the 20th century; that is more than five times the number from the nineteenth century (13%) and more than ten times the number from the eighteenth century (4.6%). In relation to the total number of all worldwide casualties since 3000 BCE estimated by Eckhardt at 150 millions, that is over a 100 million persons who met a violent death at the hands of their fellow human beings in the last century alone.

Moreover, in the second decade of the new millennium, millions more across the world are already caught up in conflict and enduring suffering of all kinds. Daily we are faced with large-scale disasters, various accounts of war and terrorist attacks that dominate the news for a while, genocide, human trafficking and so on. And this is without taking into account the many small-scale tragedies that affects our friends, loved-ones, and our personal well-being. And even though most of us have not been through anything in our personal lives that remotely compares to the atrocities inflicted on the victims of what Immanuel Kant called ‘radical evil,’ when we are confronted with photographs of the Holocaust or images of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, we are deeply affected as emotional beings: we are shocked and horrified, revolted and often left feeling either numb or deeply depressed. On a more abstract level, these countless ‘acts of evil’ also challenge our moral sensibilities because ‘evil’ poses fundamental questions regarding the world’s intelligibility and especially what it reveals about the human condition. Does human reason have the ability to find or give meaning to a world where babies are being beaten to death, children recruited to fight in wars, women systematically raped and civilians tortured? Why has the human race not seemed able to understand and overcome ‘evil?’ Can we actually expect to make sense of our lives and explain why the world has these problematic features of suffering and wicked actions? If we use the number of war-related deaths committed
in the past hundred years alone as the basis for assigning importance or the level of absolute wrongdoing which has been, it can be argued that there is no more pressing problem facing humans today than the ‘problem of evil’ for believers and non-believers alike.

If the idea of this thesis was born out of my concerns with the world around me and the conviction that it is morally evident that one should prevent ‘evil’ if possible, the motivation which drives my study is the belief that ‘evil’ is fundamentally a practical problem and that we are capable of making sense of a good portion of what goes by the name of ‘evil’ through philosophical and scientific enquiry. And even though I assume that there will most certainly remain areas that will continue to baffle, I maintain that it is reasonable to believe that it is only by learning about ‘evil’ and understanding its different forms that one can decide when and where to confront it and hopefully alleviate some suffering.10 This became clear to me when reading through the pages of the 1999 United Nations General Assembly Report on the atrocities committed in July 1995 against the Bosnian Muslim population of the United Nations-designated safe area of Srebrenica. I was especially struck by the Secretary General’s disturbing conclusion to the report and surprised by the unexpected use of the word ‘evil’ in what was otherwise a very factual and official report:

“Through error, misjudgment and an inability to recognize the scope of evil confronting us, we failed to do our part to help save the people of Srebrenica from the Serb campaign of mass murder. (Section 503- p.108)”

And further:

“The men who have been charged with this crime against humanity reminded the world and, in particular the United Nations, that evil exists in the world. (Section 506- p.108)”

The failures of peacekeeping operations in Srebrenica, Rwanda and more recently in Darfur and Afghanistan are the kind of experiences that remind us that we cannot surrender and give up the want to enlarge our understanding of ‘evil.’ As on a practical level we most certainly need to prepare ourselves to face up to future manifestations of this phenomenon and thus find more effective ways so as to confront these challenges.11 Today we live in a world where on the one hand, human ingenuity has evolved to the point where there is, in theory, the capacity to provide every person on earth with a healthy and materially comfortable life; but where on the other hand, tragedies such as the one who took place with the fall of Srebrenica are still happening and are reminding us that the human capacity for destruction and ‘evil’ still defy our understanding.

Sadly, the ‘evil deeds’ associated with places and times such as the fall of Srebrenica, the Armenian genocide, or the ravages of war in Somalia that will continue to disturb our consciousness, are of such a magnitude that it could easily drive us to believe as Jean-Paul Sartre did seven decades ago, that ‘evil’ is “irredeemable.”12 Yet, others like Terry Eagleton and Richard Bernstein maintain that we must resist the temptation to see ‘evil’ as “a fixed ontological feature of the human condition,”13 since this means allowing oneself to believe in our total inability to do anything about it; that we just ‘have to live with it.’ I do agree with Terry Eagleton that if ‘evil’ is something that we, human beings, do actually have in common; it thus becomes at the same time our lot and our responsibility. It is most probable that human beings will always engage in bloodshed, but this does not mean that we should not do our best to resolve civil

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discords or prevent conflicts of wars. Indeed, the yearning for justice and a sense of fairness, the desire to enhance human well-being (and animal well-being, for that matter), as well as a strong notion of moral responsibility seem to also be constant features of the human condition. Through human action and cooperation, things can hopefully be improved.14

As we will see in Chapter 4, Voltaire had arrived at a similar proposition by the time he finished writing his Candide (1759). The Voltaire of Candide believed that if in some way human beings are the victims of forces beyond their control, they do have the potential for limited, but effective, action through human free will, effort, and cooperation with others. Indeed, by the end of his ordeals, the fictitious Candide does not know whether ‘evil’ can be eradicated, but he assumes that things can certainly be improved, so the world can be a better place and that existence can be, if not happy, at least tolerable.

A note on the concept of ‘evil’

While I am aware that in Western contemporary thought, many thinkers may feel that the word ‘evil’ should be abandoned completely and this for many good reasons; I also believe, -and the United Nations Report seems to support this-,- that there are crimes which go so far in the depths of human perversity that they seem almost impossible to convey by using any other words. When reading the ugly details of the events that took place in Darfur, Rwanda or in the former Yugoslavia, such wanton destructiveness

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and cruelty in the interaction between human beings drive us to believe in the necessity of the concept. In *Becoming Evil*, social psychologist James Waller in his discussion regarding the ‘labeling of evil actions’ points out that:

“Activities can take on very different appearances depending on what they are called. Perpetrators facilitate moral disengagement by using euphemistic language to make their extraordinary evil respectable and, in part, to reduce their personal responsibility for it. By camouflaging their extraordinary evil in innocuous or sanitizing jargon, the evil loses much of its moral repugnancy. In this way, language can obscure, mystify, or otherwise redefine acts of extraordinary evil. [...] Soldiers ‘waste’ people rather than kill them. Bombing missions are described as ‘servicing the target’ [...] The civilians whom the bombs kill are linguistically converted to ‘collateral damage’ [...] Mass murder in Bosnia was ‘ethnic cleansing,’ and in Rwanda it was ‘bush clearing.’ [...]”

Then again, the ‘discourse of evil’ which is so embedded in religious traditions is what also often inflames passions in national, ethnic and religious conflicts and drive people to commit the kind of abominations we in turn describe as ‘evil.’ The harm done by labeling others ‘evil’ is well documented throughout our history and it is the kind of rhetoric which is still in use today by those who declare war on terrorism and by religious fundamentalists: by seeing the ‘enemy’ as the embodiment of the principle of ‘evil’, the fight for ‘good and justice’ are always on ‘our side.’ As we will see in Chapter 2, Pierre Bayle in his *Philosophical Commentary* (1686-87), already demonstrated that this dualistic view of the world is what often initiates violent campaigns whose excesses tend to fall on most marginal, and therefore most vulnerable members of the society, dividing people “into powerful judges and powerless judged.” The witch hunts which are taking place in Papua New Guinea, Nigeria and Kenya today are a witness to the danger of blaming and scapegoating others using what Professor David

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Frankfurter calls “the conceptualization of evil.” Frankfurter’s claims that for many, ‘evil’ appears only as a religious concept which is loaded with images of satanic rituals, devils, and witches; and which has been, -and is still being used-, “as a device, a frame, a mythology, a realm, and a motivation for violent purge.” Witchcraft and sorcery are still seen in some African societies as the prototype of ‘evil,’ hence in our contemporary world, children and babies identified as ‘evil’ are being abused, abandoned and even murdered on the charge of witchcraft, and elderly women are being burn to death.

Reflecting on both sides of the argument for why ‘evil’ should be a concept that one should keep or discard for good, Terry Eagleton writes:

“To acknowledge the reality of evil […] is not necessarily to hold that it lies beyond all explanation. You can believe in evil without supposing that it is supernatural in origin. Ideas of evil do not have to posit a cloven-hoofed Satan. [It is true that some would deny] the existence of evil. This is largely because they regard the word ‘evil’ as a device for demonizing those who are really nothing more than socially unfortunate.”

Indeed, it is probably accurate to say that in our contemporary Western way of thinking, people would rather view ‘evil’ in terms of human aggression and cruelty; and would most likely turn to the social sciences (e.g. appeals to social conditions), or more recently to bio-criminology (e.g. the detection of genes, neurons, and other biological factors implicated in crime) to find some explanation to human motivations. As we have already shown earlier, there are certainly good reasons for turning away from the

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19 Eagleton, 2010, p.16.

rhetoric of ‘evil,’ especially from what Susan Neiman labeled the “simple and demonic conceptions of ‘evil’.” In On Evil, Adam Morton writes:

“First, a warning. There is a strong case to be made for distrusting the very idea of evil. Thinking in terms of evil may lead to confusion and indeed to more awful consequences. That is the case against evil, and I must begin by making it. “Evil” is part of the vocabulary of hatred, dismissal, or incomprehension.”

We just have to recall the consequences of all the ‘talk about evil’ following the events of 9/11, especially from the Bush administration and its supporters to remind ourselves that we certainly need to think very critically when judging behaviors or events as ‘evil,’ -as really, there is no one qualified to make judgments about ‘evil.’ If we recall, calling the nation to fight against the great ‘evil’ of terrorism seems to have been used as a motivation to incite the American people into a willingness to pursue a cluster of military ventures, including the Iraqi war.

As psychiatrist Michael Stone judiciously points out, the dilemma here is that firstly, we do not have any definite criteria to set apart ‘evil’ from the ‘ghastly’ or the ‘very bad,’ or any standard model to show us how to draw the line where the ‘very bad’ ends and the ‘truly evil’ begins; and that secondly, society’s values as to what is ‘absolutely evil,’ ‘fairly evil,’ or ‘not so evil’ are subject to change over time. Moreover, for Stone, there is also the problem of how to agree upon the legitimate domain within which ‘evil’ can significantly be said to exist, -as for instance, what is considered ‘evil’ in times of war might not be what we regard as ‘evil’ in peacetime.

But despite all these very complicating factors, I do believe that Eagleton’s argument that ‘evil deeds’ can nevertheless be acknowledged as ‘evils’ without asserting that

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‘evil’ has an essence still stands. For Eagleton, denying the existence of ‘evil’ altogether because of the word’s most negative connotations and uses is hasty. His chief concern is that by doing so, we are running the risk of diminishing the gravity of certain actions and even the ‘scale of awfulness,’ hence putting on the same level very different degrees of human depravity. In Eagleton’s words, by doing so we could be running the risk of “letting the Khmer Rouge off the same hook on which delinquent teenagers are impaled.”

So it seems that until we have made significant progress in our understanding of ‘evil’ and come up with clear criteria to distinguish between instances of ‘evils,’ all we have to “set apart the bad from the beyond-the-merely bad” is the use of the word ‘evil’ itself. As it turns out, people in everyday life (e.g. journalists, crime writers, etc) seem to use the language of ‘evil’ quite frequently and freely to describe acts of absolute wrongdoing that appears to have exceeded definable bounds of humanity; thus, using the word with the intent to deepen the gravity of a particular crime. The word ‘Evil’ is used for the ‘unthinkable’ and the ‘unjustifiable,’ for what is experienced as morally distressing, sinister and cannot fit within our usual moral and explanatory frames.

**Defining ‘Evil’?**

However it is not within the scope of this particular study, to either propose a definition of ‘evil,’ or to develop and offer a ‘taxonomy’ which might help to differentiate between ‘evil actions’ from those of other wrongdoings. For the purpose

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26 Stone, 2009, p.18
of my thesis, I will be simply referring to ‘evil’ as an umbrella concept covering a wide span of meaning and association, and a wide array of human flaws and crimes. Further, I am also hoping to show how our ideas about ‘evil’ vary considerably according to their historical, social, cultural and religious settings. For instance, in religious terms, ‘evil’ has been defined as ‘sin;’ in this sense, reducing all ‘evils’ to spiritual rebellion against God and the consequences that follow, -a usage of the word which, as we will see, lead to the frequent confusion of ‘sin’ and ‘evil,’ and between religious and moral transgression (see Chapter 1, “Setting the Scene: Theodicy- a Brief Historical Summary”). Besides this religious understanding of ‘evil,’ I will also be looking at some specific use of the term in theology and philosophy, such as for instance, ‘evil’ defined as ‘privation’ or ‘defect, and not as a reality in its own right; thus in this sense reducing ‘evil’ to ‘something’ which can never totally corrupt the ‘good’ upon which it depends for its derivative form of existence.28

However, as a point of reference, according to Blackwell’s Dictionary of Anthropology, the very term ‘evil’ derives from the Teutonic ubiloj, the etymology of which reveals a primary sense of “exceeding due measure” or “overstepping the limits.” The Oxford Etymological Dictionary gives the origin as Old English yfel, Old Saxon ubil, Old High German and Gothic ubil and states that these adjectives or nouns were apparently used as the most comprehensive expression of disapproval, dislike or disparagement. Also according to the OED, ‘evil’ was the word the Anglo-Saxons chose in familiar speech where today we would use adjectives such as bad, cruel, unskillful, defective, and terms such as harm, crime, misfortune, disease and so forth. The French mal from the Latin equivalent malum, denotes sickness and harm, as well as bad, wrongdoing or

'evil,’ but is also used just as a general term of disapprobation (e.g. for a minor misconduct, or a passing discomfort). The Greek word *ka-kos*’ may be defined as which results in physical pain, sickness, sorrow or distress, as that which is morally ‘evil’ and destructive. Among the way it has been translated are the terms: “bad,” “evil,” “hurtful,” “injurious,” “wrong.” And, the very comprehensive Hebrew root word *ra*’ is variously translated as “pain,” “sickness,” “suffering” and “misfortune,” “bad,” “gloomy,” “unclean,” “ugly,” “wickedness,” “evil,” “calamitous,” “malignant,” “ungenerous,” “worthless,” “envious,” and even “sad,” all depending upon the context.

But what we need to put forward here is that the senses of ‘evil’ seem to be falling roughly into two categories: the first is ‘suffering-evil,’ -as the condition of being unfortunate, miserable, ill-health or a victim of calamity, human cruelty, and bad luck--; the second is ‘doing-evil,’ -as the condition of being morally depraved, bad, vicious, wicked, or the doing or tending to inflict suffering upon another sentient being, causing such thing as humiliation, fear, discomfort, pain, or death to others. What Jeffrey Burton Russell identifies as the two categories of “*passive evil,*” the suffering that a sentient being feels; and “*active evil,*” the willingness of a responsible sentient being to inflict suffering upon a fellow sentient being.29

Furthermore, we should take note that even though the meaning of ‘extreme moral wickedness’ is said to have been already in Old English, it did not become the main sense until the eighteenth century. Indeed, as we will see in this study, it is at this particular moment in time that philosophers and theologians started to clearly differentiate between ‘evil’ as instances of human suffering resulting from natural

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events or unfortunate happenings (‘natural evil’) on the one hand, and ‘evil’ as the result of human actions and human cruelty (‘moral evil’ or ‘sin’ in religious language) on the other. Whereas, as we have already mentioned it earlier, when we use the word ‘evil’ today, we tend to reserve it for free human acts of absolute wrongdoings; hence, a contemporary philosophical approach to the ‘question of evil’ seems never far from interrogations of the perplexities of human actions and intentions.30

The Theological and Philosophical ‘Problem of Evil’: A brief Overview

So, if the idea and motivation behind this thesis were instigated at first as an emotional response to actual distressing events and as an attempt to think about human nature and the reality of ‘evil’ in the world, the project of this research belongs essentially to philosophy. The rationale for this study is the belief that the large history of the ‘problem of evil’ can hopefully throw some light on the functioning, -or malfunctioning-, of familiar ideas about ‘evil,’ and help us come to term with these hard questions such as “Why do the ‘innocent’ suffer and the ‘wicked’ flourish?” “Why is not the world better ordered and more just?” “Why is there suffering and death at all in the universe?” “Why do we ‘do evil’?” “Is there any possibility for a rational theodicy?” There might be at least partial answers to these difficult universal human questions, or some insights to be found in the philosophers of the past, which might help us clarify much that is still puzzling in our contemporary ways of thinking about ‘evil’ but also deal more adequately with debilitating life events, and keep us sane.31

Within the sphere of philosophical and theological inquiry, thinkers have found it helpful to distinguish two kinds of ‘evil’: in short, ‘natural evil’ which refers to natural disasters which bring about suffering (such as earthquakes, tornadoes, tsunamis and so forth) as well as diseases, killing by animals in the wild, and so on; and ‘moral evil’ that is caused by free human acts (such as murder, rape, torture, assault, neglect and so forth). Of these two types, the concept of ‘evil’ may be further divided into ‘physical evil’ which refers to bodily pain, -death being regarded by many as the greatest physical ‘evil’-, or mental anguish (such as fear, illness, grief and so forth) which might be caused by either human actions or ‘natural evil’; and ‘metaphysical evil’ which is meant to express the finitude, contingency, and hence the imperfection inherent in all created things, -since ‘anything other than God’ is limited or imperfect.32

However, in experience, there are innumerable cases where the categories of ‘moral’ versus ‘natural evil’ seem entangled. For instance, harm caused or contributed to by human negligence (such as negligent driving of a car, or failing to make buildings earthquake proof); harm that was not directly caused but that was anticipated and could have been prevented (such as deaths caused by a famine resulting from a drought); harm caused in cases of insanity or diminished mental capacity and so forth. Also, if we believe that there is an intelligent Being responsible for the cosmos, then all life’s accidental injuries that occurs has to be that Being’s responsibility, and then once again ‘moral’ and ‘natural evils’ converge.33

Hence, it can probably be said that there are many kinds of ‘evil’ or that there are many actual specific problems concerning ‘evil,’ but the ‘problem of evil’ is something

32 For a detailed discussion on ‘metaphysical evil,’ see: “Chapter 3: Leibniz’ Theodicy.”
else. Within the Western traditional philosophical and theological discussion, the ‘problem of evil’ has been fundamentally an abstract endeavor which does not depend on what the world is actually like even if it might have been suggested by actual ‘evil’. Essentially, what we might call the ‘theoretical problem of evil’ arose within the context of biblical religion and concerns the contradiction, or apparent contradiction, between the existence of any ‘evil’ in the world, even hypothetical ‘evil’, on the one hand, -as every instance of ‘evil’, whether it is actual or merely possible, raises the abstract problem-, and religious beliefs in the goodness and power of God, or the Ultimate on the other. How the divine can be compatible with the existence of ‘evil’ has perplexed philosophers and theologians right down to the present day because basically it challenges the rational belief in the existence of the traditional biblical God, ultimately casting doubt about the validity of religious faith itself.

In a contemporary discussion on ‘evil,’ quantum physicist and Anglican priest, John Polkinghorne recognizes that while the problem has been historically the focus of intense discussion for a long time, it is one that is still felt with particular intensity today:

“How can such a world be considered to be the creation of a God who is both all-good and all-powerful? The statement of the problem is too familiar and troubling to need extensive elaboration. Not only does it give considerable pause to the enquirer after theism, but it is also one that remains a perpetual challenge and source of perplexity for those of us who are believers.”

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34 In contrast to what we will be calling further on, the ‘existential problem of evil’ which is one that is shared by all people and all religions.


“Following the century of two world wars, the Holocaust, and other acts of genocide, and many natural disasters, this problem presses particularly hard on contemporary Christian thinking.”

But if the existence of God is called into question by ‘evil,’ especially by the actual experience of ‘evil’; for some people however, the presence of God can also be a consolation and support in times of suffering and the ‘Being’ they turn to in order to make sense of what seems an unjust world, -the religious attitude to the world being more emotional it seems than it is rational. For instance, at the level of faith, the experience of Auschwitz gives one reason both to believe and to disbelieve. In this short passage of The Gates of the Forest, Elie Wiesel expresses the paradoxical nature of one of these irreconcilable moments in the life of the believer where faith can either be dismissed or affirmed. Here, the character Gregor, whose faith had been destroyed by the Holocaust, has a passionate exchange with the Hasidi Rebbe:

“Gregor was angry. ‘After what happened to us, how can you believe in God?’ With an understanding smile on his lips the Rebbe answered, ‘How can you not believe in God after what has happened?’”

In his introduction to The Problem of Evil – A Reader, Mark Larrimore suggests that experiencing ‘evil’ either as victim, a participant or as a witness can lead believers in very different directions, atheism being only one of them. That if for many, like Gregor, undergoing terrible sufferings can and often does render faith in God untenable; others, like the Rebbe, however will find their way deeper into religious traditions, sometimes even changing from one religious tradition to another in their need to cope physically, psychologically and emotionally. For instance, the Holocaust did not lead most Jews to doubt the existence of an omnipotent and benevolent God. And it is well

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documented that it is precisely in countries that have endured severe hardship that evangelical Christianity is growing at its greatest rate.40

During the 1960s and 1970s, philosophers gave a great deal of attention to the particular conflict or tension that seems to exist between the claims of orthodox theism and the facts about ‘evil’ and suffering in the world. Philosophical discussion has focused chiefly on two theoretical difficulties posed for biblical theism. First, does the existence of ‘evil’ in the world show classical theism to be logically inconsistent? Or in other words, is it logically possible for an omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good God to create a world containing ‘evil’? And second, even if we accept logical consistency, does ‘evil,’ -in the form, for instance, of what we experience as pointless or gratuitous suffering-, nevertheless counts as evidence against the existence of the monotheistic God? And when the challenge posed by this apparent conflict is given more exact shape and structure, we have a specific formulation of the so-called ‘logical problem of evil.’ In his article “The Problem of Evil,” Michael Tooley offers one very concise way of formulating the whole argument:

1. If God exists, then God is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect.
2. If God is omnipotent, then God has the power to eliminate all ‘evil.’
3. If God is omniscient, then God knows when ‘evil’ exists.
4. If God is morally perfect, then God has the desire to eliminate all ‘evil.’
5. ‘Evil’ exists.
6. If ‘evil’ exists and God exists, then either God does not have the power to eliminate all ‘evil,’ or does not know when ‘evil’ exists, or does not have the desire to eliminate all ‘evil.’
7. Therefore, God does not exist.

Whether the argument from ‘evil’ is valid or not is another question, for it may well be that one or more of the premises is false. But the point being made here is simply that when one conceives of God as all-powerful, all-knowledgeable, and wholly good, the existence of ‘evil’ quickly leads to potentially serious arguments against the existence of God. This is to suppose that the starting assumption is that a being who is the source of all and a worthy object of worship must be the most perfect being possible.41

So if on the one hand, the ‘logical problem of evil’ seems unsolvable and thus persistently raises doubts about God’s existence; on the other hand belief in a Supreme Being can be viewed as something that simply lies beyond rational proof, and is thus ultimately a matter of faith. Either response is possible: the believer can retain his or her faith in God, while acknowledging that faith to be at odds with reason and experience; or the believer can reject that faith altogether, -‘evil’ thus leaving God’s existence as an open question.42 The issue of the irreconcilability of faith and reason in regard to resolution of the ‘problem of evil’ will be explored in further details in “Chapter 2: Pierre Bayle and the Impossibility of Theodicy.”

Epicurus (341- 270 BCE) is often cited as one of the earliest philosophers we know of to have set a clear argument against the notion that the world is under the providential care of the gods by pointing out the manifold sufferings in the world. In the “Letter to Menoeceus” which was preserved by Diogenes Laertius, Epicurus declares that the gods live happy lives, untroubled by concern for human beings, and thus that it is a false assumption to believe “that the gods sent the greatest rewards [to the good] and

42 Neiman, 2002, p.128
ultimate misery to the wicked [...]” In his newly Christian context Lactantius (AD 260-340) will quote Epicurus as follows, giving the ‘problem of evil’ its classic formulation44:

“God [...] either wishes to take away evils, and is unable; or He is able, and is unwilling; or He is neither willing nor able; or He is both willing and able. If He willing and is unable, He is feeble, which is not in accordance with the character of God; if He is able and unwilling, He is envious, which is equally at variance with God; if He is neither willing nor able, He is both envious and feeble, and therefore not God; if He is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to God, from what source then are evils? or why does He not remove them?45.”

Amongst many others, Marcion the leading second-century Gnostic46, Augustine of Hippo in the Confessions (397-8 A.D.)47, Pierre Bayle in the Dictionnaire Historique et Critique (1697)48, the atheist character Birton in Voltaire’s Histoire de Jenni; ou, Le Sage et L’Athée49, the skeptical character Philo in a much-quoted passage from David Hume’s Dialogues concerning Natural Religion (1778)50, and more recently J.L. Mackie in Mind (1955) will all recall the ‘question of Epicurus.’ Despite certain differences in the way they formulate it, these writers raise the same basic problem: the problem whether it is possible for both a perfectly good, omnipotent being and any ‘evil’ to exist, -since part of the idea of a good being is that it is always opposed to ‘evil,’ and since the notion of an omnipotent being entails that it can bring about whatever it wills-, it seems that the existence of both a perfectly good, omnipotent being and any ‘evil’ is excluded by the notions themselves.

47 Augustine states and discusses the problem in Confessions, Book 7, Chapter 5.
50 It has been suggested that Hume probably encountered the argument in the article “Paulicians” in Bayle’s Historical and Critical Dictionary- see Larrimore, 2001, p.xiv, fn.19.
However, throughout this study, we will see how the *trilemma* is a question which Gnostic dualists, Epicureans, theists or atheists pose for very different reasons; and how confronting what is apparently the same ‘problem’ can lead to dramatically different responses to ‘evil.’ Indeed, Epicurus’ argument was it seems more about the indifference of the gods towards humans beings, than about doubting their existence as such, so for instance, Voltaire will make use of the Epicurus’ argument in favor of deism whereas de Sade will exploit it as his ‘killer argument’ for atheism.

Thus to resume, the ‘problem of evil’ in its most general form concerns the question of the consistency of the mere existence of ‘evil’ in the created world with the characteristics attributed to its creator. Theists recognize his problem, and every major religion has produced a theodicy, -from the Greek *theos* (God) and *dikē* (justice)-, the technical term for the attempt to understand and reconcile the relationship of God to a cosmos that comprises ‘physical, and moral evil,’ and thereby to justify the ways of God to humans. The term ‘theodicy’ appears to have been first used in philosophical language by the philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. In other words, the general aim of a theodicy hence being to give positive, plausible or credible reasons for the existence of ‘evil’ in a theistic universe; and thus, reconcile ‘evil’ (in whatever form it may take) with religious beliefs and convictions.

But most importantly, we should take note that amongst ‘theodicsists,’ some seem to take the question of the existence of God to constitute the heart of theodicy; while others consider theodicy’s main problem to be that of determining whether an ‘already existing divinity’ can justifiably be said to be responsible for the existence and considerable scale of ‘evil’ in the world. This second type ‘theodicy’ covers accounts of

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51 Larrimore, 2001, p.xxii
why God allows ‘evil’ (or certain kinds of ‘evil’), generally proposing God’s actual reasons for allowing it, along with an explanation of why God’s acting on these reasons morally justifies God’s allowing of ‘evil’. Further, if it is the traditional conception of the biblical God, Christian or otherwise, that seems to give the ‘problem of evil’ its greatest urgency because it is undoubtedly the greatest obstacle to the belief in God, I am suggesting that ‘evil’ can also be regarded as a ‘problem’ for people in all traditions, not just to monotheistic ones, as well as a philosophical dilemma that arises independently of religious faith.

As people through the centuries have reflected on the meaning of life and the presence of ‘evil’ in the world, they created myths and belief systems to try to come to grips with the apparent iniquity or indifference of the cosmos, and of their human fellows. For instance, we can recall that within the Buddhist frame of reference, ‘evil’ is understood as inherent to human existence, making nonexistence the end goal; and within the framework of Zoroastrian dualism, ‘evil’ is seen as an eternal cosmic principle that opposes the ‘good,’-the entire history of the world thus being viewed as the conflict between the two, until the good principle at the end of time carries off the victory (see Chapter 2: “Pierre Bayle and the Impossibility of Theodicy”). Moreover, within today’s philosophical inquiry, talk about the theist conception of God can now be broadened to discussion about the consistency and rationality of the world-picture of any particular era, especially in regard to our understanding of the self and its place in the world, -on the most obvious level, the common ground being the facts and experiences of suffering, and the common purpose being to try to unify what we perceive as contradictory fragments of human experience. In what ways can an adequate account be given of the mixture of pleasure and pain, happiness and sorrow,
‘virtue and vice,’ we human beings experience throughout our life.\textsuperscript{53} In Evil in Modern Thought, Susan Neiman argues that:

"[...] nothing is easier than stating the problem of evil in non-theist terms [because] every time we make the judgment ‘this ought not to have happened,’ we are stepping onto a path that leads straight to the problem of evil.\textsuperscript{54}"

Indeed, we probably can suggest that whenever we comment upon the death of a child or about people’s lives being ruined by the destructive effects of a natural disaster, we are engaging in theodicy. For Terry Eagleton, when we are confronted with some life tragedy, -especially I believe, with a situation that cannot be changed-, and ask ‘Why,’ we are not actually asking ‘What was the cause of this,’ but we are protesting against some profound lack of logic in the world; we are reacting to what seems the senseless brutality of things. A reminder of what seems to have been the reasons behind the writing of the “Individual Laments or Songs of Supplication” in the book of Psalms.\textsuperscript{55} However, it can also be argued that the ‘problem of evil’ is really the ‘problem of God and evil,’ hence that there is no philosophical problem about the latter without the concept of the former, -as in a world without the idea of God as a supposedly perfect creator, there would be no problem of trying to make sense of all these terrible happenings in the world.

According to both Ernest Becker in The Structure of Evil and Kenneth Surin in Theology and the Problem of Evil, thinkers of the Enlightenment had already felt the need for a


\textsuperscript{54} Neiman, 2002, p.5.

new kind of theodicy which would enable them to explain ‘evil’ as existing in the world apart from God’s intervention or justification. They were searching for something entirely different which would enable them to evade the problem of reconciling the existence of ‘evil’ with the existence of an ‘increasingly absent’ deity. Some felt that it was no longer possible to view ‘evil’ as a ‘problem’ that could be answered by an essentially intellectual undertaking, -that is a theodicy with a theoretical emphasis-, whereas others felt that there was no such thing as the ‘problem of evil.’ This shift towards a ‘secular’ and more ‘existential based theodicy’ or towards the suggestion that there is no theological or philosophical ‘problem of evil’ as such (cf. atheist view of the world) that seems to have occupied eighteenth-century philosophers, and especially the French Enlightenment thinkers, is central to this study and will be explored in details throughout my thesis.56

**Theodicy prior to the Seventeenth Century – a Brief Summary**

“The God that philosophers in the early modern period intended to refer to was the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition, which is to say, the being who created the world, who spoke to Moses from the burning bush, and who, through Jesus Christ, saved mankind from the consequences of sin. But who that being is, and what he means for human existence, was a matter of serious and sometimes mortal debate, even, and especially, within this tradition. This controversy is rather ironic because it was agreed that God had explicitly revealed himself through the texts that had come to be known as the Bible (“the book”).57"

- Thomas Lennon, “Theology and the God of the philosophers” (2006)

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Before the seventeenth century, in the Western tradition, the problem of theodicy had been dealt within the framework of Christian theology in a way that for a long time remained uncontested. In brief, from the Deuteronomic Judaic tradition comes the first and probably the most persistent of the explanations of ‘evil’: the doctrine of divine retribution, as the idea that all suffering is deserved because it is punishment for an individual or collective unethical behavior (or transgression) which is either known or unknown, -as for instance ‘evil’ done in one generation could be punished in another (Deut. 5:9; 7:12-14; 16:20; 28).

Generally speaking, the authors of the Hebrew Bible often seem to have regarded puzzling, distressing and frightening events, especially natural disasters, as direct divine acts; hence making a connection between justice and well-being on the one hand, and between injustice and suffering (as judgment) on the other. For instance, the story of the ‘Tower of Babel’ in Genesis 11:1-9, -in which the whole human creation, descended from Noah, is held accountable and severely punished for their ‘arrogance’-, can be seen as a classic example of the concept of retributive justice. The stories of ‘Adam and Eve,’ ‘Cain,’ or the ‘Flood’ also typically depict suffering as due to the ‘justified wrath of God.’ In each one of these biblical accounts, human beings are given the opportunity to choose between ‘good and evil,’ but seeing as they went in the wrong direction, they were cursed and ‘deservedly’ condemned to suffer for their mistakes.

Here we have to recall that the doctrine of divine retribution was directly connected to the idea of a covenant between God and humanity (e.g. the Law Covenant made between God and the nation of Israel which is so important a theme in the Hebrew Bible): the thinking being that if the human party kept to the contract with God and
behaved correctly, they shall be rewarded by God’s grace. On the other hand, if the human party ‘sinned,’ -that is ‘sin’ understood as an offence or ‘evil’ against God rather than as an offence against other people-, God would punish them, either directly or through the agency of others, and people would suffer. Thus, the confusion of ‘sin’ and ‘evil,’ and of religious and moral transgression that followed (See Chapter 1, “Defining ‘Evil’?”). In Evil – Satan, Sin & Psychology, Cooper and Epperson, writing from a contemporary perspective, suggest that:

“Ultimately, sin is a theological concept with psychological ramifications rather than a psychological concept with only human ramifications. The idea of sin makes sense in a larger theological context. In order to grasp it, one also needs to understand the nature of divine purposes for humanity, as well as divine grace and forgiveness. Thus sin points toward both a disruption in our relationship with God and a distortion in our relationship with others.”

However the doctrine of the ‘reward of good and the punishment of evil’ was very much tested when it did not appear to be confirmed by the experience of the individuals; the world is not governed by the principle of measure to measure because, in the everyday reality, ‘evil individuals’ did seem to be rewarded and ‘righteous individuals’ appeared to received unwarranted punishment. The book of Job is generally considered as the kind of speculative literature dealing with the issue of gratuitous suffering and hence raising questions about the nature of God and the order of the universe. How could an omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent God allow such a great deal of apparently innocent suffering to occur? As the author of Job leaves no doubt that Job is a righteous man who is subjected to the worst possible trials for no apparent reason, Job’s suffering and the unanswered question remain outside of and in conflict with what has been his belief that God justly rewards and punishes in accordance with one’s moral life. Despite his radical need to make sense of his long

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ordeal with anguish, physical pain and loss, Job is not privileged to know the reasons why he suffered so terribly. At the end, what God demonstrates to Job is how powerless and ignorant he is by comparison with the deity, and this seems to persuade Job to accept his suffering (cf. Job 38). As a result, Job is rewarded by the return and also the increase of his possessions.

But, one can wonder why Job is satisfied with the response he gets from God considering it does not even seem to be a proper answer to Job’s question. Why should the demonstration of divine power bring Job to accept his sufferings given that those sufferings were not caused by Job’s guilt? In *Evil and Suffering in Jewish Philosophy*, Oliver Leaman proposes that:

“*Job is not brought around by the demonstration of divine power so much that by the argument that the difference between God’s point of view and his own is so great. Our grasp of reality is very limited since we are finite creatures and there is clearly a relatively near horizon with respect to the extent of our knowledge. God, on the other end, is infinite and understands exactly why everything is as it is. Job is impressed by what God says because Job comes to understand that the nature of divine action is based on a mystery, and that mystery represents the religious aspect of the world.*”

So the lesson for Job here seems to be that he has to work towards a faith beyond all personal concerns and learn to love and worship this hidden and unknowable God for what seems to be God’s own sake. This is a theme that I will be exploring further in the context of Chapter 2: “Bayle and the Impossibility of Theodicy.”

But whatever the discrepancy between theory and reality, this concept of retributive justice was passed on; the tidy solution was to point to the next life as the ‘set up’ in which rewards and punishments are balanced with just deserts, and this is an explanation which can be found in the New Testament, especially in the writings of Matthew and Paul. For instance, in Romans 2, Paul argues for a judgment according to

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one’s works, so those who have done good will receive eternal life while those who have done ‘evil’ will be condemned (vv. 6-8), -(see also Romans 2 and 14:10-12 and 2Corinthians 5:10).

Moreover, from the Hebraic tradition, came another explanation of the origin of ‘evil’ which also absolves God of guilt, that is the idea of ‘original sin,’ -the doctrine that Adam and Eve had freely caused ‘evil’ to come into being and bequeathed ‘evil’ to their descendants. Indeed, from early Christianity onwards, a plainly literal reading of Genesis 3, -the words of God to Adam and Eve and the serpent in the mythic story of the forbidden fruit and its aftermath-, had led to the idea that ‘Adam’s Fall’ understood as the original act of ‘moral evil,’ also resulted in a curse upon creation that was the actual source of ‘natural evil.’ The church fathers and the medieval theologians typically held that the world as originally created by God was perfect and that its disorder and ‘evil’ came about as a consequence of the ‘Fall’; in Genesis 3:17, God says to Adam: “Because you have listened to your wife and have eaten from the tree which I forbade you, on your account the earth will be cursed.” Through Paul’s literal interpretation of Genesis 3, the concept of ‘original sin’ became clearly delineated; in the Epistle of the Romans, chapter 5, verses 12-18, Paul proclaims the ‘sin of the first man’ and its meaning for all future generations:

“ [...] just as through one man sin entered into the world and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, for that all have sinned (ch.5,v.12) [...] for the judgment resulted from one trespass in condemnation (ch.5,v.16).”


61The Revised English Bible with Apocrypha, Oxford University Press, 1989.

62 id.
Augustine of Hippo (354-430) also stressed that pain, the human tendency to commit ‘personal sins,’ physical death, bodily defects and eventual damnation were consequences of ‘original sin’; hence imparting once again that all suffering is a consequence of human guilt (such as it was understood in the logic of retributive justice). The lot of the natural world was so interlocked with that of Adam, who named the animals and was custodian of all of nature (Gen. 1:26-29; 2:19-20), that the consequences of Adam’s ‘evil deed’ in disobeying God afflicted all of nature too. When Adam fell, the whole humankind who was to come from Adam was condemned with him and ‘natural evil’ was simply the by-product of Adam’s ‘moral evil’ and called for no further explanation. The ‘evils’ that were thought to follow from the ‘original sin’ were, in Christian theology, redeemed by Christ’s incarnation and sacrifice which provided, in compensation for death and suffering here, eternal life and happiness in the hereafter, -the notion that a more satisfactory life begins after death. The breach with nature (God’s curse) in terms of hard labor, -that is labor understood in terms of how humanity must relate to nature-, rather than effortless existence remained however unrepaid (see for instance, Acts 13: 38-39 and I Corinthians 15:3). This view prevailed well into the seventeenth century because most Westerners took the Genesis account to be historically accurate. Augustine of Hippo’s interpretation of the biblical narrative of the ‘Fall’ is generally accepted as the predominant or ‘mainstream’ explanation of the origin of ‘evil’ and as the first fully formulated theodicy in the Christian West before the seventeenth century. In his approach to theodicy, Augustine, and later on Aquinas, wanted to entirely remove responsibility for the existence of ‘evil’ from God by locating the source of ‘evil’ in the rational will of created beings which can freely choose between ‘good and evil.’

63 Polkinghorne, John, Science and Providence –God’s Interaction with the World, SPCK, Great Britain, 1989, p.59; Polkinghorne,
In brief, Augustine’s first line of argument was that, once one accepts that God is wholly good and all-powerful, one has to conclude that ‘evil’ does not exist, for its existence would be incompatible with the existence of such a God. So the difficulty here was thus to show how ‘something’ which does not exist can be such a powerful influence in the world? To the question of ‘evil,’ Augustine (and Aquinas) replied that, although ‘evil’ in human experience can be very powerful and profound, ‘evil’ does not metaphorically speaking represent the positive existence of anything. ‘Evil’ simply does not exist in its own right; it is not one of the constituents of the universe. Rather, it is the lack of reality and thus the lack of goodness. The Augustinian approach reflected Augustine’s background in Neo-Platonism, -as in Plato’s thought, particular things are imperfect copies of their ‘forms,’ so imperfection is a feature of the world as we experience it. To resume, the Augustinian approach to ‘evil’ and suffering was to say that ‘evil’ is not a separate force opposing the good; ‘evil’ is only metaphysical deprivation, a privation of good (Augustine’s term for ‘evil’ is privatio boni – See The City of God, XII.3), or degradation; thus an ‘evil’ in creatures is being simply a loss of good, of integrity, beauty, health, or virtue.

Further, Augustine’s second line of argument came from the Bible and Church teaching, rather than from Plato, -the biblical account of the Fall of the Angels and of Adam and Eve. For Augustine, God is supreme essence and God’s essence is identical with his attributes: and one of the most important of God’s attributes is goodness. Since God is supremely good, God can be the source only of the positive features of a ‘thing,’ not of an absence or not of a defect. Just as God gives ‘being’ to his creatures,
so too God gives them goodness. All that God created is good by nature and ‘evil’ entered creation when created beings ceased to function as they were created to function by nature. First Satan and his angels rebelled against God and were expelled from heaven, and then humanity fell from grace in its turn when Adam and Eve disobeyed God in Eden and hence turned away from the highest good. In both cases the motivation was the same, the desire to be like God, and according to Augustine, it was these double faults that brought ‘evil’ into the world. From that point onward, human nature was changed, so that the human will could not in practice choose the good any longer without assistance, but instead developed a tendency to actually will ‘evil.’

Thus, for Augustine, ‘evil’ had a ‘historical beginning’ and ‘does its work,’ not by exerting a force in its own right, as if it were a god (cf. Manichaeism\(^{64}\)), but through the efforts of wicked beings, which have become ‘evil’ from wrong use of the ‘good free will’ God had given them. By arguing that ‘evil’ is no kind of thing or force at all but that it springs from us because it is the effect of human freedom, Augustine had made ‘evil’ an ethical affair. Moreover, Augustine, taking on a further extreme position, declared that God, as an act of mercy, gratuitously chose to save certain human beings out of the ‘sinful mass’ that was humanity for them to enjoy eternity in the heavenly city with the angels. The rest of humankind was then left to the consequences of Adam’s sin, and thus to damnation. Augustine also claimed that there was no way in this life to know who was saved and who was damned, since God’s will was absolutely free. Some of the outwardly pious could be damned and some outwardly sinful could be predestined to salvation. However those who were truly elect could not go astray;

\(^{64}\) This early approach to the ‘problem of evil’ which was initially attractive to Augustine but later condemned by him as heresy, will be explored in details in Chapter 2: “Bayle and the Impossibility of Theodicy.”
they persevered in goodness because God had given them the gift of perseverance. As we will see further in this study, this does not bring us to a solution by any means, for those who believe in a God of love who is all-powerful and all-knowing the dilemma of the ‘problem of evil’ reappears if we ask whether God intended the events of the ‘Fall’ to happen. If God did, God would seem to be the author of ‘evil,’ and if he did not, God would not appear to be all-powerful. Moreover, how can it be that ‘grace’ whose source is an omnipotent, omniscient, and beneficent God is not given to all, or sometimes given to people who do not deserve it?65

However problematic, the doctrine of ‘original sin’ compounded with the idea of predestination became an essential dogma of Protestantism by the time of Martin Luther (1483-1546) and Jean Calvin (1509-1564) and was not subject to reasoning. In Voltaire and Leibniz, Richard Brooks claims that although there were attempts in the humanistic movement of the Renaissance to challenge Augustine’s powerful and frightening assessment of the human predicament, the leaders of the Reformation drew strength from the acceptance of the Bible as the ultimate and absolute source of truth; thus that the ‘authority of dogma and of the Church prevented the problem of evil, apparently irresolvable on purely rational grounds, from undermining the very foundations of religion.’66 As Mark Hirvonen points out, as long as the doctrines of the ‘Fall’ and of ‘original sin’ continued to frame the human experience of the world,


“there could be strictly speaking, no such a thing as ‘innocent’ suffering to wonder about. Nobody ‘deserved’ happiness.”

Moving towards a New World-Picture: a Challenge to Traditional Theodicy

But the context of the ‘problem of evil’ challenge to faith did eventually shift with the advent of the new science and cosmology which began with Copernicus’s heliocentric theory of the universe, -the view that the earth moves in a circular orbit around a stationary sun-, and which eventually led as it did to the break-up of the so-called medieval synthesis. However we should point out that there was no sudden break from the past towards a rational and scientific style of thought as we know it today, but more of a gradual move towards a new world-picture which slowly replaced the medieval one. There were indeed several centuries of transition from the Thomistic synthesis of ancient Greek philosophy and Christianity that had dominated Western European thought to the new world view of Isaac Newton but during that period what had been a small ‘anthropocentric’ and ‘geocentric’ cosmos exploded into an infinite universe.

In brief, in medieval Europe, it was generally accepted that the earth remained stationary at the centre of a finite universe while the sun, the planets and all of the stars revolved around it. This geocentric astronomical model had been established in the fourth century B.C by Aristotle (384-322BC). Aristotle’s celestial realm was stable and orderly, composed of a special mysterious ethereal substance through which the

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67 Larrimore, 2001, p.xxviii
68 Strictly speaking, it was impossible to achieve a complete fusion of Christianity with Aristotle. Aquinas was well aware of the difficulties and only selected the facets of Aristotle’s teaching that were in accordance to his faith. For more details on this issue, see: Brooke, John, Hedley, Science and Religion – Some Historical Perspectives, The Cambridge History of Science Series, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991.
heavenly bodies revolve eternally in perfectly uniform circular motions, kept in steady motion by an external ‘Unmoved Mover.’ In contrast, the globe of the earth was characterized by corruption and mortality; the assumption was that the most perfect region was the celestial region above the moon, represented in the outer-most spheres, and that the spheres closer in toward earth at the center represented less perfect states of being. Most importantly, Aristotle sought for explanations of events in terms of the true form or intelligible essence of an object and the purpose it fulfills. For instance, objects naturally move either up or down (e.g. rising smoke or falling stones) unless unnaturally forced to change direction. In other words, motion is thus explained by the tendency of each thing to seek its own natural resting place. The acorn grows to become an oak, and the rain falls to nourish plants. Causality was thus described by ‘final causes,’ or future goals and ‘formal causes,’ or innate tendencies; attention was thus directed to final end and the behavior of every living thing followed from their essential nature.

In the second century A.D, Claudius Ptolemaus, known as Ptolemy (100-170A.D) developed a detailed yet different geocentric model of the solar system which, like Aristotle’s, put earth at the centre of the universe but which, unlike Aristotle’s model, predicted the motion of the moon, sun, and planets with considerable accuracy. This picture of an orderly geocentric universe served as the standard picture of the heavens up to the sixteenth century. Aristotle’s account of a teleological cosmos, -that is one that has a purpose-, appealed to European Christians because it could be easily reinterpreted from a Christian vantage point; not only it seemed to confirm the Christian model of heaven above, hell below but also because it was so simple to visualize Aristotle’s ‘Unmoved Mover’ as the God of theism. In this cosmological
model, human beings had a psychologically important place; the whole universe was seen as a small, finite place, existing to fulfill God’s mysterious purpose and created expressly for humankind’s enjoyment, instruction and use. The world of nature existed that it might be known and enjoyed by humankind; human beings in turn existed that they might know and enjoy God forever (cf. strong belief in human’s ‘immortal destiny’ in the celestial realms), and ‘evil’ existed in the world because of Adam’s fall, and that was that.

To revise this model of a universe that was orderly, finite, and conformed with the Scriptures by placing the human race at the centre of God’s creation, was not only to challenge Aristotle and Ptolemy but also to threaten the authority of the church and to challenge Christian doctrine. The period that took place roughly from the middle of the sixteenth century to the early decades of the seventeenth and which has come to be known as the ‘Scientific Revolution’ was the period when this finite spherical and earth-centered universe of pre-modern times was slowly replaced by the notion of a sun-centered solar system in an infinite expanse of space. New discoveries and new theories, such as the astronomical theory of Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543) and Galileo Galilei (1564-1642)’s theory of motion and mathematization of nature, not only seemed to undermine the Aristotelian and Ptolemaic systems but also challenged many of the assumptions of the ancient and medieval philosophy. No longer was humanity at the centre of the universe, about which all else revolved, but rather humanity was but one small part of a much larger system in constant movement. However, Galileo developed a scientific procedure that reflected his total confidence that, even though humankind had lost its central position in the natural order, human

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69 We should point out that it is important to avoid anachronism in the use of the term ‘science’ in regard to this period in history as prior to the seventeenth century, there was no clear distinction between philosophy and the particular sciences; what we understand as natural science was originally simply a branch of philosophy: natural philosophy. See: Rutherford, 2006, p.12. & Brooke, chapter I, 1991, pp.16-51.
intellect was such that it could unravel the secrets of the whole of nature by understanding its mathematical structure. Moreover, for Galileo, the God of final causation, -that is the God who implanted his purposes in the foundations of the universe-, had to be set aside in favor of the God of efficient causation, -that is the deity that created the atoms of a fundamentally independent and self-sustaining natural order. Galileo’s cosmology did retain a place for God, who was still require to bring atoms into existence, but divine causal efficacy became restricted as subsequent causality within nature and was grounded in the activity of already created atoms.

In other words, once final causality was set aside, the idea of God as the ‘Supreme Good’ towards which all things strive, was replaced by God as ‘First Cause’ understood as the initial link in the chain of efficient causes, and eventually become simply the original creator of the interacting atoms in which resides all subsequent causality. Nature, once created, was seen as functioning independently and self-sufficiently. The outlines of an essentially de-animated (and hence de-divinized), rational and mechanistic conception of the universe that had been started by Galileo, was to be soon completed by others, notably René Descartes (1596- 1650) and Isaac Newton (1642-1727). Descartes agreed with Galileo, his older contemporary, that ‘God’s Book of Nature’ was written in the language of mathematics; the natural world was discoverable, and he believed, was made up of a limited number of basic mechanisms and motions. For Descartes, God first created matter and then made it move before retiring to let the universe run automatically of its own accord. And Newton, invoking only the concepts of motion, matter, space and time, showed physical nature to operate according to a single universal law, -the law of attraction-, which needed God only to create the universe and to intervene from time to time to maintain its stability.
The worldview implied in the Cartesian as well as the Galilean conception of things was a clockwork universe constructed and set in motion by God but left for regulation to the impersonal workings of the laws of nature.\(^7\)

The ensuing Enlightenment era no longer depicted nature as God’s original handiwork spoiled by ‘sin’ but envisaged it as a great machine, designed and operated by divine reason according to uniform and understandable laws. Thus one of the new challenges for faith was to explain why ‘natural evils’ occur as by-products of the rational world-system operating exactly as God designed it: how could these smoothly functioning natural laws produce earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes which harmed so many people? Moreover, the new science was causing problems with the understanding of God’s nature and God’s relation to the world. For instance, the idea of ‘God’s Providence’ was central to this intellectual upheaval. ‘God’s Providence,’ -in the sense of ‘special providence’-, had been associated with the idea of miraculous or supernatural intervention into the natural world. The ‘new science’ seemed at least implicitly to deny the possibility of miracles and hence was threatening religious beliefs that drew support from them. Of course ‘special providence,’ which entailed divine intervention in the natural processes of the world, could be rejected without rejection of broader ideas of providence as immanent in the nature of the world itself. Such ideas of an immanent providence, -providence without divine intervention-, were however suggestive of non-Christian ideas of a godless universe.

If God had to be retained, as the creator and author of nature, God had to be explained rationally and made consistent. By the end of the seventeenth century, new and serious attempts had to be made to justify the omnipotence, infinite goodness and perfection of God and God’s permission of the existence of ‘evil;’ as we will see, the traditional dogmatic approach would hold little weight. 71 In Religion and Science, Barbour proposes that:

“For many centuries in the West, the Christian story of creation and salvation provided a cosmic setting in which individual life had significance. It allowed people to come to terms with guilt, finitude, and death. It provided a total way of life, and it encouraged personal transformation and reorientation. Since the Enlightenment, the Christian story has had diminishing effectiveness for many people, partly because it seems inconsistent with the understanding of the world in modern science.” 72

For the thinkers of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the task of theodicy thus developed into both a philosophical and theological endeavor. Philosophically, ‘evil’ was presenting a challenge to the consistency and rationality of the world-picture disclosed by the new way of ideas. But in dealing with this challenge, philosophers were also influenced by the polemical debates over the fundamentals of faith that were the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation, -such as the doctrine of justification by personal faith alone, the consequences of ‘original sin,’ the compatibility of human freedom and divine providence, the significance of grace for human salvation, and so forth. Moreover, the largest problem posed by the thinkers of the Enlightenment was how morality and faith had to be accommodated in a world governed by the laws of a rigidly mechanistic, and ultimately godless universe. As we

will see, Deism (the belief that God created the universe but is distant, not interested in us) or atheism, was a natural conclusion of scientific research in this paradigm. In due course the burden of the ‘problem of evil’ would be shifting from God to humanity itself.73

According to Steven Nadler,

“Above all, Leibniz and Bayle opened up a debate on a particularly troublesome series of moral and theological questions regarding the relationship between God and His creation. Some of these problems had been of great concern in medieval religious philosophy and even in pagan antiquity. But they took on a new urgency in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as the Reformation movements and their Catholic opponents fought bitterly over the proper doctrines and practices of Christianity.74


74 Nadler, 2008, p.85
Chapter 2: Pierre Bayle and the Impossibility of Theodicy

“[...] What do I learn from Bayle, to doubt alone?* Bayle, great and wise, all systems overthrows, Then his own tenets labors to oppose.”

*“He has left the outcome of the dispute over the origins of evil unclear. In his works he presents all the differing point of view; all the arguments that support a point of view and all the arguments that undermine it are equally carefully explored; he is like a lawyer who is prepared to represent any philosopher who becomes his client, but he never tells us what his own views are. In this he is like a Cicero, who often in his philosophical works, plays the part of an undecided skeptic [...]”

-Voltaire, Poem on the Lisbon Disaster (1756).75

Introduction: Setting the Scene

For most of the last forty years of the sixteenth century there was civil war in France between Catholics and Huguenots, -the Protestants of the French Reformed Church (Eglise Réformée deFrance).76, the Saint Bartholomew’s Massacre being the best known and most infamous incident. From August 23-24th to October 3rd, 1572, scholars estimate that Catholic troops and civilian mobs killed about 200 of the principal Huguenot leaders and between 20.000 to 30.000 Protestant civilians in Paris, and in the provincial disturbances that followed.77 Eventually a momentary settlement came about between Catholics and Calvinists when the Protestant Henry of Navarre was accepted as king after renouncing his own Protestantism, converting to Catholicism in order to secure the submission of Paris. In April 1598, Henry IV offered

76 For interest, according to Luc Racaut, in March 1560, at Amboise, Protestant plotters attempted to rid the court of the Guise’s influence. The ‘Tumult of Amboise’ marked the time when French Protestant started to be called ‘Huguenots’ and were irremediably associated with civil disobedience. See: Luc Racaut, “Religious Polemic and Huguenot Identity,” Chapter 3, pp.29-44, in: Mentzer, Raymond, A., & Spicer, Andrew, (Eds.), Society and Culture in the Huguenot World 1559-1685, Cambridge University Press, UK &USA, 2002, pp.32-33.
specific rights and guarantees to Protestants by the Edict of Nantes, a legislation which provided the legal and institutional framework for bringing an end to some forty years of civil wars and religious strife, and reunite France. Under the regime of the Edict, French Protestants of the Reformed Church were permitted legal toleration of a limited character, such as they were allowed to practice their religion publicly but under restricted circumstances, and had permission to occupy certain towns and maintain churches and schools in certain places.

Although this royal decree recognized for a while the civil and political rights of Protestants in some ways, it nevertheless failed to grant them full equality with Catholics. Hence their peace and security as a barely tolerated religious minority (about a twentieth of the population) depended above all on the king’s protection. This unstable settlement did not last for very long as Henri IV was assassinated by Ravaillac in 1610. As we will see more fully later in this chapter, Henry IV’s successors gradually chipped away at Protestant guarantees in a policy of persecution aimed, as they saw it, at uniting the French state. Finally, Louis XIV abolished the Edict of Nantes altogether, even though it had been issued in perpetuity, on the ground that it was no longer needed since ‘there were no longer any Protestants.’

Almost 150 years later, the horrors of the religious and political wars of sixteenth-century France will become the subject of Voltaire’s epic poem La Henriade (1723). It is known that Voltaire felt the crime of the Saint Bartholomew’s Massacre’s Day so strongly and intimately that every year throughout his life he would fall ill with a fever.

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“I always suffer from a fever on the 24th August [...] You know that it is the day of the Saint Bartholomew’s Massacre, but I grow weak and faint on the 14th May, when the spirit of the Catholic League which then still dominated half of France assassinated Henri IV at the hands of a ‘flighty’ Reverend Father. Yet the French people keep on dancing like nothing has ever happened [...] [My translation and interpretation-- for original French text, see app.A]\footnote{See Dz5855 in: Voltaire, 119 Correspondence – The Complete Works of Voltaire, Volume XXXV - 1769-1770, The Voltaire Foundation, Thorpe Mandeville House, Banbury-Oxford Shire, 1974, p. 198; see also Dz9114-, Letter to François Louis Marin, dated September 10, 1774 in: Voltaire, 125 Correspondence, Volume XI – 1774-1775, 1975, p.130.}"

As we will see, both Voltaire and Bayle were profoundly opposed to religious intolerance and the ‘evil’ of persecution, asserting that it is wrong and unjustifiable to use force and violence in the cause of religion; and both thinkers frequently condemned, in many of their writings, the persecutions of the Protestants of France in particular, -the ones of Bayle’s own times as well as earlier ones.\footnote{Mason, H.T., Pierre Bayle and Voltaire, Oxford University Press, 1963, p.135.}

Indeed, the atrocity of the Saint Bartholomew’s Massacre had intensified further the tension between the Catholic and the Reformed churches and would culminate in the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) that would leave most of Central Europe in ruins. Modern scholars estimate that up to three-fifths of Germany’s sixteen million people were killed in this war over religion which involved Germany, Bohemia, Poland, Denmark, Sweden, Switzerland, and France. The 1648 Peace of Westphalia ended the war by establishing the right of each prince to choose Calvinism, Lutheranism, or
Catholicism for his territory. However, the two treaties which were signed, -one for the Catholics and one for the Protestants-, did not stop religious persecution within nation-states. In France it seems that neither Catholics nor Protestants really believed in religious tolerance which they had reluctantly accepted as a political necessity. Henry IV’s son Louis XIII (1610-1643) and his grandson Louis XIV (1643-1715) were hostile to the Protestants as were the Catholic clergy and many zealous Catholics. Louis XIV’s determination to have no other than the Catholic faith in his territories brought about the partnership of Church and state (with however the state clearly in the superior position). Under Louis XIV’s government, French Protestants were once again subjected to increasingly severe persecution in an attempt to forcibly convert them to Catholicism and create religious uniformity in France. For instance, in 1669, a ‘Declaration of 40 articles’ which were described as a real ‘counter edict’ formed the legal basis for the destruction of Protestant meeting-houses, restrictions on Protestant worship, marriages and burials, administrative harrying on every kind, and enforced conversion. By 1685 Louis XIV would revoked the Edict of Nantes on the ground that the ‘best and greatest part’ of his Protestants subjects had presumably embraced the Catholic faith. For the ‘Sun King,’ power had to be absolute; national strength demanded a unified people with a single official faith, and therefore dissent could not be tolerated, -un roi, une loi, une foi (one king, one law, one faith). And as many kings and emperors had invariably done in the past, Louis XIV would assert that his legitimacy had been conferred by a ‘higher power;’ the European notion of the divine right of kings being expanded rather conveniently in the New Testament.

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God. And those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God’s servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer.”

-Romans 13: 1-4

In France, the amount of cruel religious persecution and human suffering these verses would sanction during the reign of Louis XIV is difficult to imagine.

The Problem of Evil in Relation to the Issue of Toleration: the ‘Evils’ that Humans do in the Name of ‘Truth.’

Ever since the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, a violent polemical war had been waged between Protestant and Catholic theologians over the fundamentals of faith. Central to these battles were rival contentions as to who, where and what precisely, was the ‘true Church;’ whence its authority was derived; whether every word of the Scriptures was inspired by God and literally true, and so forth. These kinds of controversies would throw all the churches and sects of Christianity into continual strife since each of them believed it was orthodox and had truth on its side. This question was crucial as it was clear in either camp that one could not be saved if one was not part of the ‘true Church.’ Moreover, religious truth was assumed to be so self-evident that opposition to it was taken to imply ‘evil,’ not error, hence execution was frequently accepted as an appropriate means to extirpate ‘heresy.’ During the Reformation, this view was held not only by Catholics, but also by the early Protestants. In Toleration, Preston King recalls that indeed, just as the Catholics

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burned Hubmeier (1528), so the Calvinists burned Michel Servetat at the stake\(^7\) (1553), the Lutherans, Thomas Münzer (1525) and the Zwinglians drowned Felix Manz (1527).\(^8\)

To what extend do the horrors of religious persecutions from the early days of the Christian Church were justified by a literal reading of the Bible is a question that certainly troubled Pierre Bayle, and later on Voltaire. Both thinkers stood up against the cruelties perpetuated by the belligerents from all sides under the pretext of being truthful to the Christian message, -the ongoing struggle between the ‘righteous and the unrighteous.’ For instance, in 1686-87, a year after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, Bayle published anonymously a work with the long title *Philosophical Commentary on These Words of Jesus Christ, Compel Them to Come In, Where It Is Proven by Several Demonstrative Reasons That There Is Nothing More Abominable Than to Make Conversions by Force: And Where Are Refuted All the Convertists’ Sophisms for Constraint and the Apology That St. Augustine Made for Persecution*,\(^9\) where he expresses a firm opposition to religious intolerance and persecution from all the parties in the field, Protestants and Catholics alike, and developed a very convincing argument for complete civil religious toleration, -that is, in the context of Bayle’s thought, the right to all branches of Christianity, Jews, Muslims, and atheists to remain separate and distinct from one another within the

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\(^9\) Original title: *Commentaire philosophique sur ces paroles de Jésus-Christ, Contrain-t-les d’entrer; Où l’on prouve, par plusieurs raisons démonstratives, Qu’il n’y a rien de plus abominable que de faire des Conversions par la Contrainte: et où l’on réfute tous les Sophismes des Convertisseurs à contrainte, & l’Apologie que St. Augustin a faite des Persécutions.*

NB: The *Philosophical Commentary* is made of three parts: the first two were released the 28th October 1686; the third part on the 10th June 1687
secular framework of the state. Bayle devoted the whole work to demonstrate the falsity of a literal interpretation of Scripture, and especially of the words attributed to Jesus in the ‘Parable of the Great Feast,’ -Luke 14: 23: “Then the master said to the slave, ‘Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled’”, which Augustine (354-430) had eventually endorsed in the fifth century to justify the use of coercion against ‘heretics’ to enforce ‘religious truth’ (for instance, the Roman Government’s repression of the Donatists). We should take note here that Augustine also invoked Paul’s theology in Romans 13: 1-7, and his interpretation of the ‘Parable of the Weeds among the Wheat,’ Matthew 13: 24-30, - in brief, for Augustine, the parable’s point was that if the ‘weeds’ are known they should be uprooted.91

If we recall, Augustine’s rationale was that a person who remained outside the ‘true faith,’ was condemned to burn forever; hence it had to be better to force the ‘heretic,’ if that was required, where such force will provide him/her with eternal life. So if the person being converted died in the process, this was nothing to compare with what he/she would have to experience in eternal damnation. However painful the conversion, the pain had to be set against the hope of eternal life which was achieved thereby; the means, even torture, certainly could not be worse than the end, which was salvation (short-term pain for long-term benefit). This mattered a great deal to Augustine because he was convinced that he was acting out of love, out of a desire to save eternal souls, as there was no gift of eternal life outside the ‘true Church,’ only

91 For Bayle’s discussion of the Augustinian interpretation of the ‘Parable of the Great Feast,’ see: Commentaire Philosophique, Troisième partie (Philosophical Commentary, Part III).
the torments of Hell. The case was made for the idea that it could be such a thing as ‘righteous persecution.’\textsuperscript{92}

According to Bayle, the words ‘\textit{compelle intrare}’ (‘\textit{compel them to enter}’) in the Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible used by Augustine as the basic theological ground of Christian persecution in the fifth century, was also being used by the French Catholics, under Louis XIV, to justify the persecution of the French Protestants. In his \textit{Philosophical Commentary}, Bayle’s aim was to demonstrate that on the basis of philosophical premises, -that is on rational and universal grounds-, ‘\textit{compelle intrare}’ could not be construed literally because “upon this single Principle of Natural Reason; [...]That all literal Construction which carries an Obligation of committing Iniquity is false.”\textsuperscript{93}” For Bayle, any scriptural passage interpreted literally urging people to commit crimes, or act in a manner contrary to reason and Christian values, could not be valid, or at least could not have been accurately interpreted.\textsuperscript{94} For Bayle, it was thus a sure fact that God did not give that order, for had God given such an order, God would be responsible for the crimes of constraining conscience, -which is impossible, given that God is good and had himself established the duty of following one’s conscience. In the context of Bayle’s thought, ‘conscience’ is understood as a practical judgment of our reason which tells us that this or that action is ‘good or evil’ and ought to be done or avoided. Such particular judgments are grounded on a law which is, for the believer, in God and accessible to our reason, or ‘the Natural Light (‘\textit{la lumière naturelle}’), or


expressly revealed by God (scriptural Revelation)\textsuperscript{95}; and for Bayle, “\textit{Natural Reason and Scripture are so express against Murder} [...]”\textsuperscript{96}.

Once the principle of ‘\textit{Natural Reason}’ is established, Bayle dedicates a chapter for every reason he gives to show why using the words ‘\textit{compelle intrare}’ in the literal sense is untenable and an aberration. In short, for Bayle, the notion of compelling people to believe is against common sense and ‘\textit{Natural Reason;}’ it is inconsistent with the spirit of the Gospel; it removes the boundaries between justice and injustice; it confuses virtue with vice, and it also leads to absurd, irrational and immoral behavior to the downfall of societies. Moreover, Bayle noted that the Catholic Church defended itself by the principle that a thing which would be unjust if not done in the name of the ‘true religion’ becomes just by being done for the ‘true religion,’ -“\textit{that [with truth on ‘our side’] these Violences were by no means criminal in them, but that they were very righteous doings.}\textsuperscript{97}”

This idea was, in Bayle’s view, the most abominable insult to Christ who preached mutual love, non-violence and humility to his followers; it also conveyed the lowest imaginable conception of God, because it approved every crime committed in the name of ‘true religion.’ Pushing this idea to an absurdity, Bayle boldly demonstrated that the logic supports the shocking conclusion that if God commanded the ‘true Church’ to enforce the truth by persecution, then every church was obliged to persecute, thus perpetuating the ‘evils’ of war and persecution since each Church

\textsuperscript{95} Bayle, Pierre, \textit{Système de Philosophie} : OD, IV, pp. 259-261; Bost, 2006, p.132.
believed itself to be orthodox and thus the ‘true Church.’ So it could also be inferred that the Romans were right to persecute the Christians.  

“They followed the ‘true religion’ and the erroneous conscience which followed the false cannot be distinguished by any rational criterion, -human reason being so fallible, nobody can actually ascertain whose views are actually right or wrong-, ultimately, rendering one person’s faith another’s superstition. Indeed, the principle of faith itself, -as faith in any doctrinal teaching is ‘faith in its truth’-, leaves the believer unequipped to distinguish truth from falsity at the first place. For Bayle, it is therefore immoral and unnatural to forcibly drive individuals out of one faith into another as each person’s conscience is entitled to the same rights. So, even though persecution might be thought righteous by someone or some group, in practice nobody could find the methods of persecution actually righteous; persecution remained in all circumstances the ‘evil’ action it is in essence.”

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In the Philosophical Commentary, Bayle certainly invites us to inquire why rational beings commit ‘evil deeds,’ and gives great insight into why Christians and their spiritual and theological mentors in particular were so intolerant of other Christians that they were even willing to punish or kill them for their beliefs. According to Bayle’s understanding, it was not because the persecutors and those who justified persecution were especially wicked and immoral, but because religious intolerance and persecution were seen not as ‘evils’ but necessary and salutary for the preservation of religious truth and orthodoxy, and all that was believed to depend on them. For Bayle, intolerance is clearly at the origin of ‘evil,’ “Hinc prima mali labes: Here’s the Source of all the Evil”101” and:

“To toleration is the thing in the world best fitted for retrieving the Golden Age, and producing a harmonious Consort of different Voices, and Instruments of different Tones, as agreeable at least as that of a single Voice. [...] in a word, all the Mischief arises not from Toleration, but from the want of it.”102

“As to that monstrous Medly of Sects disgracing Religion, and which they pretend is the Result of Toleration; I answer, That is still a smaller Evil, and less shameful to Christianity, than Massacres, Gibbets, Dragooning, and all the bloody Executions by which the Church of Rome has continually endeavor’d to maintain Unity, without being able to compass it. Every Man who enters into himself, and consults his Reason, shall be more shock’d at finding in the History of Christianity so long a train of Butcherys and Violences as it presents, than by finding it divided into a thousand Sects: for he must consider, that ‘tis humanly inevitable that Men in different Ages and Countrys, shou’d have very different Sentiments in Religion, and interpret some one way some another, whatever is capable of various Interpretations.”103

Outwardly Bayle remained a loyal member of the Reformed Church throughout his life (except for a brief conversion to Catholicism) and always demonstrated a clear preference for the Reformed Church in his writings, as against, in particular the Catholic faith, which he clearly disapproved of. He also claimed in many of his writings

that Louis XIV had behaved tyrannically and unjustifiably towards the Huguenots, but this did not make him believe the Reformed Church to be the ‘true church of God.’ In his broad theory of religious toleration, Bayle placed the Huguenots in the same position regarding rights and status as everyone else, as he was well aware of the ‘evils’ that could be done from any religious conviction; intolerance being, it seems intrinsic to every creed. The paradox being that the very ideal of religious tolerance and of religious pluralism appears to be in contradiction with the irredeemably sectarian truth claims of each faith (as Bayle himself had so well demonstrated). Once a person believes (as for instance, Augustine did), -that is really believes-, that ultimate salvation depends on following the ‘true Church,’ that person cannot tolerate the possibility of others, especially loved ones, experiencing the torments of Hell, -persecution and punishment becoming ultimately an act of charity and benevolence.

What precisely Bayle’s confessional stance was and the intent of his writings was at the time, -as still is today-, very difficult to assess. Was Bayle an atheist, a fideist, a deist, a skeptic, a Socinian, a liberal Calvinist, a conservative Calvinist, a libertine? All of these positions have been assigned to him. Thomas Lennon’s theory of “dissimulation,” might be helpful here. Lennon suggests that it is most probable that, in the early modern the period, some philosophers because of the political and social unacceptability of their ideas conveyed their real views only indirectly as suggestions or inferences. Their explicit professions of religious beliefs can thus be explained as “mere irony, as expressions made with a wink to indicate they are not to be taken seriously, or, more precisely, not at their face value.”\(^{104}\) Was Bayle one of these thinkers who “dissimulated”? It is very plausible. Over the course of his entire life, Bayle

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\(^{104}\) Lennon, in: Rutherford, 2006, Chapter 10, p.278
repeatedly witnessed close-hand the cruel reality of religious intolerance and as a result, suffered great personal loss; this made him very wary of dogmatism and superstition, and certainly drove him to question the possibility of reconciling the existence of an omnipotent, beneficent and infinite creator in the face of the ‘evils’ in the world. But did he stop believing in a loving God altogether? It is hard to tell. So for the purpose of this study, I have avoided the thorny problem of making a decision about Bayle’s religious conviction and focused instead on what insight can be gained by Bayle’s response to the puzzle of ‘God and evil,’ examining some of the arguments that Bayle put forward in order to challenge all traditional positions on the problem and question the possibility of any kind of rational theodicy.105

Pierre Bayle: the Making of a ‘Pessimist’

Pierre Bayle was born on the 18th of November 1647, in one of these Protestant strongholds106, the remote small town of Le Carla (now Le Carla- Bayle), near the Spanish border south of Toulouse in the foothills of the Pyrenees, where his father, Jean Bayle, was a Protestant Minister. Bayle thus spent his youth in an atmosphere of increasing religious intolerance and insecurity. His formal schooling was delayed by his family’s poverty while his older brother Jacob was being trained for the Protestant ministry. It is known that Bayle was a voracious reader with an insatiable appetite for knowledge. At first he had access to his father’s books and a local school, then after


several disappointing months at a Huguenot academy, at the age of twenty-one, he went to Toulouse and entered a Jesuit college. While studying at the Jesuit school, after considering the arguments used by Catholics to persuade Protestants that they were in error, Bayle converted briefly to Catholicism, to the grief of his family. It was only a short-lived intellectual conversion however, and in 1670, seventeen months later, further examination led him to return to the Calvinist Protestant faith.\footnote{For an insightful interpretation of Bayle’s conversion, see Bost, 2006, pp.41-52; See also: Rex, 1965, pp.129-130.} As a result, Bayle had to flee France in 1670 for Protestant Geneva, never to see his family again, -indeed under the French law of the time, the punishment for a ‘relapsed heretic,’ especially for the son of a persecuted Calvinist minister, would have been either banishment or imprisonment. First in Geneva and then clandestinely in Rouen and Paris, Bayle worked as a tutor, before attaining the position of professor of philosophy at the Reformed academy of Sedan in Eastern France where he taught from November 1675 to its closing in 1681.\footnote{The three main sources I have relied upon for Bayle’s biography are: Bost, 2006; Labrousse, Elisabeth, \textit{Pierre Bayle, Tome I}, \textit{Du Pays de Foix à la Cité D’Erasme}, Martinus Nijhoff, La Haye, 1963 & Des Maizeaux, \textit{Vie de Mr. Bayle}, en tête de for la 5ème édition du Dictionnaire Historique et Critique, Amsterdam, 1740; for the Geneva period in Bayle’s life, see also: Rex, 1965, pp.125-152.}

One personal tragedy marked this period: on the 21\textsuperscript{st} of March 1675, Bayle’s mother Jeanne, died of tuberculosis\footnote{See « Lettre à Mademoiselle Baricave, A Rotterdam, le 28 D’octobre 1706» in : Bayle, Pierre, \textit{Oeuvres Diverses}, IV, avec une introduction par Elisabeth Labrousse, Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, Hildesheim, 1968, p.883.}. Bayle, who according to his admission was already a person of pessimistic temperament, was devastated by the news and dwelt on his mother’s death. In his letters to his father Jean and his two brothers, Joseph and Jacob, Bayle admitted that the promises held out by his religion, such as the faith in the resurrection of the dead, were of no consolation to him in this moment of sadness and bereavement. Due to his exile, Bayle found himself emotionally, psychologically, and physically isolated; not only was he unable to assist his much-loved mother in her last
moments, but he also had to grieve without the close support of a family. It is known that for Bayle, this is a period of deep introspection into the human condition and the common experience of our finitude, vulnerability, and inevitable encounter with death.\footnote{Labrousse, 1983, p.31; Rex, 1965, p.128; for Bayle’s correspondence in regard to his mother’s death, see: Bost, 2006, pp. 107-109.}

In July 1681, Louis XIV abolished the Sedan Academy. Bayle was well aware of the increasingly repressive policy of the French government against the Huguenots had anticipated this event. Indeed, Bayle would have witnessed Protestant ministers being incarcerated for any pretext and Protestants households being invaded regularly by intimidating \textit{dragonnades}, -for instance, during these raids, children were being abducted on the pretext that they wished to become Catholics. In Section 97 of \textit{Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet}, Bayle refers with irony to Louis XIV’s edict of 1681 \textit{“[...] that declares seven- year-old children capable of discerning that the Roman Church is in greater conformity with God’s revelation than the so-called Reformed Church. It is a point one will not speak of at all, if one is well advised.”}\footnote{Bayle, Pierre, \textit{Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet}, Translated with Notes and an Interpretive Essay by Robert C. Bartlett, State University of New York Press, 2000, p.125. See also: Bayle, Pierre, \textit{Nouvelles Lettres Critiques} VIII in: \textit{OD II}, p. 210 & Bost, 2006, pp.198-199.}

Bayle was appalled by this widespread form of child abuse, and was very critical of the attitudes of mind that assumed that seven-year-old children are possessors of beliefs that they are too young to have thought about. Moreover, Protestant hospitals, schools and colleges were closed and a great number of Protestant churches were destroyed. In the autumn of 1681, Bayle managed to flee to Holland where he settled in Rotterdam for the rest of his life.\footnote{Bayle, \textit{Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet}, 2000, p.13; for a detailed biography of this period of Bayle’s life, see: Bost, 2006, pp.13-154.}

\footnote{Bayrousse, 1983, p.31; Rex, 1965, p.128; for Bayle’s correspondence in regard to his mother’s death, see: Bost, 2006, pp. 107-109.}
Safe in Rotterdam, Bayle was soon appointed professor of philosophy and history in a newly founded institution, the *Ecole illustre*, established by the civic government. Moreover during the years 1684-7, Bayle learned a new trade, becoming a *gazetier litteraire* (literary journalist), editing and publishing for the scholarly journal of the time, the *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* (*News of the Republic of Letters*), one of the earliest intellectual periodicals to appear in Europe, whose pages contained reviews of a large number of recent books in diverse fields and provided a medium of communication and discussion for thinkers of different countries. In the *Dictionary*, Bayle will describe the *Republic of Letters* metaphorically as such: [this] “Common-Wealth of Learning” is “a State extremely free. The Empire of Truth and Reason is only acknowledged in it; and under their Protection an innocent War is waged against any one whatever [...] without asking leave of those who govern.” Indeed, the Republic of Letters provided a living model of coexistence, and even cooperation, in spite of and through disagreement, and contributed to the development of an autonomous realm of reason, independent of issues of faith. For Bayle, the *Republic* played an important role in his fight against injustice and the rights of conscience. The succession of contentious writings that came from Bayle in Rotterdam during that period brought him international renown and probably would have been banned anywhere but the Dutch Republic. Indeed, in the closing years of the seventeenth century, the Netherlands was the only country in Europe where genuine toleration of religious denominations outside the state church existed.115

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In the years 1684-5, Bayle’s two brothers and father, who had stayed in France, died. Joseph, the youngest, succumbed unexpectedly on the 9th of May 1684, a month before his 28th birthday, from a brief but fatal illness (most probably meningitis). Bayle was once again overcome with grief; his increasing pessimism, detachment from life, and Job-like resignation in regard to the ‘mysterious designs of Providence’ are displayed in two letters of sympathy addressed to his father:

“How difficult it is to lose the ones who are so dear to us and still had such beautiful expectation of life [...] If God would have kept him alive for our sake, he would surely have had to push himself to intervene. But it always comes down to the fact that God does not want us to be happy in this world. For me, I care so little about life at the moment, that to be honestly speaking from the mood I am in at this present time, I wish that fate had come unto me instead of my youngest brother.” [My translation and interpretation - for original French text, see App.B]

“ [...] the conclusion is that we both have good reasons to cry and grieve, but we have to try to do this as good Christians do, adoring and respecting the hand who punishes them. [My translation and interpretation - for original French text, see App.B]

In March 1685, Bayle’s father died at the age of 76. And Jacob, Bayle’s eldest brother, died in November 1685, at the age of 41 in the infamous prison of château Trompette, in Bordeaux, five months after being put under arrest by the Catholic authorities.

Indeed, as we recall, in 1685, only nine years before the birth of Voltaire, Louis XIV of France revoked the Edict de Nantes ending the hope of religious toleration in France for many generations to come and withdrawing virtually all the legal rights and remaining privileges guaranteed to Protestants by Henri IV. Once again, the Huguenots were subjected to increasingly more severe persecutions. As a result of these anti-protestant persecutions, Jacob Bayle, who had become a protestant minister as his father had, was arrested and held for months in very bad conditions for refusing to convert to Catholicism, -arrested the 10th of June 1685, he died the 12th of November

118 Pierre Bayle to Jean Bayle, 18 may 1684 (Correspondance, t.IV, p.120). Cited in Bost, 2006, p.226.
1685. It has been suggested that the French government had discovered that Pierre Bayle was the author of the Critique Générale de l'Histoire du Calvinisme de M. Maimbourg (1683) in which Bayle presented a most critical examination of the negative polemical account of the origins and development of Calvinism by a prominent French Jesuit writer. Since they could not reach him, his brother was arrested instead. In “The Life of Mr Bayle” by Mr Des Maizeaux writes:

“Upon the eight day of May, 1685, Mr Bayle was informed that his father died upon Saturday the 30th of the preceeding March. This was very afflicting news to him, but his grief was redoubled, when he heard that his elder brother was in prison upon account of religion. [...] They used all their efforts to make him change his religion, but neither their promises, their threats, nor their outrages, were capable to make him. He showed a constancy and steadfastness which astonished his persecutors, and praised God who had called him to suffer the truth. But the delicacy of his constitution could not bear such barbarous usage: he died the 12th of November, after five months imprisonment.”

The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, -and thus for Bayle, what he perceived as the triumph of injustice-, the sight of Huguenot refugees pouring in the Dutch Republic, the brutal circumstances of Jacob’s death together with the death of his close friend and protector Adrian Paets (ten days before the Revocation) profoundly disturbed Bayle’s already pessimistic outlook in life. Many scholars hold this to be the definitive moment in Bayle’s life where the problem of evil became a central issue. For instance, Labrousse suggests that Jacob’s death had taught Bayle “that so far as human beings can tell, virtue is not ‘rewarded’ in this life, and that those who lose their battles, although defamed by history, are not necessarily those whose cause is wrong.” There had been so much misfortune and suffering in Bayle’s world that the course of human lives and of human societies would have appeared at this point of his life, anything but

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119 For details regarding Jacob Bayle’s ordeal, see Labrousse, 1963, pp.198-200.
120 See: Letter from the lawyer François Janiçon to Bayle, 10 août 1685 (inédit) –cited in Bost, 2006, pp.281-282; See also: Des Maizeaux, Vie de Mr. Bayle, p.XXXIII.
121 “The Life of Mr Bayle” by Mr. Des Maizeaux, p.xxii, in: The Dictionary Historical and Critical of Mr Peter Bayle, Volume I, Routledge/Thoemmes Press, Great Britain, 1997. For the French version, see Vie de Mr. Bayle, par Monsieur Des Maizeaux, en tête de la 5ème édition du Dictionnaire Historique et Critique, Amsterdam, 1740, p.XXXII.1
122 For more details on the relation between Bayle and Paets, see: Bost, 2006, pp.275-276.
123 Labrousse, 1983, p.36.
providential. It is hard to imagine what it would have been like for Bayle to lose someone he loved and who loved him on the basis of religion. For Bayle, the ‘pessimist,’ it was clear that the world is bad, that more ‘evil’ than good exists, and that human beings are a source of ‘evil’ and corruption. In the Article “Manichees,” remark D, he states that the condition of humanity was one of misery as he viewed history as nothing more nor less than a collection of the crimes and misfortunes of the human race. 124

“Man is wicked and unhappy: everyone knows it by what he feels in himself, and by the intercourse he is obliged to have with his neighbours. He, who lives only five or six years (*), may be perfectly convinced of these two things; and they, who live long, and are much engaged in worldly affairs, know this still more clearly. Travel shows everywhere the monuments of men’s misfortunes and wickednesses: this appears everywhere by the many prisons, hospitals, gibbets, and beggars. Here you see the ruins of a flourishing city, elsewhere you cannot even find the ruins of it.125”

However it should be stressed that expression of his concern with the issue of ‘evil’ appears in his earlier work.126 For instance, we should take note that as early as 1680127, Bayle’s mind engaged to some degree with the ‘question of evil.’ First, in the Harangue de Mr. le Duc de Luxembourg à ses juges suivie de la censure de cette harangue128, a satirical apology wherein the defendant argues that he was capable, entirely by his own devices, and free of any infernal aid, of committing many ‘evil acts’ for which he had been accused of seeking the devil's assistance, Bayle imagined the most fanciful


125 (*) At that age he has played and suffered malicious tricks; he has had grief and sorrow, and has powdered many times. Dictionary Historical and Critical (Dictionnaire historique et critique), art. “Manichees”, rem. D.


127 We should take note that the earliest writing wherein Bayle posed the dilemma of ‘evil’ was: Objectiones in libros quatuor de deo, anima et male (1679).

128 I have consulted the reprint of Bayle’s Harangue de Mr. le Duc de Luxembourg à ses juges in: Bayle, Pierre, Oeuvres Diverses, I, avec une introduction par Elisabeth Labrousse, Elizabeth, Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, Hildesheim-NY, 1982.
reasons that the Maréchal de Luxembourg\textsuperscript{129} could have used in court to defend himself against the accusation that he had made a pact “avec le Diable (with the Devil).” In this virulent attack against forced conversions, superstition and persecution, Bayle sought to demonstrate how violent purges were often motivated by false beliefs in magic, and general superstition about witchcraft and sorcery.

This theme of the independence of ‘moral evil’ from supernatural causes, and Bayle’s attack on bloodshed arising out of belief in superstition is taken up again in 1682, in Lettre sur la Comète, (Letter on the Comet) followed the next year by a larger work on the same subject, Pensées diverses sur la Comète (Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet), which was occasioned by the unsettling stir caused by several comets that had appeared in the skies over western Europe in 1680-1. The passage of the comets seems to have been a pretext for Bayle to reflect on commonly held beliefs, -such as the deeply ingrained popular notion that comets are ill omens-, and to launch an attack on religious superstition and idolatry as worse enemies to religion than atheism. Bayle stressed that comets and eclipses alike are purely natural events fully in accord with the knowable laws of nature and as such are without moral significance. In Pensées diverses, Bayle sought to show that, for reasons of both physics and theology, celestial phenomena could not be miraculous warnings sent by God and were not the direct cause of misfortunes. And more generally, that God’s miraculous use of a comet was incompatible with the character of God’s providence, for God does not in fact punish all alike at the same time, though all alike see a comet at the same time; and that sensational phenomena such as comets and monsters and even sin, represented

\textsuperscript{129} François Henry de Montmorency-Bouteville, duc de Luxembourg – Maréchal de France (1628-1695) was implicated in “l’Affaire des Poisons” and jailed for a short time in the Bastille - see Bost, 2006, pp.142-143.
neither a failure of providence nor God’s particular will, but were instead the unintended result of the simple laws by which God rules the world.

“It is a matter of faith that the liberty of man is beyond the influences of the stars and that no physical quality necessarily leads it to what is evil. I conclude therefore that comets are not the cause of wars set ablaze in the world, since the plan to wage war, as well as the acts of hostility committed as a result, are all effects of the free will of man [...] for I cannot see how one can maintain that the atoms of a comet have the capacity to produce plague, famine, or some other alteration in our elements. My first reason proves it in an invincible manner. Let it be concluded, therefore, that comets are but a sign of evils to come."\(^{130}\)

Another part of Bayle’s theological reasoning was that if we assume that comets or eclipses were miraculous signs of God’s intention to warn ‘sinners’ of God’s wrath, then God would be responsible for an increase in idolatry in the world, thus be the willing author of a great ‘evil,’ -idolatry being the most deplorable of ‘sins’ (cf. the target of the very first two of the Ten Commandments - Exodus 20:3-6). Moreover, amongst Bayle’s most arresting ideas was the suggestion that morality was independent of religion\(^{131}\), that atheists could be more virtuous than Christians, who were guilty of many crimes, and thus that a decent society of atheists was possible in principle. Bayle wanted to show that the identification of atheists with moral viciousness was a groundless prejudice because he was convinced that the principles of morals are open to our reason even without knowledge of God, and thus that the morality necessary to sound political life did not require and was even harmed by the belief in a divinity.\(^{132}\)

“ [...] since experience shows us that those who believe in a paradise and a hell are capable of committing every sort of crime, it is evident that the inclination to act badly does not stem from the fact that one is ignorant of the existence of God and that it is not corrected by the knowledge one acquires of a God who punishes and rewards. [...] that the inclination to act

\(^{130}\) Bayle, Pierre, Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet, translated with Notes and an Interpretive Essay by Robert C. Bartlett, State University of New York Press, USA, 2000, Section 58, p.76.

\(^{131}\) For a contemporary approach to the question of whether religious people differ from atheists in their moral intuitions, see: Hauser, M., Moral Minds: How Nature Designed our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong, Ecco, NY, 2006.

badly comes from the ground of man’s nature and that is strengthened by the passions, which coming from the temperament as their source, are subsequently modified in many ways according to the various accidents of life. [...] that the inclination to pity, to sobriety, to good-natured conduct, and so forth, does not stem from the fact that one knows there to be a God [...] but from a certain disposition of the temperament, fortified by education, by personal interest, by the desire to be praised, by the instinct of reason, or by similar motives that are met with in an atheist as well as in other men. 133"

From a philosophical perspective, -and history contains numerous examples to suggest so-, it thus appears that the inclination to ‘do evil’ is no more connected to the ignorance of God than suffering is to the appearance of comets, or eclipses. Bayle clearly understood that in human society, what makes people behave well is not the love or fear of God, but chiefly the fear of one’s fellow citizens, society, -reputation being important (as for instance, there is benefit in acquiring a reputation for generosity and kindness)-, personality traits and natural inclinations, education, and the judgment and punishment of the law. By demonstrating that nothing inevitably connected Christian belief with individual conduct, Bayle was openly asserting the independence of ethics and religion.134

The ‘Existential’ and Theological Problem of Evil

After the terrible events of 1685, Bayle seems to have thrown himself into his work, writing a number of controversial pamphlets and treatises and becoming ever more outspoken as time passed. Briefly, from 1686 onwards Bayle wrote Ce que c’est que la France toute catholique sous le règne de Louis le Grand (1686) in which Bayle speaks against Catholic persecution of Calvinists in France and especially against the French Catholic clergy; followed by the famous Philosophical Commentary (1686-1688) in

favour of toleration (see above), the Réponse d’un nouveau converti à la lettre d’un réfugié (1688) and the Avis important aux réfugiés sur leur prochain retour en France (1689) which were seen as deeply anti-protestant especially by the prominent pastor Pierre Jurieu, -an authoritarian and dogmatic Calvinist theologian whom Bayle had first come into contact with at Sedan and who had become his mentor and colleague. In 1691, Bayle published the Cabale Chimérique in defense of himself against increasingly virulent attacks from Jurieu. Then, on 30th of October 1693, Bayle is dismissed from his academic post, most probably as a result of so many complicated ideological controversies. The Rotterdam publisher, Reinier Leers comes to his rescue with a pension which enabled Bayle to write his most lasting achievement, the four-volume Dictionnaire historique et critique (1697-1702). Bayle’s final publications are Réponse aux questions d’un provincial (1704), Continuation des Pensées diverses écrites à un Docteur de Sorbonne (1705), and his unfinished last work on the problem of evil, Entretiens de Maxime et de Thémiste where he critiqued Isaac Jacquelot, an adept of Malebranche’s response to the problem of evil (see Chapter3: “Leibniz and the Theodicy”). Bayle, whose health had never been robust, died on 28th of December 1706, probably of a heart attack precipitated by tuberculosis. A few hours before he died, Bayle wrote in a letter to a friend: “I die a Christian philosopher, convinced of and filled with God’s goodness and mercy.” So it seems that despite all the terrible realities Bayle lived through and which for him escaped all explanation and all justification, Bayle might have nevertheless kept his long-held commitment to the belief in the existence of a personal God’s whose primary attribute is goodness.

135 First published in 1697 1st edition; and then later expanded in the 1702, larger four-volume 2nd edition with clarifications five years later.
This relatively long parenthesis dedicated to Bayle’s biographical details especially up to 1685’s is, I believe, necessary to become attuned to the deep personal dimension of Bayle’s thought, and should help us to understand that the problem of evil was for Bayle, much more than just a theoretical issue. Bayle’s personal suffering and his own lived experience of the cruelty of religious persecution made the question of ‘evil’ actual for him. Moreover, any assessment of Bayle’s responses to the problem of evil can no more be divorced from his personal and spiritual struggle and the various controversies which motivated and inspired his work that it can be viewed in isolation from the historical and cultural milieu in which it emerged. As a Christian who believed God to be both good and all-powerful, the existence of ‘evil’ in God’s creation would have been for Bayle a deeply troubling issue. And although, Bayle did not argue in favor of the Calvinist doctrine of grace and hence accept Calvinist predestination\textsuperscript{137}, one cannot help wondering if the fact that Bayle who was a loyal member of the French-speaking Reformed Church, -thus casting his lot with ‘\textit{le petit troupeau des élus}’ (‘the little flock’ of the elects\textsuperscript{138})- he would have expected that in some way, he and his family and in extension the Huguenots, should have enjoyed better protection under God. Even though, it should be pointed out that in the Reformed theology of the period, the understanding was that present sufferings will receive their compensation and that God will make all things right in the end, -the “\textit{evils that lead [the faithful] to God.}\textsuperscript{139}” The understanding seems to have been that in the realm of the personal experience with God, testing had to give way to trusting. Indeed, it is written in the Gospel that tribulation, especially in the form of persecution can certainly have a weakening effect upon the faith of an individual and create doubts (e.g. Matthew


\textsuperscript{138} See Luke 12:32: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

\textsuperscript{139} Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet, Section 38, 2000, p.53.
13:21; Mark 4:17); but that tribulation itself has to be viewed as momentary and light in comparison with everlasting life to be received for the remaining faithful (e.g. Romans 5: 3-5; 8: 35-39; 12:12).\textsuperscript{140} Elisabeth Labrousse suggests that from the sacrifices that many Huguenots were prepared to make for their faith, -and Jacob Bayle’s sacrifice is a witness to that faith in a religion which is essentially concerning the individual and God-, they had to be psychologically convinced of their own salvation: “to be faithful to a religion which entailed such disadvantages was for them a clear sign of being in a state of grace. “Indeed,” writes Labrousse, “was it not written: Blessed are they that are persecuted...?”\textsuperscript{141} This is the paradox of Calvinism Bayle often talked about and lived through.

In the case of Pierre Bayle himself, it is known that in 1682, Bayle was still confident that God might intervene to save the Huguenots, his ‘faithful servants,’ from a terrible end. He had confined his worries and hopes in a letter to his father:

\begin{quote}
The news that we receive from France illustrate the tragedy of the most unfortunate Church on earth. I tremble with fear when I think that you are in the hands of a high judicial court that have always had a reputation for its brutalities against those of the ‘true Religion,’ and nothing can reassure me except for the trust that we should have in this invisible but almighty protection that God gives to his ‘faithful servants.’\textsuperscript{142} [My translation and interpretation - for the original French text, see App.C]"
\end{quote}

But by the time he wrote his last work \textit{Entretiens de Maxime et de Thémiste}, Bayle is so consciously aware of the harsh realities and injustice of life that the ways of God seem to have become completely inscrutable; real concerns and unease about God’s relationship to humanity are being expressed through the words of Maxine:

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\textsuperscript{141} Labrousse, 1983, p.5.
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“People have continued to be shocked by the fact that under the providence of a perfect God, the wicked prosper and the righteous are oppressed; but if I think correctly, what we should really wonder about is why no human being has ever been exempt of sin and suffering, when this same God only has to say the word, and immediately, humang beings would all turn into saints and be happy.143 [My translation and interpretation - for the original French text, see App.D]”

Apart from being confronted with the perplexing question of the distribution of suffering, -that is the practical fact that under the providence of the ‘almighty God,’ the wicked prosper while those who try to keep faith with God suffer-, much more puzzling questions have to be asked: why would a perfectly good God permit pain and so many other physical ‘evils,’ and allow human beings to commit sins at the first place, or in Bayle’s words: “How comes it that God being good, men are wicked?”

Throughout his writings, Bayle will review and refute the various customary answers to these questions, showing that none of them can do more in the end than say that God permits sin and other ‘evil’ for reasons we cannot understand. In the Historical and Critical Dictionary, Bayle carries out the exploration of these fraught questions. In the article “Paulicians,” remark E, Bayle quotes the classic formulation of Lactantius (AD 260-340) of the problem of evilderived from Epicurus (see “Introduction chapter”) and rejects the idea suggested by Lactantius that ‘evil’ is necessary and has a positive function in the process, such as the suggestion that “wisdom, virtue, and the knowledge of what is good” can only be developed within the context of a world containing naturally occurring pain and suffering.146 For Bayle, this is fallacious thinking as an omnipotent God could have created a world in which people always behave well and thus protected humankind from so much injustice and pain. There is certainly no contradiction involved in someone behaving well, or in a world where everything

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144 Dictionary Historical and Critical (Dictionnaire historique et critique), Art. “Paulicians.”
would be happy and blissful, as we just have to think of the idea we have of the
“happiness of Paradise.”\textsuperscript{147}

In the Dictionary article “Pyrrho,” Bayle writes:

“[…] I come now to morals. […] It is evident, that evil ought to be prevented, if it be possible, and that it is a sinful thing to permit it when it can be prevented. Nevertheless, our Theology shows us that this is false. It teaches us that God does nothing but what becomes his perfections, when he permits all the disorders that are in the world, and which he might easily have prevented.”\textsuperscript{148}

For Bayle, it is obvious than those who permit an ‘evil’ which is easy for them to prevent are culpable, -such as letting perish a person that one could easily save. Hence, how could a perfectly good God, -the fundamental divine attribute for Bayle being goodness-, have let the whole human race suffer and fall into crime and misery? God could easily have prevented the disobedience of Adam and Eve or at least stop the consequences of their fall. If we might be tempted to argue that God was obliged to permit ‘evil’ in order to respect the free will with which he had endowed Adam and his descendants, it is for Bayle a most foolish argument. For Bayle, the doctrine of ‘original sin’ is not subject to human reasoning. If we recall, according to this ancient doctrine derived from St Paul and developed by, among others, Augustine, Luther and Calvin, the whole human race is held to have inherited the consequences, even the guilt, of Adam’s primal sin (see “Introduction chapter”). For Bayle, it is not helpful to say that God permitted the first human beings to sin so as not to take away their freedom of choice, as (using what seems to be one of his favorite example): ‘Who would not blame a mother who, knowing that her daughters would be seduced at a ball, did not prevent them from going to the ball?’

\textsuperscript{148} Dictionary Historical and Critical (Dictionnaire historique et critique), Art. “Pyrrho,” rem. B (1.)
“There is no good mother who having given leave to her daughters to go to a ball, but would revoke that leave, if she were sure that they would yield to enticement, and leave their virginity behind them; and every mother, who knowing that this would certainly come to pass, should nevertheless suffer them to go to a ball, being contented with exhorting them to virtue, and threatening them with her disgrace, if they should not return maids, would, at least justly, bring upon herself the blame of neither loving her daughters, nor chastity. It would be in vain for her to say, in her own justification, that she had no mind to restrain the liberty of her daughters, nor to show any distrust of them: she would be answered that this management was very preposterous, [...] and that it had been better to keep her daughters in her sight, than to give them the privilege of liberty to such bad purposes, and to grant them such marks of her confidence. This discovers the rashness of those who assign for a reason the regard which, they say, God showed to the free will of the first man.”

A mother is in a sense the creator of her children. If we consider that this relationship gives her rights over the children, -here her daughters-, that others do not have, it is not nearly enough to justify her if she allows a ‘sin’ or ‘moral evil’ to take place (here: disobedience by being unchaste) which she knew full well would take place and could have prevented; and then further inflicts punishment upon them. Is she not responsible to some extent and guilty of their ‘sin’? Any parent concerned with the best interests of their children would arrange matters in such a way that they would never disobey. The permission of ‘evil’ which might be prevented indicates either indifference to its occurrence or a desire to ‘have it occur.’ It is impossible for a ‘good mother’ to act that way without being seen as outrageously unfair to the point of being malicious. Indeed, the other questionable theological point in the traditional model of ‘the Fall,’ is the dreadful way in which God reacted to the ‘first sin.’ If we recall that Adam and Eve were banished from the garden, sentenced to death; that from then on, all women were condemned to the vicious pains of childbirth, and that most of humanity would be eternally damned, it all seems like a harsh overreaction. By

149 Dictionary Historical and Critical (Dictionnaire historique et critique), Art. “Paulicians,” rem. E.  
150 For a similar argument, see also: Chapter CXLIV of the Réponse aux questions d’un provincial & for further details, see Chapter 3 of this present study: “Leibniz’s Theodicy.”
giving a parental analogy to this scene, Bayle cleverly manages to make his readers feel appalled at the possibility of such a severe, even cruel, parental reaction.\footnote{As we will see, Leibniz in the Theodicy (cf. Chapter 3) would respond to Bayle's analogy by suggesting that on moral grounds one cannot compare the reasons why a parent or friend might have had to permit evil, or even did things which would have facilitated it, with God's purposes in regard to a whole world: "in reference to God, there is no need to suppose or to establish particular reasons such as may have induced him to permit the evil; general reasons suffice. One knows that he takes care of the whole universe, whereof all the parts are connected; and one must thence infer that he has innumerable considerations whose result made him deem it inadvisable to prevent certain evils." In: Leibniz, Theodicy, Part One, section 32, 1990, p.93.}

But in an effort to escape some of the problems, the 'good mother' would argue that she would not want a robot for a child and that freedom is worth the price of misbehavior, -the assumption being that free will is an extremely valuable thing. That without it, we might be very acceptable automata, but we could not be good, rational creatures, and that is a much better thing to be. Indeed, the defender of free will's response is that for rational creatures, the ability to freely choose for God entails the ability to choose against 'Him' and doing 'evil' is the most important thing about us. For Bayle, this assessment is implausible. As their mother, she could have stopped her daughters without robbing them of their free will. And while freedom may be a good thing, there are exercises of free will which could not possibly be worth their cost in pain and suffering.\footnote{Stump, Eleonore and Kretzmann, Norman, "Being and Goodness," chapter 4 in: MacDonald, Scott,(Ed.), Being and Goodness: The Concept of the Good in Metaphysics and Philosophical Theology, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1991, p.125; Cooper, Terry, D., Dimensions of Evil – Contemporary Perspectives, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2007, p.91; Rogers, Katherin, A., Perfect Being Theology, Reason and Religion, Edinburgh University Press, Great Britain, 2000, p.83 & p.140.}

Moreover, for Bayle, it seems even more ridiculous to argue that God permitted human beings to sin in order to show 'His' goodness in redeeming humanity from sin as it is to imagine a father who would break the legs of his children in order to show his goodness in resetting the bones. If we recall, the 'evils' that were thought to follow from the 'original sin' were, in Christian theology, redeemed by Christ's incarnation
and sacrifice which provided, in compensation for death and suffering here, eternal life and happiness in the hereafter. Finally, it does not help to postulate a Devil as the author of sin to remove the responsibility from God, because the only alternative to saying that God is the author of the Devil and hence of sin, is to say that the Devil is co-eternal with God and thus to concede the dispute to the Manichaeans. In the whole, the biblical understanding of creation sowed the seeds for the perennial stumbling block of the problem of evil; if God is the ultimate cause of everything which exists, God might be held responsible for the good as well as the ‘evil’ in the world, thus for Adam’s first sin and the cause of his damnation. The problem became steadily more acute as Bayle explored and developed the implications of his faith and trust in the goodness of God in regard to his life experience of suffering. For Bayle, “[...] the manner of introducing evil, under the empire of a sovereign being, infinitely good, infinitely holy, and infinitely powerful, is not only inexplicable, but incomprehensible [...]” In the case of theodicy, Bayle denies that we can ever justify rationally the ways of God. Theodicy for Bayle is impossible.154

Indeed, Bayle’s position is that the consequences of a particular issue of faith must be amenable to reason, even if that particular view was not reached by means of reason; and hence, all articles of faith not compatible with reason must be rejected (or adjusted accordingly). As for Bayle, simply because something has long been believed, or because everyone believes it by no means signifies that there are adequate grounds for believing it to be true; philosophical reasoning is the only tool we have to separate

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truth from falsehood. Consequently, by its nature religious faith can never be based on reason.\textsuperscript{155}

**The Manichaean Hypothesis in the *Dictionnaire historique et critique***

Briefly, the *Dictionary* became the most widely held book in private French libraries in the eighteenth century, -what one might call a ‘philosophical best-seller.’ It is not a dictionary in the usual sense; it can probably be best described as a vast collection of articles on various persons and subjects ancient and modern, many of whom were little known; its discussion of religious, philosophical, historical and many other subjects are packed with references, dense notes, and digressions often much longer than the main text at the top of its pages. Its entries are alphabetically arranged, but approximately ninety-five percent of the work is to be found in the footnotes and the notes to the notes. Bayle’s monumental compilation (circa. nine million words) combined encyclopedic erudition, rigorous textual scholarship, corrosive criticism of various opinions and beliefs, much wit, and curious scandalous anecdotes that drew readers with highly diverse interests. And it is in the *Dictionary* that Bayle argues for the first time at length that a satisfactory resolution of the problem of evil through reason was impossible. For Bayle, Christian theologians could not reconcile God’s attributes of omnipotence, justice and benevolence with the fact of ‘evil’ in a world that God has created, -thus responsible for its conditions-, without exposing themselves to great difficulties, or in Bayle’s words: without finding themselves “very much entangled.”\textsuperscript{156}


For instance, in his presentation of the problem of evil in the articles on the “Manichees,” the “Marcionites,” and the “Paulicians” (as well as his subsequent clarifications on the “Paulicians’” and “Manichees’” articles), Bayle had made the controversial claim that the dualistic solutions to the problem of evil proposed by those sects that ascribed ‘evil’ to a rival power, because the simplest, or the best at explaining the facts of experience, was indeed the only true reasonable solution to the problem, but nonetheless fails on a priori level, - since on the basis of the Scriptures (that is the claims of Divine Revelation)-, there is only one almighty and beneficent God, or one single unifying principle\(^{157}\). In these articles, Bayle supported this position by showcasing the strengths and weaknesses of the Manichaeans and the orthodox solutions to the problem of evil, and conceded that on purely rational grounds, dualism was no less rational than theism. That if on a priori grounds dualism is the weaker, since a rival divinity is inconsistent with the perfection of God; on a posteriori grounds however, dualism has the upper hand, for the fact of ‘evil,’ which is undeniable, is no less inconsistent with divine perfection. In the beginning of the article “Manichees,” remark D, Bayle writes:

“The most certain and the clearest ideas of order teach us that a Being who exists by himself, who is necessary, who is eternal, must be one, infinite, all-powerful, and endowed with every kind of perfection. Thus, by consulting these ideas, one finds that there is nothing more absurd than the hypothesis of two principles, eternal independent of each other, one of which has no goodness and can stop the plans of the other. These are what I call the a priori arguments. They lead us necessarily to reject this hypothesis and to admit only one principle in all things. If this were all that was necessary to determine the goodness of a theory, the trial would be over, to the confusion of Zoroaster and all his followers. But every theory has need of two things in order to be considered a good one: first, its ideas must be distinct; and second, it must account for experience. It is necessary then to see if the phenomena of nature can be easily explained by the hypothesis of a single principle.\(^{158}\)”

\(^{158}\) Dictionary Historical and Critical (Dictionnaire historique et critique), Art. “Manichees,” rem. D.
In the ancient world, several traditions opted for dualism, the belief in two fundamental causal or divine principles that underlie the existence of the world. There are indeed many different kinds of dualism in the religions and philosophies of humanity and what they are offering essentially is a very simple solution devised by the human mind to account for the manifest imperfections of existence, and thus a way to reconcile the existence of a good Creator with the presence of ‘evil’ in the world, - i.e. “Dualism as a device serving theodicy." One of the best known is the radical (or absolute) dualism represented by Zoroastrianism (Iranian) which posits two coequal and coeternal absolutely independent principles both of them spiritual in nature, -a ‘good god’ and an ‘evil dark god,’ - who exist and act from eternity. This form of dualism views the entire history of the world as dominated by the conflict between these two opposite Spirits, until the ‘good Spirit’ with help of his adherents at the end of time carries off the victory. It is usually thought that the basis for Zoroastrian dualism was laid by the Iranian prophet Zarathustra (Zoroaster). Zarathustra’s revelation was that ‘evil’ is not an aspect of the good God but a complete separate principle, -Angra Mainyu or Ahriman being the personification of ‘evil’ or Destructive Spirit. Thus, by denying the unity and omnipotence of the creator god, -Spenta Manyu or Ohrmazd being the personification of goodness and light, the Beneficent Spirit-, Zarathustra could preserve his perfect goodness. According to the Zoroastrian myth, all things bright and beautiful came from Ohrmazd. He created the cosmos, matter, the first human couple and it was all good. It was only when Ahriman burst from the outer darkness where he was bound and laid hold on the beautiful cosmos that violence, darkness, lust and disorder entered the creation.

160 NB: How much goes back to Zoroaster himself is extremely difficult to determine and the date of Zoroaster is uncertain; it varied from c.1200BC to 550BC.
for the first time. The original human couple was given free choice and could choose whether to follow light or darkness. Initially they had chosen to love and serve Ohrmazd, but were eventually seduced by Ahriman. From then on, the human couple’s behaviour was driven by error and dark impulses, and strife, hatred, disease, poverty, and death intruded into a world which was until then entirely perfect. Nevertheless, in the fullness of time the ‘good Spirit’ would inevitably prevail over the ‘evil one.’\footnote{Couliano, 1990, pp.23-24; Jacobsen, T., “Dualism,” in: Eliade, Mircea, (Ed.), \textit{The Encyclopedia of Religion}, Volume 4, Macmillian Publishing Company, NY/London, 1987,pp.506-509; Rudolph,K., \textit{Gnosis, The Nature and History of an Ancient Religion}, T&T. Clark Limited, Edinburgh, 1977, pp.59-60; Ferguson, E., \textit{Backgrounds in Early Christianity}, Eerdmans Publishings, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 3\textsuperscript{rd} Edition, 2003, p.310; Bowker, 1970, pp.270-274; for a complete re-telling of the Zoroastrian myth, see for instance: Russell, 1988, pp.19-24.}

Another equally sophisticated system which proposed similarly dualistic solution was that of Mani and the Manichaeans. Bayle recognized that the real strength of the Manichaeans and of other early Christian heretics such as the Paulicians and Marcionites, was that on \textit{a posteriori} level, the proposition of dualism corresponded to experience, ‘evil’ and the facts of suffering being phenomena which are experienced in a direct and practical way. Bayle could appreciate that dualism was an extremely attractive way of understanding the experiences of suffering. It made sense to a lot of people especially because it picked up on the very clear sense that life is a struggle and gave a somehow adequate account of the two sides of experience: light and darkness, happiness and sorrow, pleasure and pain, human goodness and wickedness. However, on a priori level, dualism was ultimately misleading and the weaker solution, since a rival divinity was inconsistent with the perfection of God: as our clear and internally coherent ideas of order are what naturally leads one to think that any self-existent, necessary, and eternal being must also possess every possible perfection, -including, presumably, oneness, ultimate power and ultimate goodness. Hence, on purely
rational grounds, the dualistic position was no less rational than the orthodox one, as presumably, oneness, ultimate power and ultimate goodness.\textsuperscript{162} Hence, on purely rational grounds, the dualistic position was no less rational than the orthodox one, as dualism -while false- was the only rational conclusion to be drawn from the mixed character of human experience.\textsuperscript{163} In the “Manichees” article, remark D, Bayle writes:

“[...] let us observe that these two evils, the one moral and the other one physical, do not encompass all history or all private experience. Both moral good and physical good are found everywhere, some examples of virtue, some examples of happiness; and this is what causes the difficulty. For if all mankind were wicked and miserable, there would be no need to recourse to the hypothesis of two principles. It is the mixture of happiness and virtue with misery and vice that requires this hypothesis. It is in this that the strength of the sect of Zoroaster lies [...]”\textsuperscript{164}

And further in the “Paulicians” article, remark E:

“Who will not admire and deplore the fate of our reason? Behold that here the Manichaeans, with a completely absurd and contradictory hypothesis, explain experiences a hundred times better than do the orthodox, with their suppositions so just, so necessary, and so very true of an infinitely good and all-powerful first principle.”\textsuperscript{165}

Manichaeism was founded by Manes (or Mani) who was born and lived principally in Persia in the third century AD.\textsuperscript{166} Manichaeism had endured from the third century to at least the seventeenth, and eventually spread over an area stretching from North Africa to China (it was once a world religion). According to modern scholarship, Manichaeism seems to have been, in doctrinal terms, an amalgam of elements drawn from Persian Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Buddhism. Though its belief system is highly complex and is couched in allegory and symbols (highly complicated myth), its main tenets seem to have been held by Manicheans everywhere. The central

\textsuperscript{162} See also: Réponses aux questions d’un provincial, Pat. II, ch.CXLIV, in: OD, Vol. III, in which Bayle argues that reason teaches that one must believe in the excellence of God’s creations: “[...] la Raison [...] nous montre [...] que nous devons croire bien faire tout ce que Dieu fait.” – (« Reason [...] shows us [...] that we have to believe that every thing that God creates is good » [My translation]).


\textsuperscript{164} Dictionary Historical and Critical (Dictionnaire historique et critique), Art. Manichaeans, rem. D.

\textsuperscript{165} Dictionary Historical and Critical (Dictionnaire historique et critique), Art. Paulicians, rem. E.

question for Manichaeism was the question of ‘evil.’ It seemed self-evident that it could not come from a good principle, or God, since God would surely not have been able to create ‘evil things.’ If then ‘evil’ had to be separated from God. Manes sought to explain ‘evil’ by asserting the existence of two realms or kingdoms, the realm of light and the realm of darkness, and two coexistent but ontologically distinct Principles constantly at war in the universe: the ‘Good Principle’ (the Father of Greatness and Light) opposing the ‘Evil Principle’ (the king of Darkness). ‘Evil’ is thus seen as an eternal cosmic force, not the result of a fall. In brief, according to the Manichaean myth, the emergence of the visible world was precipitated by a primordial conflict between the two competing regions, and our universe was viewed as the setting for the struggle between ‘Good and Evil.’ This conflict gave rise to the present age, when Light first became intermingled with Darkness. Further, human souls are said to be fragments of light imprisoned in carnal matter, this latter expressing the original of ‘evil’ from which souls must try to free themselves.\footnote{167} Manichaeism has always been vigorously contested in the church as being contrary to Christian faith and biblical teaching, since for Christianity there is only one God, the God of the Christian revelation. Twentieth century discoveries have enlarged our knowledge of the religion, but at the time Bayle wrote the Dictionary, most of the understanding of the Manichaean doctrines came in fact from Augustine\footnote{168}, who was at one time a member of one of the lower order of Manichaeism (an ‘Auditor’), but who became disillusioned with its teachings and later opposed and condemned it as heresy since he saw it as an

\footnote{167}{For a complete re-telling of the Manichaean myth , see for instance: Torchia, Joseph, Creation ex nihilo and the Theology of St. Augustine – The Anti-Manichaean Polemic and Beyond, American University Studies, Peter Lang Publishing, 1999,pp.68-77.}
\footnote{168}{Before the twentieth century, the sources for our knowledge of the Manichaean religion consisted in reports found in the writings of its opponents, who included Christian writers such as Epiphanus, Hegemonius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Augustine, Severus of Antioch amongst others. The evidence provided by St. Augustine is particularly valuable because he had been a Manichaean for a number of years prior to his conversion to ecclesiastical Christianity. In: Pearson, 2007, pp.293-294}
attack on monotheism and a repudiation of the Bible. As a result he had to oppose it by affirming very strongly the goodness of the creation as well as of the Creator.169

According to Bayle too, dualism had to be rejected but it could be rejected only on the basis of the Sacred Scriptures, which clearly asserts both the perfection of God and the presence of ‘evil:’

“According to Scripture there is but one good principle, and yet moral and physical evil have been introduced among mankind: it is therefore not contrary to the nature of a good principle, to permit the introduction of moral evil, and to punish crimes.”170

For Bayle, there is no solution to the problem of evil, rather, we must take up an attitude of acceptance in the face of this mystery, and indeed, in the face of all religious mysteries; in this, faith alone is the source of certainty. Bayle, in the powerful discussion of dualism in the Dictionary denied that any theodicy was possible, that is to say, any theory that would explain rationally how God’s oneness, omnipotence, justice and goodness could be reconciled with all of the ‘evil,’ suffering and turmoil the world exhibits. Bayle argues that there can be no way of demonstrating rationally that the all-powerful Creator should not be held responsible for the ‘evils’ that blemish ‘His’ creation. So that believers have to accept God as a single unifying Principle who is all good, omnipotent and omniscient, just as they have to accept, as a fact of experience, that human beings are wicked and that ‘evil’ is everywhere. For Bayle, there is a sharp distinction between the realms of reason and of faith.

“[...] that there are unsearchable depths of the sovereignty of the Creator in which our reason is swallowed up, and nothing but faith can support us. This is in reality our resource. Revelation is the only magazine of the arguments, with which we must to oppose these people [that is, all dualistic sects]: it is by this means only, that we are able to refute the pretended eternity of an ill principle.”171

If we accept Bayle’s Calvinist conviction at face value, it is very probable that by proposing the hypothesis of Manichaeism as an answer to the problem of evil, Bayle was not trying to undermine Christianity as such but the coherence of Christian theology and pretention to any kind of theodicy, -as in the area of religion, human reason is unable to solve its own objections. If we had to find an explanation, dualism was the most rationally satisfying explanation of ‘evil’ on offer as it explains the misery of human existence, and somehow manages to reconcile the belief in the existence of a good God with the presence of ‘evil’ or imperfection in the cosmos. The irony here (intentional or not?) was for Bayle to profess that the Manichaeans, with their fanciful creation-myth, provided a more rational approach to ‘evil’ than the Christian had managed themselves. Indeed the Manichaean cosmogony, which relies so heavily upon complex symbolism and fantastic imagery rather than empirical investigation and the accumulation and analysis of observable data, is far from being a rational approach to ‘truth.’

Chapter 3: Leibniz’s *Theodicy*

“[…] one cannot deny that there is in the world physical evil (that is, suffering) and moral evil (that is, crime) and even that physical evil is not always distributed here on earth according to the proportion of moral evil, as it seems that justice demands. There remains, then, this question of natural theology, how a sole Principle, all-good, all-wise and all-powerful, has been able to admit evil, and especially to permit sin, and how it could resolve to make the wicked often happy and the good unhappy?173”


**A response to ‘M.Bayle’s difficulties’ on the subject of ‘evil’**

In the first decade of the eighteenth century, the philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716)176 is one amongst those philosophers who took on the challenge to try to “reconcile reason with faith in regard to the existence of evil175” and find a positive solution to the problem of evil which would be suitable for an age of rationalism, -the central concerns being the defense of divine justice and God’s lack of culpability in the existence of ‘evil.’ Even though his approach to religion departed from traditional biblical faith and Christian dogmas176, Leibniz seems to have been committed to maintaining a harmony between the conclusions of philosophical reasoning and what he saw as the core beliefs of Christianity, -such as the existence of a Supreme Being, the immortality of the soul, and the obligation of moral conduct.

According to modern scholarship, one of the reasons for Leibniz’s concern with God

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174 As a point of reference, “The peace of Westphalia, which puts an end to the 30 years war in Europe is signed in 1648, two years after Leibniz’s birth. The peace of Utrecht, which puts an end to the 14-years long Spanish succession war is signed in 1714, two years before Leibniz’s death.” See: Dascal, 2006, p.xxii.
176 For instance, Leibniz strongly rejected the Augustinian doctrine that all humanity was involved in the damnation brought about by the sin of Adam, and he questioned seriously the doctrine by which the sin of one man condemned another and an elected few were predestined to salvation, in: Brooks, 1964, p.14 & p.28; see also: Kremer, Elmar, J., “Leibniz and the ‘Disciples of Saint Augustine’ on the Fate of Infants Who Die Unbaptized,” Chapter 8, in: Kremer & Latzer, 2001.
and ‘evil’ was rooted in his ambition to reconcile the scientific advances of his day with
the Judeo-Christian heritage of Western civilization. Leibniz was confident that through
the use of human reason, he could offer a coherent understanding of the world in
which we live and of humanity’s place in it, thus provide an adequate, even though in
some way incomplete explanation to the dilemma posed by the presence of ‘evil’ in
the world, -as Leibniz himself recognizes that it is a much too difficult task to show the
origin of ‘evil’ “in detail.”

Throughout his philosophical career, Leibniz is said to have been very preoccupied,
even anguished with the ancient problem. Indeed, as early as 1669-71, Leibniz had
already written a ‘meditation’ on the freedom of human beings and on God’s
foreknowledge and grace; and one of the most important writing of his youth, the
Confessio Philosophi (1672-73), was a sort of “proto-theodicy.” In 1710, Leibniz offers
his fullest discussion of this issue in his Essais de Théodicée sur la Bonté de Dieu, la
Liberté de l’Homme et l’Origine du Mal (Theodicy – on the Goodness of God, the
Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil), -the only book-length philosophical work to be
published in his life-time which will be the main focus of this study. The Essais de
Théodicée were in part provoked by his ongoing dialogue with Pierre Bayle, -especially
as an answer to Bayle’s ‘Manichaean hypothesis’ and claim that rational theodicy was
impossible, and as a result of his discussions of Bayle’s ideas with Sophie Charlotte,

178 I owe this information to both Barber and Antognazza: For more details, see Barber, 1955, p.73 &. Antognazza, Maria, Rosa,
Leibniz – An Intellectual Biography, Cambridge University Press, USA, 2009, p.480. Moreover, in the “Preface” of the Theodicy,
Leibniz also tells us that he discussed the cluster of problems surrounding the issue of ‘evil’ with Arnauld in Paris. For more details,
see Barber, 1955, p.73.
179 Especially to the second edition of Bayle’s Dictionnaire Historique et Critique, Rotterdam Reinier Leers, 1702, Article: “Rorarius,”
Rem. H & the publication in 1704 of the first volume of his collected works: Response to the questions of a Provincial. See Leibniz,
the Queen of Prussia and her entourage.\textsuperscript{180} In the \textit{Reply to Mr. Le Clerc on behalf of Mr. Bayle}, we can read the following:

“Mr. Bayle’s doctrine (which is here in question) can be reduced to the following three propositions: Natural light and Revelation teach us clearly that there is one Principle of all things and that this Principle is infinitely perfect. The way to reconcile the moral and physical human evil with all the attributes of this one and only infinitely perfect Principle of all things surpasses philosophical lights; so that the Manicheans’ objections leave open difficulties that are irresolvable by human reason. In spite of that, it is necessary to firmly believe that which natural light and revelation teach us about the unity and infinite perfection of God, just as we believe by faith and by our submission to divine authority in the mysteries of trinity, incarnation, etc.\textsuperscript{181}”

Leibniz had great admiration for Bayle who he described as “one of the most gifted men of our time, whose eloquence was as great as his acumen and who gave great proofs of his vast erudition\textsuperscript{182}” and believed that on the subject of ‘evil,’ Bayle had called to attention “all the difficulties\textsuperscript{183}.” Indeed, in Chapter CXLIV of the \textit{Réponse aux questions d’un provincial} (1704), Bayle had given his conclusion to the problem of evil and stated that the theological doctrine of the origin of ‘evil’ was in disaccord with philosophical affirmations concerning the problem. Bayle was asking again why an all-wise and perfect God would grant human beings free will to pursue ‘evil.’ Bayle’s conclusion to the whole issue was that the human mind cannot comprehend the problem of evil, and should not seek rational explanations for the nature of Providence, or the question of free will. Thus human beings have to accept the situation on faith and rest assured.

\textsuperscript{180} As Leibniz recounted later on, it was during these informal conversations with Sophie Charlotte and her entourage which returned repeatedly to Bayle’s work during the summer 1702, that bits and pieces of the \textit{Essais de Théodicée} took shape. See: Antognazza, 2009, pp.420-421.; Leibniz, “Preface” in: \textit{Theodicy}, 1990, p.63.


\textsuperscript{183} Id.
In Chapter CXLIV, Bayle had reduced the theological doctrine of the origin of ‘evil’ to seven propositions and then had countered all of these propositions with a series of philosophical statements equally true but seemingly contradictory. In brief, firstly, God is eternal and necessary, infinitely good, holy, wise and powerful; and ‘His’ glory can never increase nor decrease. Secondly, God created ‘His’ creatures on ‘His’ own free will, and chose among an infinite number of beings those ‘He’ wished, leaving all the others uncreated. Third, God created man and woman, and gave them free will. They thus had the power to obey ‘Him,’ but ‘He’ threatened them with death if they disobeyed to the order ‘He’ gave them to abstain from a certain fruit. Fourth, they disobeyed and were condemned with all their posterity to the miseries of this life. Fifth, it has pleased God in ‘His’ infinite mercy to excuse a small number from condemnation, nonetheless exposing this small number during life to corruption and misery, while preserving for them eternal bliss in Paradise. Sixth, God has foreseen, foreknown and foreordained all future actions and all future events and circumstances in full detail. And seventh, God offers pardon to those who will not accept it and condemns severely for not accepting it.

Then Bayle had countered these propositions with a series of nineteen ‘Maximes philosophiques’ and asked his readers to consider which of these were actually in agreement with theological doctrine. In “Optimism and the problem of evil,” Ira Wade summarized Bayle’s ‘Maximes’ as follows: God is determined in all his actions by infinite goodness, -this includes creating the world. All the qualities of knowledge, skill, power, and grandeur present in God’s creation are destined for the happiness of intelligent creatures. If God gave free will to human beings, it was to provide them a means of becoming happy; otherwise, ‘He’ would take away free will. Giving a means
of becoming unhappy is equivalent to making them unhappy. A real benefactor gives promptly and never waits for a succession of misfortunes before according a favor. A master acquires the greatest glory by maintaining order, virtue, peace, and peace of mind. If God permits vice as well as virtue, God’s love of virtue is certainly not infinite; for if vice is hateful, it should have been crushed in the beginning of things. A master concerned with the best interests of his subjects would arrange matters in such a way that they would never disobey. The permission of ‘evil’ which might be prevented indicates either indifference to its occurrence or a desire to have it happen.184 ‘Evil’ is only excusable when a greater ‘evil’ is avoided. Disorder is definitely a defect. God is all-powerful and if ‘He’ permits ‘evil’, it is not because ‘He’ could not prevent it. Responsibility for disasters resulting from moral or physical causes lies with the Supreme Being who is the center of all causes. When a people rebel and is disobedient, pardon, when given, should not be limited to a very small percentage of the group. Finally, Bayle adds cryptically, a physician who gives a medicine that he knows his patient will not take may be suspected of not wishing to effect a cure.185 Here Bayle might be referring to the argument he had made in the article “Paulicians” that God could have given Adam the grace not to sin, and still respected his free will. Adam would still have been a finite creature, with a potential for freedom to choose sin, but this freedom could have remained unrealized; perhaps the punishment of death would have been avoided?186

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184 See previous chapter of this study: Bayle’s parental analogy of the mother letting her daughters go to the ball knowing full well they will be unchaste and then, punishing them for a ‘sin’ she could have prevented.
186 Labrousse, 1983, p.64.
Leibniz purposed to submit his detailed response to the problem of evil to “the scrutiny of M. Bayle”\(^{187}\) and opposed Bayle’s demonstration of all the difficulties regarding the original of ‘evil’ but, unfortunately Bayle died four years before the publication of Leibniz’s *Theodicy*, ending abruptly the ongoing dialogue between these two great thinkers.

“Now when preparing to justify my system in face of the new difficulties of M. Bayle, I purposed at the same time to communicate to him the ideas which I had had for some time already, on the difficulties put forward by him in opposition to those who endeavour to reconcile reason with faith in regard to the existence of evil. Indeed, there are perhaps few persons who have toiled more than I in this matter. […]\(^{188}\)”

Leibniz’s belief that the problem of evil could lead to a major crisis for religion seems to have been the main impetus for writing and publishing the *Theodicy*, as for Leibniz the presence of ‘evil’ in the world, -particularly seemingly pointless suffering-, was persistently raising doubts about God’s nature. As we recall, Bayle had questioned either God’s omnipotence or God’s wisdom and goodness. Leibniz seems to have been concerned that the dilemma posed by the problem of evil was creating a dangerous schism between God’s absolute moral goodness and God’s infinite power, requiring God to give up either one of ‘His’ attributes, and consequently renounce the divine nature itself. Indeed, although faith is meant to be a personal trust in God, that trust seems to be based on a number of important beliefs about what God is like which supposes that a ‘greater being is inconceivable’\(^{189}\)and that complete submission to God’s will is justified since an omnipotent God cannot make mistakes. Indeed, a ‘being’ of limited power would not be the God of most believers; it would not be a fitting object of worship. And if God is said to lack perfect goodness, -as a god of limited

\(^{189}\) See Anselm’s definition of God as ‘that than which a greater cannot be conceived’ (Anselm’s ontological argument).
goodness might be unwilling to prevent ‘evil’-, belief in the orthodox Christian God must be abandoned and with it typical religious attitudes, such as unrestricted love, total trust and genuine devotion could be excluded as unjustified.190

Leibniz thus felt the necessity to find a sound theological and philosophical solution to the problem of evil for humankind to keep their confidence in God and God’s purposes which was, in Leibniz’s view, the most valuable stabilizing influence of religion in the life of the believer and the source of human virtue and happiness, -the object of faith being to preserve the moral life.

“There are diverse persons who [....] ill understand the goodness and the justice of the Sovereign of the universe; they imagine a God who deserves neither to be imitated nor to be loved. This indeed seemed to me dangerous in its effect, since it is of serious moment that the very source of piety should be preserved from infection.”191

Leibniz was also eager to remove the idea of the possibility of an arbitrary and despotic God, of a tyrant who acts by caprice (such as the God of Luther and Calvin) so he could preserve the notion of a benevolent, wise and compassionate God. How could anyone love a God who seems to dispense ‘goods and evils’ in an arbitrary way, damns and saves without any understanding reason? Especially if we consider Leibniz’s Lutheran background, the issues of grace and election emerged as stumbling blocks in regard to the justice and goodness of God. As for Leibniz, the recognition of God’s perfections and human beings’ consequent love and devotion for ‘Him’ depended on their recognition of God as a just creator. It was from this knowledge that would spring humanity’s love for God, and from that love, piety (understood in terms of rational and social actions, or ‘beneficent activities’): “One cannot love God without knowing his

perfections, and this knowledge contains the principles of true piety.\textsuperscript{192} Indeed, in Leibniz’s account of the moral life, morality demanded that one should do ‘good’ to others, and act as to promote the welfare of others as an end in itself. For Leibniz, it was only by benefiting others that one would also secures one’s own good and achieve some pleasure for oneself. Here the idea is that the good that is sought for its own sake is something that leads to an increase in perfection, and hence gives pleasure to the one’s inner-spirit. In brief, for Leibniz, the attainment of the highest human happiness begins with the knowledge that God exercises justice in the creation and government of the world and the imitation of that justice in our dealings with others.

“[… ] there is nothing so agreeable as loving that which is worthy of love. Love is that mental state which makes us take pleasure in the perfections of the object of our love, and there is nothing more perfect than God, nor any greater delight than in him. […] It follows manifestly that true piety and even true felicity consist in the love of God, but a love so enlightened that its fervor is attended by insight. This kind of love begets that pleasure in good actions which gives relief to virtue, and, relating all to God as to the centre, transports the human to the divine. For in doing one’s duty, in obeying reason, one carries out the order of Supreme Reason. One directs all one’s intentions to the common good which is no other than the glory of God. Thus one finds that there is no greater individual interest than to espouse that of the community, and one gains satisfaction for oneself by taking pleasure in the acquisition of true benefits for men.\textsuperscript{193}

However, as the \textit{Theodicy}’s subtitle implies, in the \textit{Essays} Leibniz also sets himself the broader task of reconciling freedom with necessity. In the preface of the work, he declares his intention to examine one of the two ‘famous labyrinths’ where human reason often goes astray. This first labyrinth is the “\textit{great question of the Free and the Necessary, above all in the production and the origin of Evil}.\textsuperscript{194} Leibniz was concerned with showing how the pre-ordained course of events that God chose to create is compatible with human freedom, especially in regard to ‘evil’ -as he strongly felt that


the possibility of deliberate voluntary action was necessary for moral theory, “the freedom of the will, so essential to the morality of action.” The ‘puzzle’ being that human freedom seems incompatible with the idea of a determined future; but nonetheless God in his omniscience is said to know the future and shape it, -as nothing exists without God willing it. Moreover, apart even from God the chain of cause and effect is always complete and unbroken. Thus people’s actions seem to be forced upon them, and hence human beings cannot be hold morally responsible, -which destroys all justice, humane and divine. In the Theodicy Essays, Leibniz also concentrated on specific problems in connection to the issue of ‘evil’ arising from the various Christian doctrines in regard to divine providence, damnation, salvation, grace and predestination, and the consequences of original sin.

Leibniz addressed the other ‘labyrinth’ in his famous discussion of mathematical and metaphysical aspects of continuity and of the “indivisibles which appear to be the elements thereof.” That labyrinth, he remarks in the preface to the Theodicy, exercises only philosophers whereas the labyrinth of freedom, necessity and ‘evil’ “perplexes almost all the human race.”

However, for the purpose of this chapter I will be mainly concentrating on Leibniz’s project of theodicy, his treatment of the question of God’s justice in regard to ‘evil’ as it is expressed in the creation of the ‘best of all possible worlds theory,’ and his adoption of the ‘consider the perfection of the whole’ approach to the dilemma of ‘evil.’ Bayle’s Manichaean argument convinced Leibniz that a systematic and rational solution of the problem of evil was urgently necessary. For Leibniz, the problem of evil seems to revolve around the following question: has God created the metophysically

best of all possible worlds? If so, then God is morally good, regardless of the amount of ‘moral’ and ‘physical evil’ in the world. If not, we will have to accept that God is ‘evil.’

“I hold [...] that one can reconcile the evil, or the less good, in some parts with the best in the whole. If the Dualists demanded that God should do the best, they would not be demanding too much. They are mistaken rather in claiming that the best in the whole should be free from evil in the parts, and that therefore what God has made is not the best.”¹⁹⁷

Leibniz’s argument being that God’s goodness and justice can be justified logically before the ‘evil’ of the world in light of a certain understanding of how God created the world: the omnipotent and rational God created the best of all possible worlds, hence even ‘evil’ and suffering have their rightful place in a good order; however as finite beings, we are not capable of understanding the goodness of the totality, we can know neither all of the ‘evil’ which will ever occur nor all of the world’s good which might justify it. Ultimately, it probably can be suggested that Leibniz’s attitude was one of faith in the goodness, wisdom and justice of God, and of belief that all actual ‘evil’ can be justified only if it is a necessary means to greater good, thus that there is no contradiction in asserting that an individual ‘evil’ or ‘the less good, in some parts’ may be connected with what is best on the whole.¹⁹⁸

“[...] about the year 1673, wherein already I laid it down that God, having chosen the most perfect of all possible worlds, had been prompted by his wisdom to permit the evil which was bound up with it, but which still did not prevent this world from being, all things considered, the best that could be chosen.”¹⁹⁹

Leibniz’s project of theodicy

“[…] concerning the origin of evil in its relation to God, I offer a vindication of his perfections that shall extol not less his holiness, his justice and his goodness than his greatness, his power and his independence. I show how it is possible for everything to depend upon God, for him to co-operate in all the actions of creatures, even, if you will, to create these creatures continually, and nevertheless not to be the author of sin. Here also it is demonstrated how the privative nature of evil should be understood. Much more than that, I explain how evil has a source other than the will of God, and that one is right therefore to say of moral evil that God wills it not, but simply permits it. Most important of all, however, I show that it has been possible for God to permit sin and misery, and even to co-operate therein and promote it, without detriment to his holiness and his supreme goodness: although, generally speaking, he could have avoided all these evils.”

Firstly, Leibniz’s discussion of the theodicy-question is premised on an understanding of ‘God’ framed by the principles of seventeenth- and eighteenth- century philosophical theism. It postulates God as essentially omnipotent, omniscient, benevolent and perfectly free; and it assumes only one entity who is the First Cause, the necessary and eternal Being in which the contingent and temporal order has its origin.

“This intelligent cause ought to be infinite in all ways and absolutely perfect in power, in wisdom and in goodness, since it relates to all that which is possible. Furthermore, since all is connected together, there is no ground for admitting more than one. Its understanding is the source of essences, and its will is the origin of existences.”

Second, Leibniz believed that the existence of God can be rationally established apart from ‘evil,’ thus problems about ‘God and evil’ are not for him problems about God’s existence, but rather problems of how to account for ‘evil’ since an omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent God exists. In other words, for Leibniz, a genuine theodicy had to consist of a set of true propositions, capable of showing the ultimate

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201 Leibniz, Theodicy, Part One, section 7, 1990, pp. 127-128.
consistency of the existence of God and ‘evil’ without sacrificing the attributes of God as classically defined. Because, in Leibniz’s view, even though we can assume that God did not actually cooperate in bringing about ‘evil,’ the fact that God permitted it in spite of ‘His’ goodness, omnipotence and perfect prevision could still bring doubts about God’s nature and disturbs the mind of the believer. If we were to attribute ‘evil’ to God himself, how would Leibniz’s Christian God differ from the ‘evil Principle’ of the Manichaeans, and what a contradiction this would be in the theist conception of God as embodying the ‘good Principle.’

Leibniz kept his grounding in the Scriptural tradition. For Leibniz, the basic presupposition that was rooted in the teaching of Genesis was that, if God is the supreme Creator of all things, then everything which God creates is fundamentally good (Genesis 1: 1-31). Accordingly, this affirmation carried with it an extremely positive vision of reality; for Leibniz, the ‘optimist,’ the world is not bad, and more good than ‘evil’ exists whereas if we recall, for Bayle, the ‘pessimist,’ the world is bad, and ‘evil’ is much more prevalent than good. Leibniz’s main challenge was then to explain the origin of ‘evil’ outside of God’s will and the possibility of God permitting ‘evil’ and even cooperating in its commission without diminishing God’s supreme goodness.

“Even though there were no co-operation by God in evil actions, one could not help finding difficulty in the fact that he foresees them and that, being able to prevent them through his omnipotence, he yet permits them.”

Leibniz was, it seems, very eager to prove God’s existence by using all means available utilizing the ontological argument, the cosmological argument, the argument from eternal truths, and the argument from design (or teleological argument) but offering

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his own versions of these four traditional arguments. In brief, according to the ontological argument, God’s existence follows *a priori* from his definition as an absolutely perfect Being. Since existence is more perfect than non-existence, the very idea of God entails that ‘He’ exists. The cosmological argument, on the other hand, begins with the fact that something exists and derives the existence of God via a causal principle. Leibniz claimed that if the existence of contingent beings is possible (as is obvious as they actually exist) the existence of a necessary God must also be possible, since it is only through the action of such a deity that the existence of contingent things could be explained in accordance with the ‘Principle of Sufficient Reason.’ The ‘Principle of Sufficient Reason’ being one of the methodological assumptions which governed Leibniz’s reflections; this principle serves to assure him that whatever is not ruled out as a contradiction can only come to pass provided there is a reason why it should be and not otherwise. So, for Leibniz, God exists by logical necessity, for God’s nature is such that it is impossible for God not to exist, and as we will see, God always operates according to the Principle of Sufficient Reason in whatever ‘He’ does.

Leibniz’s third argument for God’s existence is the argument from eternal truths which asserts that since there are necessary truths known *a priori*, they must exist “*in an absolutely or metaphysically necessary subject, that is, in God*” In short, according to this argument, minds are understood as the regions in which truth dwells; but logical and mathematical truths are prior to human minds, so they must be located in an eternal divine mind. Finally, the argument from design claims that the degree of organization and order in the universe implies the existence of a divine being who designed things. Leibniz gives the argument a further slant with his metaphysical

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theory of substances by purporting to show that the world consists of an infinite number of ‘simple substances’ (‘perceptive/dynamic particle-things’), -which Leibniz liked to call ‘Monads’-, which are perfectly coordinated with one another yet are utterly incapable of interaction; each monad containing within itself a representation of the whole universe from a distinct, or particular point of view. This infinite coordination, and the appearance of interaction to which it gives rise, involve a ‘Pre-established Harmony’ that only God could have produced. Indeed, Leibniz thought that matter was infinitely divisible and therefore could not form the ultimate fabric of the world. Logically the ultimate fabric of reality had to be ‘something’ which is self-contained, autonomous, spontaneous and indivisible.207 I will be discussing Leibniz’s notion of substance and his theory of a ‘perfect world’ in more details later on in this chapter.

So once it has been established that God necessarily exists, and that of necessity is omnipotent, omniscient, and of his very nature is a perfectly good rational being, it is thus reasonable to believe that at the moment of creation, God, “bound by a moral necessity, to make things in such a manner that there can be nothing better”208, deliberately chose to create this actual world even though it includes ‘evil,’ simply because it is the best out of an infinite number of contingent possible worlds. As God always operates according to the ‘Principle of Sufficient Reason’ in whatever ‘He’ does, God would not have created this world without a sufficient reason for doing so. In


Leibniz’s very way of thinking, the world must be ‘reasonable,’ that is everything must have a reason, and even God must participate in this chains of reasons. The ‘Principle of Sufficient Reason’ is what ties everything together in a chain of necessity which ultimately begins with God and include even all those things we call ‘evil’ too. In Leibniz’s view, the scope of divine knowledge is infinite, its range comprehend the “infinity of possible,” which is the actual world that God created but also the infinite number of possible worlds that might have been brought into existence had God so willed.

In other words, all the possibilities already existed before God made any decision about which one to actualize, -the actual world itself standing among these possible worlds prior to its creation. God created the actual world as an expression of God’s infinite goodness (as a kind of ‘moral necessity’), and to do so God’s divine knowledge (not different, it seems in Leibniz’s understanding, from the divine wisdom) surveys the infinite field of possible worlds in order to choose the best and will it into reality. Further, the necessity which obliged God to choose the best world was a moral, not a metaphysical necessity; God was determined not by a lack of power, but by the infinity of his goodness. Thus Leibniz can claim that God created the world freely as it is the highest liberty to act perfectly according to sovereign reason.

“One may say”, as Leibniz does, “that as soon as God has decreed to create something there is a struggle between all the possibles, all of them laying claim to existence, and that those which, being united, produce most reality, most perfection, most significance carry the day. It is true that this struggle can only be ideal, that is to say, it can only be a conflict of reasons in the most perfect understanding which cannot fail to act in the most perfect way, and consequently to choose the best.”

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Since God’s actions are free, and motivated only by supreme wisdom and a desire for the best (as God always acts for the best -‘Principle of the Best’), if no one possible world had been better than all the others, God could not have created any world at all. Further, exercising his omniscience, God will be sure to have identified that best correctly, and in virtue of his omnipotence will have it realized it perfectly. For Leibniz, ‘Sufficient Reason’ seconded by the ‘Principle of the Best’ brings us to acknowledge that the actual world around us has the configuration that it does because it was selected by God from among the alternatives that presented themselves on account of its being the very best of the various possibilities that there were. Moreover, according to Leibniz, the power of God is always subordinated to ‘His’ wisdom. And God’s absolute independence and freedom do not imply that God could decide and act without considering any law or rule. For instance, the rational God cannot decree that 1+1=3, nor can the good God perform ‘evil’ actions. Even though God can do whatever God wills, God can only will that which is in accordance with the divine nature. God always acts according to wisdom, goodness and justice, never in an arbitrary manners, even if we are unable to understand all the reasons of ‘His’ Providence.

Leibniz’s basic position is outlined in paragraphs 8 and 9 of the Theodicy (and in a number of other passages):

“No, this supreme wisdom, united to a goodness that is not less infinite, cannot but have chosen the best. For as a lesser evil is a kind of good, even so a lesser good is a kind of evil if it stands in the way of a greater good; and there would be something to correct in the actions of God if it were possible to do better. As in mathematics, when there is no maximum nor minimum, in short nothing distinguished, everything is done equally, or when that is not possible nothing at all is done: so it may be said likewise in respect of perfect wisdom, which is no less orderly than mathematics, that if there were not the best (optimum) among all possible worlds, God would have not produced any. I call ‘World’ the whole succession and the whole agglomeration of all existent things, lest it be said that several worlds could have existed in different times and different places. For they must need be reckoned all together as one world or, if you will, as one Universe. And even though one should fill all times and all places, it still remains true that one might have filled them in innumerable ways, and that there is an
But most importantly, we should take note that for Leibniz, the idea of the best, to which God is responsive, has a very specific content. As we have discussed earlier, God’s mind or God’s understanding contains the whole realm of possibilities, -that is where all alternative possibilities subsist in ideas-, so the main criterion that seems to emerge from God selecting the real word for actualization as one possibility among an infinitely many others, is that the actual world maximizes perfection, -that is a world which was created according to a plan that permitted the simplest possible ordering of an infinity of ‘real things,’ the elementary substances or monads, together with the richest possible variety. Hence, Leibniz’s thesis seems to be that the ‘good’ that God seeks to maximize is one that embodies as much variety as possible in its content (cf. Principle of plenitude, -the principle that a world with greater variety is superior to any world with less) subject to that variety being achieved though economy of means, that is, under the simplest and most elegant mathematical formulae. Anything else would have fallen short either in the scale of variety or in the scale of order, to the detriment overall of the whole. Hence it seems that Leibniz identifies perfection with harmony, which he defines in classical fashion as “unity with variety,” the most harmonious order involving the greatest variety of phenomena regulated by the simplest laws. Indeed, according to Leibniz’s system of the ‘Pre-established Harmony’ between substances, God created the world so perfectly that it not only has the most monads (or, maximum number of monads, thus the greatest considerable variety of phenomena) but also that each monad acts according to its own law of unfolding, and is at the same time in perfect harmony with all the others monads, -as the inner

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211 Leibniz, Theodicy, 1990, sec. 8, p.128.
development of each monad has been so pre-arranged that all its changes are accompanied by corresponding changes in others.212

“The wisdom of God, not content with embracing all the possible, penetrates them, compares them, weighs them one against the other, to estimate their degrees of perfection or imperfection, the strong and the weak, the good and the evil. It goes even beyond the finite combinations, it makes of them an infinity of infinites, that is to say, an infinity of possible sequences of the universe, each of which contains an infinity of creatures. By this means the divine Wisdom distributes all the possible it had already contemplated separately, into so many universal systems which it further compares the one with the other. The result of all these comparisons and deliberations is the choice of the best from among all these possible systems, which wisdom makes in order to satisfy goodness completely, and such is precisely the plan of the universe as it is.”213

But how do we know that ‘the best of all possible worlds’ expresses a coherent notion? If the alleged best possible world contains ‘evil E,’ can we not imagine a world similar in all other respects but lacking ‘E’? And if God is omnipotent, how could it be impossible for him to bring such a world into being? Leibniz acknowledged that there are those who thought that God could have done better, but he insisted that just because humans can imagine possible worlds without sin and without suffering, in actuality these worlds would have been inferior to ours in goodness and perfection. Leibniz recognized the criticism that to most of us the world is far from perfect, and that we can all imagine a better world than this, but this is in terms of the quantity of human suffering not in terms of the quantity of actualization (which has nothing to do with human happiness being maximized or not). For Leibniz, the ills of the world are not however gratuitous. Generally speaking, we can affirm that God does not permit

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any ‘evil’ to arrive in the world, unless God knows that a good will arrive thanks to it.

But this does not mean we will necessarily be able to identify this good in particular.

“It is true that one may imagine possible worlds without sin and without unhappiness, and one could make some like Utopian or Severambian romances: but these same worlds again would be very inferior to ours in goodness. I cannot show you this in detail. For can I know and can I present infinities to you and compare them together? But you must judge with me ab effectu, since God has chosen this world as it is. We know, moreover, that often an evil brings forth a good where to one would not have attained without that evil.”

Even the ‘best possible world’ will contain some imperfect substances, -thus the possible existence of wicked individuals for instance-, their imperfection being embodied in their intrinsic nature, or complete individual notion because however great its merits, a created ‘thing’ cannot possess the absolute perfection of God. ‘Evil’ and imperfection result from the inherent nature of things (as included in their very conceptions). The crucial idea seems to be that even though God decides its existence, God does not make a substance ‘what it is,’ and hence God is in no way responsible for what substances do. God, who chooses for actualization a world that is as perfect as it is possible for a world to be, is thus not responsible for imperfection and ‘evil.’ In other words, Leibniz’s answer to the question of the nature of ‘evil’ itself, and its source is thus that ‘evil’ is essentially privative and that its origin lies in the fact that created things are limited, thus imperfect. Fundamentally, Leibniz seems to adopt the traditional Scholastic view (e.g. Augustine) that evil is a limitation, that is, a privation of being, or perfection.

“I have therefore been well pleased to point out that every purely positive or absolute reality is a perfection, and that every imperfection comes from limitation, that is, from the privative: for to limit is to withhold extension, or the more beyond. Now God is the cause of all perfections, and consequently of all realities, when they are regarded as purely positive. But limitations or privations result from the original imperfection of creatures which restricts their receptivity.”

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Indeed, Leibniz distinguishes between three kinds of ‘evil’: ‘metaphysical evil,’ the idea that evil is not something positive but just ‘a privation of being’ which characterizes finite creatures (ontological imperfection of finitude rather than moral imperfection); ‘physical evil’ which consists in “sorrows, suffering miseries,” and ‘moral evil’ which consists in ‘evil of will,’ viciousness or wickedness. Of these three categories, ‘metaphysical evil’ is viewed by Leibniz as fundamental, whereas the other two seems to simply derive from it. For Leibniz, ‘moral evil’ flows from ‘metaphysical evil’ because human beings are finite creatures; and ‘physical evil’ results either from ‘moral evil’ or from in its usefulness in accomplishing a greater happiness in the end. God, Leibniz says, is no more the cause of ‘sin’ than the current in a river is the cause of the hindrance on a heavily loaded boat; the cause of what is defective in human actions is not God but the limitations in our receptivity to ‘his’ positive causal force.

“These question is asked first of all, whence does evil come? [...] The answer is, that it must be sought in the ideal nature of the creature, in so far as this nature is contained in the eternal verities which are in the understanding of God, independently of his will. For we must consider that there is an original imperfection in the creature before sin, because the creature is limited in its essence; whence ensues that it cannot know all, and that it can deceive itself and commit other errors.”

However, Leibniz also argues that none of these ‘evils’ indicates that the world is imperfect: all ‘evils,’ including what is called ‘sin,’ conform to the divine plan. Leibniz readily admitted that much is wrong in the world but no more than what is consistent with its being the best of all possible ones. In other words, if this world contains ‘evil’ and imperfections, there are simply unavoidable, -all the other possibilities are worse. For Leibniz, ‘evil’ is real, not a mere illusion, but it can be explained as a systematically necessary condition for the greater good. Thus, according to Leibniz, ‘evil’ is a

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necessary and unavoidable consequence of God’s having chosen to create the best of all possible worlds. On a theological level, he matched this with the book of Job, arguing that ultimately we simply cannot understand why God does what ‘He’ does. If humans could see the whole -which we cannot- we would understand “the general plan of the universe, chosen by God for superior reasons,” that is, reasons superior to human understanding. To begin to grasp why there are imperfections and ‘sins’ in the work of an all-knowing, powerful and perfectly benevolent deity, we have to look beyond the evident facts of nature itself, to something that, for Leibniz, only metaphysical inquiry can reveal. Leibniz accepts that God may legitimately sacrifice the happiness of rational beings for the sake of the perfection and harmony of the whole (the whole being greater than the parts), and human happiness is not God’s chief aim in creation. For Leibniz, God has succeeded in fulfilling his obligation to create the metaphysically best of all possible worlds, but this does not entail that our world is the happiest place for humankind. For the Leibniz of the Theodicy, it is mistaken to assume that:

“[...] the happiness of rational creatures is the sole aim of God. If that were so, perhaps neither sin nor unhappiness would ever occur, even by concomitance. God would have chosen a sequence of possible where all these evils would be excluded. But God would fail in what is due to the universe, that is, in what he owes to himself.”

[However,] “since God, being altogether good and wise, has care for everything, even so far as not to neglect one hair of our head, our confidence in him ought to be entire. And thus we should see, if we were capable of understanding him, that it is not even possible to wish for anything better (as much in general as for ourselves) than what he does.”

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222 Leibniz, Theodicy, 1990, Part two, sec.120, p.192.

223 Leibniz, Theodicy, 1990, Preface, pp.54-55.
Rescher suggests that Leibniz’s God has to confront the choice of a world on systematic grounds, between entire possible worlds, and not with respect to the merits or demerits of particular possible substances viewed in isolation; hence a world must be chosen or rejected en bloc. For Rescher, the ‘world-optimization’ is the underlying operative principle of Leibniz’s God’s creative activity, and the ‘relative perfection’ of its product is the prime object of ‘his’ creative concern. In Leibniz’s metaphysical theory, the world’s arrangements are so systematically connected (‘interconnectedness of its substances’ within an ordered whole), that if we would improve something at one point of the system there would inevitably have damaging repercussions at another.224

“[...] the limitation or original imperfection of creatures brings it about that even the best plan of the universe cannot admit more good, and cannot be exempted from certain evils, these, however, being only of such a kind as may tend towards a greater good. There are some disorders in the parts which wonderfully enhance the beauty of the whole, just as certain dissonances, appropriately used, render harmony more beautiful.”225

At the core of Leibniz’s system is the sense of fittingness of things, -the sense of things beings as they are because they are the best possible, the best even thinkable as able to exist. If we could only see God’s total plan, we would see how this little portion of ‘evil’ is not actually ‘evil,’ for it promotes good in God’s total plan and total creation. If only we could understand that the world which actually exists is the most harmonious (universal harmony), -as everything in the universe is connected with everything-, we would find a purpose to the cosmos, albeit unknown to us.226 In understanding the larger context, the harmony of the whole, “the perfections and beauty of things,”227

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and recognizing our own place in the ‘System of Pre-established Harmony,’” we should be able to find a kind of tranquility (a “quiet mind”) and work towards our own happiness and true contentment. For Leibniz, it all rests on our willingness to be reconciled, for the sake of God’s higher purposes, with the existence of the shadows in the beautiful picture or the dissonances in the harmony. This may not be very consoling at moments of great distress, but it should not stop us to appreciate the depth and consistency of the metaphysical vision.228

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Chapter 4: Voltaire and Candide’s Garden: a Practical Response to ‘Evil’

Leibniz’s *Fatum Christianum* and Zadig

In *Zadig* (1747-48\(^{229}\)), published twelve years before the publication of *Candide* (1759), the French writer and philosophe\(^{230}\) Francois-Marie Arouet (1694-1778) who wrote under the name Voltaire had himself made an attempt at a ‘Leibnizian conclusion’ to the question of Providence. Towards the end of Voltaire’s oriental tale, ‘Leibnizian ideas’ with their implications are expounded by the angel Jesrad who had been sent from heaven to enlighten, console and teach Zadig submission to Divine Providence. Indeed, Zadig, the hero of the tale, in his search for happiness had only encountered tribulations and misfortunes and was starting to question God’s inscrutable plan especially in regard to humanity. At the heart of the matter were the question of the necessity of ‘evil’ (as suggested by Jesrad), and the problem of apparently undeserved suffering.

“Is it necessary then, venerable Guide, that there should be Wickedness and Misfortunes in the World, and that those Misfortunes should fall with Weight on the Heads of the Righteous? The Wicked, replied Jesrad, are always unhappy. Misfortunes are intended as a Touch-stone, to try a small Number of the Just, who are thinly scatter’d about this terrestrial Globe: Besides, there is no Evil under the Sun, but some Good proceeds from it."\(^{231}\)


\(^{230}\) For details on the meaning of the word ‘philosophe’ in the context of eighteenth century France, see: Chapter 5: “De Sade and the ‘Problem of Evil’ in Justine, or Good Conduct Well Chastised.”

This, for Zadig, hardly answers the question. The unhappiness of the wicked does not explain the misfortunes of the righteous; it is not clear why the latter need to be tested; and the assertion that ‘evil’ leads to good does not itself either explain or justify its existence. Zadig proceeds further with his line of reasoning: “But, said Zadig, Suppose the World was all Goodness, and there was no such Thing in Nature as Evil.”

But Jesrad explains the nature of destiny by the characteristically ‘Leibnizian ideas’ of the complete interdependence of everything in the universe. God has ordained everything exactly as it is; if it were different in even the slightest degree, it would not be the same world; indeed, if our actual world was perfect it would not be this world, but heaven:

“Then, that World of yours, said Jesrad, would be another World; the Chain of Events would be another Wisdom; and that other Order, which would be perfect, must of Necessity be the lasting Residence of the supreme Being, whom no Evil can approach.”

Then Jesrad goes on to explain that even though human life may seem so tragic, the universe is nonetheless immensely rich in its diversity and the laws which govern everything in every detail are immutable; there is a cosmic plan at work, a cosmic necessity; everything which happens has a purpose, chance does not exist and there is no gratuitous ‘evil.’ Our duty is thus to worship the Providence whose workings we cannot comprehend.

“ [...] And whatever you see on that small Atom of Earth, Whereof you are a Native, must exist in the Place, and at the Time appointed, according to the immutable Decrees of him who comprehends the whole. [...] know, that there is no such Thing as Chance, all Misfortunes are intended, either as severe Trials, Judgments, or Rewards; and are the Result of Foreknowledge. [...] Frail Mortal! Cease to contend with what you ought to adore.”

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232 Voltaire, Zadig; Or, The Book of Fate, Chapter XVII, 1974, p.222.
233 Id.
234 Voltaire, Zadig; Or, The Book of Fate, Chapter XVII, 1974, pp.223-224.
These are the clear-cut answers Zadig was hoping for; he is not satisfied, but he is given no opportunity to inquire any further:

“But, said Zadig- whilst the Sound of the Word But dwelt upon his Tongue, the Angel took his Flight towards the tenth Sphere. Zadig sunk down upon his Knees, and acknowledg’d an over‐ruling Providence with all the Marks of the profoundest submission.”

So Zadig is left with no alternative but to take Jesrad’s advice, and to worship Divine Providence in a spirit of submission. The appeal to Providence which is central to what Leibniz’s calls the Fatum Christianum236 and the kind of tranquility it represents is supposed to be found in the recognition of the order of the universe, the acceptance of the logical necessity of events, and of our place in the system of things. The heart of the Leibnizian Optimistic view of destiny seems to be in the reconciliation of personal liberty and cosmic necessity; in the acceptance that although the fate of human beings is predetermined, they are still responsible for their actions and happiness. Despite the anxieties about the apparent futility of human morality and of humanity’s search for happiness, revolt is out of the question and God is given the benefit of the doubt. In metaphysical matters, Zadig accepts resignation as the only attitude; Voltaire at this point will do likewise.237

235 Voltaire, Zadig; Or, The Book of Fate, Chapter XVII, 1974, p.224.

236 In comparison to the Fatum Mahometum and the Fatum Stocicum, see: Leibniz, Theodicy, 1990, Preface, p.55

**Voltaire, Optimism and the Lisbon Earthquake: ‘Whatever is, is Right’**

“Leibniz can’t tell me from what secret cause / In a world governed by the wisest laws, / Lasting disorders, woes that never end /With our vain pleasures real sufferings blend; /Why ill the virtuous with the vicious shares? /Why neither good nor bad misfortunes spares? / I can’t conceive that “what is, ought to be,”/ In this each doctor knows as much as me.”

-Voltaire, Poem on the Lisbon Disaster (1756)

“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.”

- Alexander Pope, Essay on Man (1733-34)

**The Lisbon Earthquake**

Optimistic Enlightenment beliefs that “*Whatever is, is right*” in the “best of all possible worlds” were rendered increasingly fragile by specific historical events, including the destruction unleashed by the 1755 Lisbon earthquake and subsequent tidal wave that destroyed the city of Lisbon and killed several thousand of its inhabitants. The event of the Lisbon earthquake is often described by scholars as a turning point in European history, not merely because of the enormous human suffering it caused, but also because of its political, philosophical and theological significance. According to Kendrick and Hirvonen, the earthquake happened at a time when Europe was in a

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238 Wootton, 2000, p.105.
transitional state. The old ideals, dogmas, authorities and institutions were being challenged even as the Catholic Church still defended the order of things. The Lisbon earthquake was hard to ignore since, at the time, Lisbon was affluent and the fourth largest city in Europe, after London, Paris, and Naples. It was also one of the best known cities in Europe, since traders, especially English and German, contributed too much of the business in town. Moreover, Lisbon was not only famous for its wealth, but also for its impressive churches and many convents as well as for the piety of its people. It was also a major city where the Holy Office of the Inquisition operated. The catastrophe destroyed almost all the important churches in this Catholic city, and had at the time a profound impact on the collective imagination as it happened on a Catholic holiday, -1st of November, All Saints’ Day-, at the very moment when many were attending mass. Estimates of lives lost varied tremendously, some reaching 70,000. Horrified people wondered how to make sense of the disaster: Why did God allow this to happen? Was it the manifestation of divine wrath and a punishment for human wickedness? Philosophers struggled with the significance of the earthquake as Lisbon certainly posed a challenge to the idea of a providential order inherent in the world itself.\footnote{For interest, Rousseau refused to see the Lisbon earthquake as a refutation of the idea of divine order, and argued that it showed the folly of human beings, responsible for their own misfortune because they had gathered together in such a big city. See: Rousseau’s letter to Voltaire Regarding the Poem on the Lisbon Earthquake, August 18, 1756. The debate between Rousseau and Voltaire is however outside this research project.} A lot of popular literature and public debate were generated by the earthquake, and the range of concerns expressed and speculations made on the causes of the event varied from scientific to religious conjectures. However, opinions suggesting that the Lisbon earthquake was a natural happening, like eclipses or thunder, were few in number. Many readily accepting the quake to have religious and moral significance: some saw the city as wicked, materialistic and immoral; others saw the earthquake as a triumph for the Jansenists, since the quake had crushed the center
of Jesuit power. Protestants could see the quake as a lesson for Catholics, and both Protestants and Catholics could see the quake as directed toward wickedness and toward the Inquisition.\textsuperscript{242}

As a side note, Jansenism was a religious doctrine derived from the works of St Augustine by Cornelius Jansen (1585-1638), Bishop of Ypres (then in the Spanish Netherlands). Adherents, among them the tragedian Jean Racine and the mathematician and thinker Blaise Pascal, had been attracted to the moral austerity of the doctrine. For Jansenists, human beings were incapable of discerning what was good without the help of divine grace. To seek salvation by ‘good works’ was an illusory pursuit, for in our ‘freedom’ we could be sinning further. Self-denial and submission to God’s will were keys. Jansen argued that divine grace could never be ‘resisted,’ meaning that it always had to override the human will. He bitterly opposed the doctrine associated with the Jesuits that salvation depended on a kind of cooperation between divine grace and the human will. Thus, the Jansenists believed in predestination, which meant that although they were Catholics they were in some ways more like Calvinists. Jansenism proved to be a problem for the Catholic Church, and especially for the Jesuits, for some considerable time. The Jesuits, in their teachings laid greater emphasis on God, the heavenly father, a compassionate deity with a broad understanding of human frailty and a limitless capacity to forgive ‘our sins.’ Accordingly their moral flexibility amongst other things made them the implacable enemy of the Jansenists. At the age of ten, young Voltaire was sent for his education to the Jesuit College Louis-le-Grand in Paris where he will stay as a boarder


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till the age of seventeen (1711) whereas his older brother Armand did his education at the Oratarian Seminary of Saint Magloire and became a fanatical devotee of Jansenism.243

Voltaire’s Poem on the Lisbon Earthquake

From Voltaire’s correspondence,244 we know that on the day the city of Lisbon was crumbling to the ground, Voltaire was moaning about the lack of turnips and onions in the Republic of Geneva. In a letter written at Les Délices245 on the 1st of November 1755, Voltaire was complaining that the land around Geneva was so infertile that the inhabitants were being deprived of vegetables enjoyed by their French neighbours; and that the soil was so barren that flowers and herbs would not grow there. When Voltaire finally learned of the Lisbon earthquake three weeks later, on the 23rd of November to be exact, he used an image borrowed directly from nature to express his profound distress,246 describing a micro-catastrophe that he most probably had witnessed in his own garden:

“It is most puzzling to try to explain how the laws of motion bring about such appalling disasters in the best of all possible worlds. One hundred thousand ants, our fellow beings, crushed suddenly in our anthill, half of them perishing in agonies which are beyond words.247 [My translation and interpretation- for original French text, see App.E.]”


245 In 1755, Voltaire moved to Les Délices, a property situated on a piece of land near Geneva. He had nowhere else to go. Indeed he had been banned from Paris and Versailles since 1790 and expelled in disgrace from Frederick the Great’s court at Potsdam in 1753. In: Dawson, Deidre, Voltaire’s Correspondence - An Epistolary Novel, Peter Lang Publishing, USA, 1994, p.101.

246 To read more about how deeply affected Voltaire was by the event of the Lisbon earthquake, see: Besterman, Theodore, chapter 27: “The Death of Optimism,” in: Voltaire, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1976 (First Published in 1969), pp.351-359.

One of the most distressing factors for Voltaire, aside from the arbitrariness of the tragedy, was the utter helplessness and powerlessness of the victims. Humans were no more capable than the tiny ants of defending themselves against natural disasters; the earth had quite literally collapsed in upon its tiny and frail inhabitants: “[..] la terre engloutit les uns et les autres [..] the earth engulfing each and everyone of them - My translation”.\(^{248}\)

Confronted with the horrors caused by this devastating event, Voltaire reacted angrily against what he saw as the facile, Optimist explanations for the earthquake, and so he wrote a bitter poem about it entitled Poème sur le Désastre de Lisbonne ou Examen de cet Axiome: Tout Est Bien (Poem on the Lisbon Earthquake or An Inquiry into the Maxim: ‘Whatever Is, Is Right’) where he specifically reflected on Pope’s maxim, and raised many philosophical and metaphysical questions. Still respectful towards Pope despite their philosophical differences (see Voltaire’s “Preface”), Voltaire nevertheless strongly critiqued the currently most accepted explanations of ‘evil’ for he believed that they gave no aid or consolation to the stricken citizens of Lisbon. Therefore, he spoke impatiently and indignantly against the kind of theorizing which, he felt, ignored reality, had no concern for the individual and justified suffering to the point of claiming not only that God allows it but even wills it.

“The axiom that: “All is well” seems a little odd to those who witness these disasters”\(^{249}\). All is arranged, all is organized, doubtless, by Providence; but it is only too apparent that All, for a long time now, is not arranged for our present welfare.”\(^{250}\)


\(^{249}\) Here, Voltaire is referring to ‘physical evils’ such as great plagues and earthquakes

\(^{250}\) Voltaire’s Preface to the Poem on the Lisbon Disaster, Translation of the poem by Tobias Smollett, in: Voltaire, Candide and Related texts, Wootton, Indianapolis/Cambridge, 2000, p.95
For Voltaire, it was thus purely an untenable ‘illusion’ for individuals to adopt a pious resignation when confronted by such suffering, choosing to believe that the disaster and distress that followed would somehow enable an unfathomable greater good that had been sanctioned by Divine Providence. Providence might well exist, but it certainly ignores the well-being of humanity on earth. In the poem, Voltaire concentrated on the theme of individual suffering and the worth of individual human personality in relation to the overall good, posing the problem of human suffering from the point of view of the person who suffers and cannot understand (cf. Book of Job; Voltaire’s Zadig). Voltaire recognized that much theorizing about this theme was of the armchair variety and did not affect the theorist, so, instead of framing individual suffering against a philosophical backdrop, he personalized it and urged for a more direct human response of compassion or pity. Thus, he invited the ‘Optimists’ to come to Lisbon and see:

“Oh wretched man, earth fated to be cursed; / Abyss of plagues and miseries the worst! / Horrors on horrors, griefs on griefs must show, / That man’s the victim of unceasing woe, / And lamentations which inspire my strain, / Prove that philosophy is false and vain. / Approach in crowds, and meditate awhile / Yon shattered walls, and view each ruined pile, / Women and children heaped up mountain high, / Limbs crushed which under ponderous marble lie; / Wretches unnumbered in the pangs of death, / Who mangled, torn, and panting for their breath, / Buried beneath their sinking roofs expire, / And end their wretched lives in torments dire. / Say, when you hear their piteous, half-formed cries, / Or from their ashes see the smoke arise, / Say, will you the eternal laws maintain, / Which God to cruelties like these constrain?251

For Voltaire no philosophical and metaphysical theorization could give an account of the disaster as they generally dealt in abstractions and were not set in human experience; they seemingly lacked practical relevance to the realities of living. For Voltaire, there could be no possibility of rational speech in such conditions. It was thus grotesque to attempt to justify human suffering through an appeal to its place in an

all-encompassing Providential order. From the point of view of the victims themselves, the workings of the universe had become irrelevant. They, or their loved ones, perished. Optimistic philosophy in particular, had nothing to offer the victims and survivors of the Lisbon tragedy. But it is, it seems, the more superficial and popular version of Optimism that Voltaire had in mind when he composed his Poem and later his Candide. Once he had been faced with the harsh reality of ‘evil,’ Voltaire could only see Optimism as a fatalistic doctrine of despair which not only insulted human pain, but also denied human freedom and human capacity for action (this idea will be expanded on further in this chapter, in regard to Candide). However, in his anger and distress, Voltaire ignored the fact that people caught up in a terrible disaster, such as an earthquake, frequently report that they derived consolation from the reflection that it is all part of God’s inscrutable plan, holding on to the hope that somehow some good shall come of it in the fullness of time.252

According to Kenneth Surin, Voltaire perceived that the terrible disaster which had befallen mid-Europe had undermined once and for all the pretensions of the ‘hopelessly optimistic philosophical theodicies’ of preceding centuries: for Voltaire, our quest for a justification of God which is acceptable to the human conscience and to our powers of reason was a futile and absurd pursuit. Humankind cannot justify the ways of God. Theodicy is inherently flawed as it requires us to be articulate, rational and

reasonable in the face of the unspeakable; as for Voltaire, words could not express the reality of the unspeakable and only trivialized the pain and suffering in the world.\textsuperscript{253}

\section*{Voltaire's \textit{Candide, or Optimism} (1759)}

“\textit{Unfair though Voltaire’s caricature may be to the subtlety and complexity of Leibniz’s metaphysics, Candide does offer a powerful challenge to the emotional upshot of Leibnizian optimism. Written at white heat, this short satire, in which the young, eternally trusting Candide wanders through the horrors of the “best of all possible worlds,” offers a devastating critique of the accommodation of human misery in a world supposedly chosen by an all-good and all-powerful God.}\textsuperscript{254}”


\section*{Introduction}

The problem of the ‘suffering of the innocent’ became more pressing for Voltaire with the years that follow the horror of the Lisbon earthquake, as all around him, Europe was once again being ravaged by a senseless and bloody war, - the Seven Years War which started in 1756 following after a brief respite the War of the Austrian succession (1740-1748). The Seven Years War (1756-63) was the first war to be fought by the European powers in the New World and in Asia, as well as in Europe. According to David Wootton and Haydn Mason, for Voltaire, the Seven Years War was not simply a war amongst many, each equally futile and destructive; it was personal. This war had been deliberately started by Frederick II, King of Prussia, his former intimate friend. Not only was Voltaire appalled at the desolation wrought by Frederick’s armies, but he was distraught by the piratical methods of the British navy on the high seas.\textsuperscript{255} And Theodore Besterman also comments that Voltaire saw the consequences of the Seven

\textsuperscript{253} Surin, 1986, p.155.
\textsuperscript{254} Lloyd, 2008, p.252.
\textsuperscript{255} Wootton’s Introduction to: Voltaire, Candide and Related texts, 2000, p.xxi; Mason, 1992, p.5. Regarding the Seven Years War and the War of the Austrian succession, see also: Manuel, Frank, E., \textit{The Age of Reason}, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1951, chapter VI and chapter IX.
Years War “more clearly than most of his contemporaries. For years to come his thoughts were dominated by the frightful development of this war, which was spreading its devastation over a large part of Europe and into many colonial territories.”

Voltaire’s thinking became further tormented by an awareness of the immediacy of ‘evil’ in day-to-day human experience, and more and more dissatisfied with the explanations available. As we have mentioned earlier, Voltaire was particularly disturbed by what he described as ‘facile Optimism’ and the ‘comfortable complacency’ that accompanied the doctrine of ‘All is well,’ and by the fatalism inherent in the idea of Providence taken in an absolute sense which he felt offer no hope for a future. Voltaire’s loss of faith in philosophical reflection and distaste for ‘vain speculations and metaphysical pretentions’ reached its climax in his short story Candide, or Optimism (Candide, ou l’Optimisme- 1759) supposedly “translated from the German of Dr. Ralph,” in which Voltaire parodied ‘the best possible world theory’ and ridiculed Leibniz’s views via the humorous pontification of Pangloss, Candide’s starry-eyed tutor. However, Voltaire was most probably also targeting the circle of followers of the ‘Leibnizian thesis’ such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Christian Wolff and the Wolffians in Germany; but also the ‘Optimist attitude’ taken on by his friend and correspondent Louise Dorothée, the duchess of Saxe-Gotha who despite the ferocity of the war kept on holding to the dogma of “all is well.”

Candide, the hero, inhabits a bleak, arbitrary universe in which ‘evil’ is an omnipresent crushing reality, but Dr. Pangloss (from the Greek pan, meaning ‘all,’ and glossa,

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meaning ‘tongue’), a teacher of “métaphysico-théologo-cosmolonigologie,” fatuously writes off every disaster (even his personal misfortunes) as unimportant because this is ‘the best of all possible worlds’ and thus nothing really can go wrong. As we will see, the sequence of disasters that befall Candide and his companions are subject periodically to the elevated judgment of Pangloss, who retains his Optimism in the face of drowning, beatings, hangings, war, earthquake, etc. Pangloss will not desert his principle because he is deeply convinced that all apparent horror and misery prove in the long run conducive to happiness and contentment.

“‘Well my dearest Pangloss,’ said Candide to him, “while you were being hanged, dissected, lashed, and were rowing in the galleys, did you continue to think that all went as well as could be?’” “I still think as I always did,” said Pangloss, “for, after all, I’m a philosopher, and it would be inappropriate for me to change my mind. Leibniz cannot have been wrong, and moreover the pre-established harmony is the most beautiful thing in the world [...]”

As clearly illustrated in this passage and expressed in the subtitle of the tale, Candide, or Optimism can be viewed essentially as an attack on “optimism, [-or] the madness that leads one to maintain that all is well when one’s own life is dreadful,” but Candide can also be understood as a broader satire on stupidity and ‘evil,’ and the absurdity of the human predicament. As a point of interest, this is actually the only passage in the text of Candide in which the word ‘optimism’ appears; it happens at the point of the story where Candide meets the mutilated slave Surinam and can no longer overlook the ‘evils’ of this world.

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Central to *Candide* is not just Optimistic blindness and complacency but the problem of evil, moral and physical ‘evil.’ In *Voltaire*, Peyton Richter and Ilona Ricardo propose that: “In its broadest sense the subject of Candide is innocent man’s experience of a mad and evil world, the struggle to survive in that world, and eventually, to come to terms with it and create its own existence within it.”

According to Haydn Mason, there is no evidence that at the time of *Candide* Voltaire had actually read Leibniz with any great care. As we will see, Voltaire’s description of Pangloss’ worldview is nor an accurate or fair expression of Leibniz’s thought. As Steven Nadler comments: “in his satire Candide, Voltaire has a good time at Leibniz’s expense.” Leibniz’s highly detailed and complex philosophy will end up being simplified by Voltaire as the laughable doctrine that we are living in ‘the best of all possible worlds,’ and would come to epitomize ‘facile optimism’ about the world and the place of human beings within it. If in some way, Leibniz could be found guilty of *Panglossism*, -by claiming, for instance, that every case of apparent ‘evil’ eventually brings forth a greater amount of happiness than would have been brought forth otherwise-, the absurdity of Pangloss’ reasoning cannot be treated as a straightforward philosophical refutation of Leibniz’s form of Optimism. For Genevieve Lloyd, the anger of the satire is really directed at those who offer as a response to human suffering the idea that ‘evils’ are permitted by Divine providence because they somehow contribute to a better world overall: “*Candide is a savage critique of the idea*

that human misery serves the purpose of divine justice – or indeed any divine purpose."

Voltaire’s *Candide* is presented as a love story in which the reader follows Candide in his travels halfway around the world in his quest for his beloved Cunégonde; the survey of the world’s ‘evils’ is thus made possible by the experiences and adventures of the hero. Candide’s world is a world filled with catastrophes, -sometimes natural but mostly human-made--; reality is ‘bad’ but, for Voltaire, the denial of that reality and the Optimistic pretence of cheerfulness is even worse. Basically, the world contains a stupendous amount of ‘evil’ and the human condition is one of misery, so let us at least not pretend that ‘all is good,’ for that will not help us to cope with it. While, in *Candide*, Voltaire does not offer an alternative solution for the problem of the origin of ‘evil,’ one truth is certain: Optimism is a false answer; while ‘evil’ is incomprehensible, any minimization is an offense against those who suffer in the world. And if human beings are the victims of forces beyond their control, it is experience, not philosophical discussions that taught Candide that the potential for limited, but effective action, still lay within humanity’s grasp: Candide’s garden must be cultivated. Thus, for Voltaire, the point of thought is action, -even if we are limited in our ability to create our own destiny-, not the construction of inconclusive speculative systems; in response to the question of ‘evil,’ there are no adequate theoretical answers, and thus there is no possibility for rational theodicy: “Let us work without philosophizing, [...]it is the only way to make life bearable.”

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Summary of Voltaire’s *Candide, or Optimism*

In brief, the story of *Candide* opens in Westphalia, in the castle of Baron Thunder-ten-tronckh. Candide, a naïve, sincere, and well-intentioned young man has been educated at the Baron’s castle where he has been taught by his tutor, Dr Pangloss who believes in the principle of ‘sufficient reason’ (one of Leibniz’s central principles) that he lives in the best of all possible worlds:

“[Pangloss] demonstrated beautifully that there is no effect without a cause, and that, in this best of all possible worlds, the castle of His Excellency the Baron was the most beautiful of all castles, and his wife was the best of all possible baronesses. [...] that things could not be other than what they are: for everything has been made to serve a purpose, and so nothing is susceptible to improvement.”

Candide is thought to be the illegitimate son of the Baron’s sister, so when he falls hopelessly in love with Cunégonde, the Baron’s seventeen-year-old daughter, and they are caught embracing by the Baron, Candide is literally kicked out of the castle for his impertinence. He is then forced to serve in the Bulgarian army where he is brutally abused and becomes involved in an especially cruel battle (“thirty thousand corpses”):

“[…] the artillery knocked over about six thousand men on each side; then the muskets removed from the best of all worlds about nine or ten thousands bastards who infested its surface. The bayonet, in addition, was the sufficient reason for the death of some thousands of men.”

But luckily, Candide manages to escape to Holland and is rescued by an ‘honest Anabaptist,’ called Jacques. While out on a walk, he runs into a horribly disfigured Dr. Pangloss who has caught syphilis from Paquette, the baroness’s maid whose

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268 The adjective ‘candide’ in French meaning ‘ingenious,’ ‘guileless,’ ‘artless.’


indiscriminate favors spread love and disease in equal proportion. However Pangloss has not deserted his principles and he demonstrates to Candide how syphilis is a necessary ingredient in the best of worlds: if Columbus had not introduced this disease into the world, we should not have the benefit of chocolate or cochineal! Candide also learns from Pangloss that the Baron’s castle has been attacked and taken, that the baron and baroness are dead, and that Cunégonde and her brother (who remains unnamed throughout the story) have been raped and apparently slaughtered. From then on, things go from bad to worse. The ‘good Jacques,’ who has taken Candide and Pangloss with him on a voyage to Lisbon, drowns in a terrible storm when trying to save a fellow sailor. Candide and Pangloss are shipwrecked on the Portuguese coast, witness the destruction of Lisbon by an earthquake, and are arrested by the Inquisition. Pangloss is hanged, but survives. Candide is beaten but escaped with the help of Cunégonde, who turns out to have survived her ordeal but has been forced to live as a kept woman. They both manage to sail away to the New World with the help of an old woman, the ‘daughter of a Pope and a Princess’, who has had her own full share of troubles, including the loss of a buttock (which was eaten by starving soldiers undergoing a siege). Unfortunately they are caught by their pursuers, and Candide is forced to abandon Cunégonde to the Governor of Buenos Aires. Candide is joined by the South American Cacambo, ‘faithful servant-of-all-trades.’ They both set out to Paraguay where they are faced with the Jesuits’ oppression and escape from being eaten by cannibals.

After various further adventures, Candide and Cacambo find by chance the earthly paradise of Eldorado, an ideal society which they will eventually leave, loaded with gold and diamonds. Cacambo is then sent off to Buenos Aires with enough money to
purchase Cunégonde and the order to bring her to Venice to meet up with Candide once again. Candide himself embarks on a French ship where we are introduced to a new companion: the pessimist, Martin, a Manichaean who believes in the predominance of ‘evil’ and who will be acting as a counterpoise to the Optimist Pangloss, - [in a way, Martin, represents Bayle’s attitude just as Pangloss represents that of Leibniz]. Candide’s fantastic odyssey will continue throughout Europe (France, England, Italy), ending in Turkey where Candide is finally reunited with Cunégonde (in Venice, Martin and Candide had failed to find Cacambo and Cunégonde), now grown old, ugly and irritable. However, Candide, the ‘faithful and honorable lover,’ keeps his promise to marry her. In a garden, near Constantinople, they settle down with Pangloss (whose hanging was inefficient), Paquette and her lover, Martin and the one-buttocked woman, and together they will try to make a living from the land: Candide convincing his entourage that it is better to forget the ills of the world by cultivating one’s garden: “Il faut cultiver notre jardin.” By the end of the story, Candide seems to have finally “achieved the difficult task of renouncing metaphysics and absolutes and settling for relative values. [For Candide*] there is no transcendental goal whatsoever at which to aim. It is sufficient if they have created a little light for themselves in a brutish world.”

*The character’s relation to the narrator and to the author is not assumed to be no more than a mouthpiece, but as one voice expressing one point-of-view, even where that view is, in fact, dominant in the author’s work.


272 Mason, 1975, p.63.
Central themes in Voltaire’s Candide: Natural and moral ‘evil,’ the misery of the human condition and the failings of Optimism.

When reading Voltaire’s Candide, one is inevitably bound to think that the main purpose of the tale is to show that the world is as just as awful and absurd wherever one goes, -with the exception of the perfect State of Eldorado. Indeed, in Candide, the perfect State of Eldorado seems to be the only place in the world that provides happiness for all its inhabitants. But it is clear that for Voltaire, Eldorado is understood as a utopian ideal, -Voltaire’s ideal of the perfect deistic state ruled by the philosopher king-, another world sufficient unto itself, isolated physically from the rest of civilization by high mountains and impassable rivers; thus with no actual connection with this world, except maybe by way of inspiration.273

But apart from Eldorado, there is such a great deal wrong with Candide’s world: it is a world which is filled with the ‘evils’ of poverty, depravity, disease, ignorance and fanaticism; and human beings turn out to be murderers, rapists, thieves, liars, traitors and hypocrites. Consequently everyone’s life contains far more misery than happiness; and many are the characters expressing a pessimistic view of the world and showing an awareness of human suffering within it. For instance, on the boat to Cadiz, the ‘one-buttock old woman ‘tells Cunégonde and Candide that in her opinion, life is for most people an unhappy experience; so she suggests to ask all the passengers to tell their stories and see if she is right or wrong:

“[…] I am a person of experience, I know the world. Give yourself some fun; require each passenger to tell you their life story; and if you find a single one who has not repeatedly cursed...

their life, who has not said to themselves over and over again that they are the most unhappy person in the world, throw me in the sea head first. [...] [Cunégonde] persuaded all the passengers [...] to tell their stories. She and Candide had to admit that the old woman was right.²⁷₄

Candide himself through his trials and travels will be introduced to all kinds of ‘evils’ (hunted by the Inquisition and the Jesuits, subjected to torture, beaten just about to death, and so on) and he will absorb these experiences and try to make sense of what he can. Indeed only a journey through the whole world can really fully test Pangloss’ teachings, and at every step of Candide’s long and disastrous odyssey, Pangloss’ Optimism will be undermined. In that respect, Candide’s encounter with the mutilated slave in Surinam is a very significant passage since it marks one of his strongest outbursts against Pangloss’ teaching. In this episode, Candide falls into despair at the plight of this wretched man whose right hand had been cut off when his fingers got caught in the sugar refinery mill, and whose left leg was mutilated as punishment for making an attempt to escape. The black slave tells forthrightly to Candide:

“It’s customary. They give us a pair of canvas shorts twice a year, and these are the only clothes we have. When we work in the sugar refineries, and we get one of our fingers caught in the mechanism, they cut the hand off. When we try and escape, they cut a leg off. [...] This is the price that has to be paid so that you can eat sugar in Europe [...] Dogs, apes and parrots are a thousand times less miserable than we are: the Dutch witch doctors who have converted me say every Sunday that we are all the children of Adam, white and black. [...] then we are all second cousins. But you’ll have to admit that one couldn’t treat one’s relatives in a more dreadful fashion.”²⁷₅

Candide becomes outraged at the inhuman treatment of the slaves in Surinam, -a poignant critique of the effects of colonial slavery-, and thus declares that he is


renouncing Optimism: "Oh Pangloss! cried Candide, you never imagined such an
abomination could exist. That’s it; in the end I have no choice but to give up your
optimism."

Voltaire’s account of the customary treatment of slaves in Surinam was,
according to Wootton, Pomeau and Mason, regrettably accurate. Moreover, according
to Mason, colonial slavery was beyond Voltaire’s powers of intervention; like Candide,
an individual, even a polemicist of Voltaire’s stature could only express outrage.

In Candide, Voltaire thus begins to reflect that the ‘evils’ brought by nature are not of
the same order as those caused by human beings. ‘Evil’ events like earthquakes,
floods, famines and plagues are simply natural events and, seem to fade somehow into
insignificance beside the horrors of war or the abominable ways human beings treat
each other. In chapter 3, for instance, Voltaire’s graphic description of first an Abarian
and then a Bulgarian village ravaged by army soldiers from both the Abarian and
Bulgarian camps, really encapsulates the atrocities human beings are capable of in the
course of war, - such as using political, religious or territorial conflict as a pretext for
large scale butchery. Each village has been burned according to accepted military
custom of the time; and in each of them, old men have been savagely beaten, women
are dying with their throats cut, girls have been raped and disemboweled, and the
countryside is in complete ruins.

“The wickedness of men was now apparent to [Candide] in all its ugliness; his mind was
full of dark and dismal thoughts.”

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276 In: Voltaire, Candide, or Optimism, in: Wootton, Cambridge, 2000, Chapter 19, p.43. For the French text, see: Voltaire, Candide


278 In: Voltaire, Candide, or Optimism, in: Wootton, Cambridge, 2000, Chapter 19, p.45. For the French text, see: Voltaire, Candide
For Voltaire, the underlying problem of evil rests thus primarily with human nature not the cosmos. So, the deity is almost completely absent from Voltaire’s *Candide*; in it Voltaire considers the world mainly from humanity’s point of view. The Deist God of Voltaire is unconcerned with human affairs. In the tale, Voltaire deals principally with our human condition and thus speaks from the perspective of one human being to another about the human race and the world it has made for itself; if the world is not too good, says Voltaire, we have only ourselves to blame. In *Candide*, this contrast between physical and moral ‘evil,’ and the inadequacy of Pangloss’ response (thus of Optimism) to the harsh realities of ‘evil,’ is best illustrated by the episode of the Lisbon earthquake.

After being shipwrecked, Candide and Pangloss arrive in Lisbon; they have hardly set foot in the city when they are greeted by the earthquake. Pangloss’ way of handling the earthquake-crisis is to engage in pompous philosophizing, -when he could have instead taken appropriate action-, and to try to console the terrified survivors by assuring them that:

“[…] things could not be otherwise. “For, […] all this is the best there could be; for if there is a volcano under Lisbon, then it couldn’t be anywhere else. For it is impossible that things could be placed anywhere except where they are. For all is well.”

In order to justify, in this case, ‘natural evil,’ Pangloss’ way is to deal in philosophical abstractions which, in Voltaire’s view, provide no aid or relief to the victims and can only lead to further despair; held up to the light of experience and the reality of ‘evil,’ Pangloss’ Optimism is thus exposed here in all its cruel absurdity. But, for Voltaire,

Optimism is not just an absurd belief; it also has important consequences because human behavior derives from it: by accepting that ‘all is well’ one resigns to one’s inevitable destiny of suffering; human beings give up hope, and with it all practical effort. Voltaire takes aim here not only at the insensitivity of that response to human suffering but also at ready rationalization of inaction. Pangloss’ passive fatalism is thus not just laughable, it also carries dangerous implications. For instance, when Candide attempts earlier in the story to rescue the ‘brave and virtuous Jacques’ from drowning, Pangloss prevents him “proving to him that the bay of Lisbon had been especially made so that the Anabaptist could drown in it” and drown he does. For Voltaire, chance, not fate, determines who lives and who dies when one’s ship goes down or when an earthquake strikes; in Candide, Voltaire presents the reader with what appears to be a loosely, not tightly structured universe, giving thus individuals some power to determine their fate, or in a case like Jacques’, the fate of others. Human responsibility and accident are interconnected in this tragedy.

Beside Pangloss’ unsuccessful attempt at restoring confidence after the disaster, Voltaire presents the reader with the response of the Portuguese Inquisition to the earthquake. For the Inquisitors, the cause of the destruction was not any natural phenomena, but the terrible sins of the Lisboners. Thus the Inquisitors, Candide tells us in a matter of fact, have discovered an infallible way to prevent the recurrence of earthquakes: the presentation of an auto-da-fé, an act of repentance and sacrifice to an angry and punishing God. The absurd, irrational and vicious practices and beliefs of Christianity are pointedly denounced here; -indeed we should take note that attacks on religious intolerance and fanaticism, ignorance and superstition, and on the

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institutions and beliefs he held responsible for those ‘evils’ are somewhat commonplace in Voltaire’s *Candide* and throughout his life works. In the Lisbon episode, the contrast between moral and natural ‘evil’ and the connection between human conduct and the presence of ‘evil’ in the world are made very clear. Moreover, Voltaire’s great insight throughout the development of *Candide* is also to show how ‘natural evils’ are made worse by the inadequate or immoral responses of human beings, by their failures to do what lies within their control to alleviate human misery; and that failure is fed by the folly of both religious and philosophical interpretations of ‘evil.’ The fictional role of the Portuguese Inquisition in *Candide*’s chapter 6 is most probably related to the assumption that the Lisbon earthquake was a divine punishment for human sins.

“After the earthquake, which had wrecked three quarters of Lisbon, the wise men of Portugal had identified no more effective method to prevent the rest being destroyed than to hold a fine auto-da-fé to educate the people. It was decided by the University of Coimbra that the spectacle of a few people being burned over a slow fire, accompanied by the most elaborate rituals, was an infallible, if little known, method for preventing earthquakes. [...] The same day the earth trembled once again, making a blood-curdling noise.281”

Because of the blind, unenlightened use which religious leaders have made of religious sentiment and absurd beliefs, several people are burned, Candide is beaten, and Pangloss is hanged. “If this is the best of all possible worlds, what on earth are the others like?282” asks Candide, who is bleeding and trembling all over. As Bayle had already demonstrated in his *Philosophical Commentary*, religious faith was a strong enough force to motivate such utter madness as the sacrificing of anyone. And Voltaire wrote many works in which he catalogued the ‘evils’ stemming from the tyranny and

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bondage of the church and on the ‘evil’ consequences that can flow from religious belief and observance; for Voltaire, indeed, ‘those who can make you believe absurdities can also make you commit atrocities.’²⁸³

What Voltaire fails to mention in his Candide is that, after the disaster, they were many people who contributed to the restoration of order and confidence in Lisbon, handling the earthquake-crisis in very practical and efficient ways. Kendrick recalls the well-known story that when the unhappy young king Jose I at a loss on learning the dreadful nature of the catastrophe asked what was to be done, the Marquis de Pombal replied: ‘Bury the dead and feed the living.’ It might be a fictional saying, but it expresses well the practical measures he at once caused to be carried out, and, according to Kendrick, “it has rightly become immortal as a classic example of the blunt common sense of a man of action breaking roughly and abruptly through another man’s mood of dithering emotional helplessness.”²⁸⁴

In a series of documents, beginning on the day of the earthquake itself, Pombal is shown to handle with great determination the numerous anxieties and crises which are inevitable after such a major disaster. His immediate concern was to prevent a plague, so it was imperative to get rid as quickly as possible of all the corpses, human and animals that lay in the ruins and to get rid of the pools of stinking stagnant water. The next urgent matter was that of food supplies and of the providing of temporary shelter for the homeless; other urgent problems were to stop looting and robbery, and to put an end to the dreadful alarmist sermons that were terrifying the already


²⁸⁴ Kendrick, 1956, pp.45-46.
nervous people of Lisbon by prophesying even greater disasters to come because of the ‘enormity of the city’s wickedness.’ Pombal believed that what people really needed was a strong, comforting assurance that the earthquake was not necessarily a judgment of an angry God upon the Portuguese, but more probably just an accidental natural occurrence.  

In 1764 there was published a small history of all that had happened in Lisbon from the earthquake onwards, we read that:

“[...] every thing written, ordered, or done in the name of His most Faithful Majesty in respect of burying the dead, restoring morale, collecting provisions, calling in troops, dealing with looting, providing protection against African pirates, stopping and controlling refugees, maintaining a strict military discipline, protecting nuns, averting God’s wrath, preserving the king’s person, punishing traitors, suppressing Jesuits, restoring commerce, encouraging the arts, cleaning the ruins, planning and rebuilding the city, all this we are told, was in the great part due to the foresight, wisdom and authority of the Conde de Oieras [or Marquis de Pombal].”

**The fact of ‘evil’ and the inadequacy of theoretical answers**

So, natural and moral ‘evil’ appear throughout the tale as Voltaire rejects the doctrine of Optimism, the sort that comforts no one and changes nothing for the better. Over time and through the succession of tragedies, the proposition that partial ills are necessary components of a universal good sounds more and more unfeeling and arrogant. But if Voltaire did not like Pangloss’ explanations, what is he proposing in *Candide* to substitute for them? Martin’s Manichaeism (see Bayle’s chapter) suggests the pessimistic alternative. Martin who had embarked on a French ship with Candide and whose personal misfortunes have turned him into a Manichaean, believes, at the

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286 Cited in Kendrick, 1956, p.44.
very opposite of Pangloss, that everything is for the worst. For Martin, this is an ‘evil’
world, abandoned by God and ruled by an ‘Evil Power’:

“’But you, Mr. Martin, [Candide] said to the scholar, [...] ‘What’s your opinion with regard to
moral and physical evil’287[,] [...] if I look at this globe, or rather at this globule, it seems to me
that God has handed it over to some malevolent being [...] I don’t think I’ve seen a town that
didn’t want to see the town nearest to it destroyed, or a family that didn’t want to see some
other family wiped out. Everywhere the weak loathe the powerful, while cringing before them,
and the powerful treat them like sheep whose wool and meat go to market. A thousand
assassins organized in regiments run from one end of Europe to another, carrying out murder
and robbery to feed themselves while never disobeying orders, for there is no more respectable
occupation. And in those towns that seems to be enjoying peace, where commerce and the arts
flourish, people are so eaten up with envy, anxiety, and disquiet that they would be less
miserable in a city under siege. Their secret sufferings are more painful than their public
miseries. In a word, I have seen so much, and experienced so much, that I am a
Manichaean.288’

For a while Candide does not completely refute Martin’s Manichaeism because
Candide’s very own experiences of the world and of human nature seem to confirm
Martin’s complete negativism. But what Candide has over Martin is hope and the
belief that ‘there is still some good in the world: “But there is good in the world,”
replied Candide. “That may be,” replied Martin, “but I have not experienced it.”289’

What has kept Candide going throughout his misfortunes is the romantic longing for
his beloved Cunégonde but also the search to find some kind of happiness in a better
place, and that has always seemed enough to sustain life. Candide is really an optimist
in the everyday sense of the term; even though he has become well aware that ‘evil’ is
too prevalent in the world, he assumes, unlike Pangloss and Martin, that something
can and must be done about it. Pangloss never wants to interfere in the slightest way
with the way things are in the world because he rather maintains the belief that

287 Voltaire, Candide, or Optimism, in: Wootton, Cambridge, 2000, Chapter 20, p. 46. For the French text, see : Voltaire, Candide ou
288 Voltaire, Candide, or Optimism, in: Wootton, Cambridge, 2000, Chapter 20, p. 47. For the French text, see :Voltaire, Candide ou
289 Voltaire, Candide, or Optimism, in: Wootton, Cambridge, 2000, Chapter 20, p. 47. For the French text, see : Voltaire, Candide ou
‘whatever is, is right,’ and Martin never acts because, according to him, there is too much misery and malice in the world. Both accept the status quo and both are inflexible in their views of the world. By the end of the tale, Candide will thus reject both Pangloss’ metaphysical Optimism and Martin’s philosophical Pessimism. For there is a lack of balance in both their explanations of ‘evil;’ if the world contains a great amount of moral and physical ‘evil’ as they have been shown to be, there is also some good in it, thus the only satisfactory picture is one which does justice to this blend; in this respect both the ‘theodical defense’ and the ‘Manichaean resignation’ have failed.

Still in search of a solution, Pangloss, Martin and Candide go to visit a reputedly wise dervish. The dervish’s suggestion is not to go on philosophizing as do Pangloss and Martin as it is not our place to inquire into the meaning of life. According to the dervish, God does not have any interest at all in what goes on in this world; God has withdrawn from it and is no more concerned with human beings that the Sultan is with the fate of the mice in the holds of his ships. Metaphysical discussions are forever useless, so the best thing to do is ‘keep quiet’ (‘se taire’).

“[...] ‘Reverent Father,’ said Candide, ‘there is a terrible amount of evil on earth.’ ‘What does it matter whether there is evil or good on earth? When His Highness sends a vessel to Egypt, does he worry whether the [mice] who are on the ship are comfortable or not?’ ‘So what should one do?’ asked Pangloss. ‘Keep quiet,’ said the dervish.”

Candide never disagrees with the dervish’s advice not to seek answers to questions that can have none; the problem of evil and the meaning of human existence seem far beyond the realm of human knowledge, even though Voltaire is well aware that it is in the nature of human beings to seek meaning in life. So maybe, ‘just maybe,’

metaphysical speculations should not totally be abandoned but philosophers should concern themselves with the practical aspects of philosophical inquiry and be more interested in human progress than in the progress of the human mind. Indeed, on their return from the dervish, the three companions stop at a small farm run by a Turkish farmer and his children. The farmer adds the significant comment that work can ward off three of life’s great ‘evils:’ boredom, depravity, and poverty (need). According to Haydn Mason in *Candide – Optimism demolished*:

“The dismissively theoretical approach of the dervish [...] aided by the practical wisdom of the Turkish farmer, helps Candide to open his eyes. It is as if the same picture was presented twice, but with a totally different lighting.”

The words of the dervish and the farmer certainly lead Candide to reflect and to thus address himself to the more pressing problem of how to live in a world where vicious behaviours and injustice exist. In the face of the multifarious ‘evils’ of life, he will come to the sudden conclusion that the most satisfactory solution to adopt is to ‘cultivate one’s garden.’ In *Candide*, Voltaire thus gives up the hope of finding a rational explanation of what happens here. Faced with the inability to come to a theoretical solution of the problem of evil, theodicy gives way to more specific questions, particularly social ones, - such as what basis humanity can have for action, in a world which is one of uncertainty, folly, vice and injustice. So if it appears that human beings are the victims of forces beyond their control, for Voltaire, we still have the potential for limited, but effective, action through human free will, effort, and cooperation with others. Indeed, in the case of Voltaire, Candide may well embody the valorization of a limited but effective attempt to engage one’s free will in the world, especially in the

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face of Optimist fatalism; but that will is not always, if ever, a rational one and it certainly cannot be called ‘free,’ -a view that Voltaire took from the moral skepticism of Vauvenargues and which he lays out philosophically and satirically in *Le Philosophe ignorant* (1766) and *Il faut prendre un parti* (1772). Candide does not know whether ‘evil’ can be eradicated, but he assumes that things can certainly be improved, so the world can be a better place and that existence can be, if not happy, at least tolerable. At the end, Candide and the community of friends reach some measure of self-reflective contentment in taking responsibility for what they can control: they agree to cultivate their garden.

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292 I would like to acknowledge here Dr McCallan for his valuable comments.

Chapter 5: De Sade and the Problem of Evil in Justine, or Good Conduct Well Chastised (1791)

“In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won’t find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe had precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference.”

-Richard Dawkins, River out of Eden: a Darwinian View of Life (1995)\textsuperscript{294}

Introduction

“At the moment a novel of mine is being printed, but it is a work too immoral to be sent to so pious and so decent a man as yourself. I needed money, my publisher said that he wanted it well spiced, and I gave it to him fit to plague the devil himself. It is called Justine, or Good Conduct Well Chastised. Burn it and do not read it, if perchance it falls into your hands. I am disclaiming the authorship. . . .”

-De Sade, Letter written to his lawyer-friend Reinaud, dated June 12, 1791.\textsuperscript{295}

Firstly, I should take note that de Sade wrote three versions of the ‘Justine’s story’ but, as Gilbert Lely suggests in his Vie du Marquis de Sade\textsuperscript{296}, they are so different that it is probably more suitable to treat them as three very distinct works. The original version of Justine, entitled Les Infortunes de la Vertu” (The Misfortunes of Virtue) is a short story that was composed by de Sade over a two-week period in his cell in the Bastille in 1787. The unpublished 138 pages manuscript was to grow into the novel-length Justine, ou les Malheurs de la Vertu (Justine, or Good Conduct Well Chastised) which was first published anonymously in 1791. It is considerably more violent and sexually explicit that the first version. We do know, from de Sade’s correspondence to Reinaud,

that money was certainly one of the motives behind the publication of the novel, and that, in fact, de Sade would always deny authorship of this novel. However, as Neil Schaeffer points out, “if Sade’s motivation was pecuniary, the original work and the revised novel he brought to the press were nevertheless genuine expressions of his mentality.” Indeed, eight years later, in 1799, de Sade wrote a even more extended, more brutal and more openly obscene final version of Justine’s adventures, entitled La Nouvelle Justine (The New Justine) which was followed shortly afterwards (sometime between 1799 and 1801) by what is often considered de Sade’s most violent and most offensive completed work, the story of her sister Juliette. What all three novels have certainly in common is that they give literary expression to an incredible and incredibly unappealing assortment of sexual practices and aberrations, crimes and perversions; they are all constructed on a pattern of sexual scenes followed by passages in which the characters discussed the philosophical, moral, and cultural implications of whatever they have just done or had done to them.

For the purpose of this chapter, I have chosen to focus essentially on the second version of the ‘Justine’s story,’ because I believe that it is the one which invites the best comparison with Voltaire’s Candide. However, as a point of interest, Schaeffer is suggesting that Justine was actually written as a parody of the ‘moral and rational world’ exemplified in Samuel Richardson’s Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded, which was at the time an international bestseller. In brief, Pamela was the story of a young servant girl who manages to preserve her virtue against the flatteries and the assaults of her titled employer and who is finally rewarded by marriage to the chastened and reformed libertine. According to Schaeffer, even though de Sade was charmed by

Richardson’s skill as a novelist, he found the Englishman’s optimistic morality at odds with his own view of the world.299

Summary of de Sade’s Justine or Good Conduct Well-chastised (1791)

“The scheme of this novel [...] throughout to present Vice triumphant and Virtue a victim of its sacrifices, to exhibit a wretched creature wandering from one misery to the next; the toy of villainy; the target of every debauch; exposed to the most barbarous, the most monstrous caprices; driven witless by the most brazen, the most specious sophistries; prey to the most cunning seductions, the most irresistible subornations; for defense against so many disappointments, so much bane and pestilence, to repulse such a quantity of corruption having nothing but a sensitive soul, a mind naturally formed and considerable courage: briefly, to employ the boldest scenes, the most extraordinary situations, the most dreadful maxims, the most energetic brushstrokes, with the sole object of obtaining from all this one of the sublimest parables ever penned for human edification; now, such were, ‘twill be allowed, to seek to reach one’s destination by a road not much traveled heretofore.”

-De Sade’s dedication of Justine or Good Conduct Well-chastised addressed to his dear friend Marie-Constance Quesnet.300

As de Sade’s dedication and the subtitle of the novel implies, the central character in Justine goes on an endless series of ill-fated adventures, moving relentlessly from one misfortune to the next. In brief, at the beginning of her remarkable ordeal, Justine, a devout young girl of twelve, is thrown out of the convent because she has suddenly found herself poor and an orphan. She is forced to live a miserable life in the streets of Paris fighting to keep her virtue (and, in particular her virginity). We should point out that de Sade uses the term ‘virtue’ to refer not to acquired traits but rather to natural and uncorrupt features, like virginity, innocence and beauty. For Maurice Blanchot, in de Sade’s world, Justine represents Virtue itself, -“Virtue which is tenacious, humble, continually wretched and oppressed but never convinced of its errors.”301 As we will see, Justine is also portrayed as the embodiment of moral and religious ideals, as a young

woman who possesses ‘too much virtue’ in the sense that she never learns; till the end she manages to stay in her original innocent state of ignorance. In the ‘black novels,’ excessive virtue is shown as defect of character (‘stupidity’) and as a mistake that deserves punishment. These ideas will be explored in more details further in this chapter.

As the story unfolds, Justine is framed for theft by her employer, the usurer Monsieur du Harpin, because she refuses to become the accomplice in a larceny. Arrested, she manages to escape from ‘la Conciergerie’ where she has been incarcerated, but only to find herself abused by a gang of bandits and raped in the forest of Bondy. She then finds good employment as a maid in a nearby château but, after four relatively happy years, she has to flee from the young Count de Bressac’s anger because she disobeys the order to poison his aunt. Savaged by the count’s dogs, she barely escapes with her life. Stumbling into the lair of a certain Rodin, an enthusiast of surgery and anatomy who is also a ‘libertine’ school teacher, she is rescued and returned to health but only to be branded as a criminal and thrown out of the house when she tries to stop the vivisection of Rodin’s young daughter, Rosalie.

Back on the road, our pious heroine unable to resist the desire to make a pilgrimage to the miraculous Virgin of Saint Mary-in-the-Wood (Sainte-Marie-des-Bois) becomes the captive and victim of the lubricious and murderous monks occupying the Benedictine monastery. She somehow manages to get away from these vicious predators only to fall the next day in the hands of the ‘vampiric’ count de Gernande who drains her blood for almost a year and who subjects her to perverse practices. Escaping from this murderer, her naivety is once again cynically exploited by a certain Roland, the chief of a gang of counterfeiters whose life she has just saved. Roland takes her to his fortress
in the Alps where he will mistreat and overwork her for many months. Arrested with the rest of the gang and taken to Grenoble to be judged, Justine about to be hanged, is saved by the eloquence of a kind lawyer who believes and pities her. On her way to Lyon, she is once again compromised in another criminal affair; almost becomes the victim of a ‘head-cutting bishop,’ and is successively falsely accused of arson, theft and of murdering a child. Incarcerated once again, she is tormented and condemned by a debauched and corrupt judge. She is thus sent to Paris for the confirmation of the sentence. At a staging-inn when pausing with her guards, she encounters Madame de Lorsange and her lover Monsieur de Corville who, intrigued by the fate of this young woman, ask Justine to hear her story. By the time she finishes her sad tale, she is recognized by Madame de Lorsange who is no other that her long-lost sister, Juliette. She is rescued by Juliette’s rich and powerful lover and goes to live with the couple in their château. Finally saved from all the cruelties and abuses she has suffered at the hands of her fellow men and women, Justine is denied the chance of a happy ending when lightning comes from the sky to strike her dead, cutting short her young life and her newly found happiness. For a point of interest, in de Sade’s extended and final version of Justine’s adventures, La Nouvelle Justine, there is no happy reunion between the sisters, and Justine’s sudden and terrible death is not simply a naturally occurring incident but an event deliberately planned by Juliette and her libertine friends, who callously drive her outside as the storm reaches its peak.302

De Sade’s *Justine* (1791) parodies Voltaire’s *Candide* (1759)

De Sade’s *Justine* (1791) parodies Voltaire’s *Candide* (1759) by having the central character go on an extraordinary long journey in which misfortunes pile up on top of one another. The resemblance to the story of Job in these tales is interesting to note as in all three accounts, the problem of human suffering is posed from the point of view of the unsuspecting individual who suffers and cannot understand why. Both Candide and Justine inhabit a world which is full of abominations and where the ‘frail and the innocent’ are persistently exploited by the ‘rabid and the strong.’ And both Candide and Justine cling to hope as a way to survive their terrible ordeal, whether for Candide it is his plans for a future with his beloved Cunégonde, or for Justine it is her faith in God and her religion, and the prospect of a better world (such as in Augustine’s doctrine of the ‘happiness of hope’[303]); the capacity to hope is what helps them to find the energy to keep living one more day. But Justine, unlike Candide, is denied the chance of a relatively happy ending. Indeed, in *Justine*, de Sade’s words describe a sense of hopelessness from the very first page; believing in the inherent ‘evil’ nature and isolation of human beings, de Sade’s Justine lives in a world where one must constantly be on guard for the next ‘monster’ in human form to round the corner and cross one’s path. Justine’s hope for the reward of a better future (in heaven if not on earth) is dismissed by de Sade and ‘his libertines’ as pure fantasy and thus doomed to failure. Whereas in *Candide*, even though Voltaire displays a certain pessimism and despairs at existing circumstances and at human wickedness, Candide still hold onto the hope that human beings do have the capacity to be enlightened and make the

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world a better place, especially through friendship and shared support, even if it is in a ‘small way’ (cf. ‘The Turk and Candide’s gardens’). Voltaire does not know if human beings are born either ‘good or evil’ but he believes in a certain potential for action which might help to negate fatalism, despair, apathy, and thus contend against all forms of social, religious or political ‘evil’ wherever it occurs. However, if we put aside Voltaire’s hopeful sentiments, at the heart of both his and de Sade’s novels seems to be the intention to demonstrate that in the world of nature and human beings, the ‘good’ (or synonymously, the ‘weak’) are destined to be the wretched victims of the ‘vicious’ (or, the ‘strong’); a theme which is derived from the problem of evil.

In both Voltaire and de Sade’s worlds, human beings do not have an exceptional status; the original cause of order in the universe, -whether natural (de Sade’s Nature) or supernatural (Voltaire’s God in Candide)-, is indifferent to the conditions of things, and certainly indifferent to pain and suffering and the struggles of humanity. However even though in Candide, Voltaire’s portrayal of a lawless universe and view of the world seems at times on the brink of de Sade’s materialistic naturalism, Voltaire still insists on making room for God, as the guarantor of value and as the shield and protection against moral nihilism. Further, both De Sade and Voltaire loathed organized religion and strongly rejected Christianity in particular, wanting it suppressed, and there are numerous passages in Justine and in Candide styling both writers as fierce critics of religious practices and of the clerical establishment. Both de Sade and Voltaire believed that Christianity was inherently irrational and fostered ignorance and superstition on the people to keep them under control of both Church and state. While religion educated people to fear invisible tyrants, it also made them gullible, slavish and cowardly toward earthly despots, inhibiting all initiative to the
independent guidance of their own life, -and especially in Voltaire’s eyes, made them incapable of solving their own problems. It is interesting to note that the same line of argument can be found in the works of Denis Diderot (1713-1784) and Paul-Henri Thierry, Baron d’Holbach (1723-1789) amongst others who also believed that the emancipation of humankind from religious tyranny had to be the first necessary step in a general politics of emancipation because anyone dominated by false beliefs could never be in control of oneself.

But unlike de Sade whose ferocious position on the subject of religion was far more radical than that of his contemporaries, Voltaire was always careful to add that his struggle was not with faith but with superstition, not with religion but with the Church. As we recall, for Voltaire, there was at least one possible rational substitute to Christianity in response to human misfortune and ‘natural evil,’ and it was the new form of faith called Deism; Deism and Natural Religion being it seemed, the only suitable compromise for those philosophes who, like Voltaire, still gave reason a high priority but were not quite ready to take the plunge into atheism.

For interest, in eighteenth-century France the word ‘philosophe,’ -etymologically, a ‘lover of knowledge’-, came to mean ‘freethinker’ and to be in some respects the equivalent of our ‘intellectual.’ By the second half of the century, after Diderot and d’Alembert began publication of their Encyclopédie in 1751, it was at once a badge of pride and a term of abuse affixed to those writers and thinkers who opposed Christianity and sought ‘enlightenment’ through the independent use of human

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304 This discussion is however outside this research project, but for interest, see, for instance: Diderot, Pensées Philosophiques (1746), De la suffisance de la Religion Naturelle (1746-1750; published in 1770), Encyclopédie, with Jean d’Alembert (1751-1783); & Holbach, Christianisme Dévoilé (1767); Système de la Nature (1770)
reason. Such ‘philosophes’ could be Deists, like Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, believing in a God whose divine hand is everywhere apparent in our well-ordered universe, or they could be Atheist Materialists, like Diderot, Helvétius, Holbach, La Mettrie and de Sade who, as we will see, believed that matter is eternal and constantly evolving, so that ‘nature’ is simply what we call its current configuration. Being part of that ‘nature,’ we humans are bound to see it as well ordered, but all talk of a Divine Creator is just mere superstition and infantile illusion.305

So, as we recall, aside from Voltaire’s compromise with Deism, in Candide Voltaire did not offer any other solution to the traditional Christian problem of evil which would square God’s all-powerful, all-good nature and the fact of ‘evil’ in the world. As we have discussed in the previous chapter, for Voltaire, the problem of evil was insoluble and philosophy had no rational solution to offer: God exists, -even if far remote (as like Epicurus, Voltaire questioned God’s involvement with the world)-, and ‘evil’ exists; it is an irreducible paradox, an impasse, and our mind must give up trying to penetrate the meaning of the universe and address itself to the problem of how to live in a world where ‘evil’ and injustice exist, trying to find a fairly satisfactory solution to this more pressing problem. For all the horrors, Voltaire still wanted to trust that the world has some sort of general order and purpose, and thus not totally pointless.306

305 Pearson, 2005, pp.69-70.
For de Sade however, it is a very different matter. In *Justine*, de Sade will adopt the position of atheistic materialism and moral ‘nihilism’ with all its metaphysical and ethical implications; a position that Voltaire as a believer in God and a humanist was so afraid to embrace. Voltaire could not join the atheistic materialist in his intellectual acceptance of ‘evil’ in the universe because he believed, that for the atheist, nothing remains, nothing was left ‘divine;’ so humanity would have to resign itself to a universe that was at best empty of moral value, at worst, positively ‘evil.’ With Voltaire the step from Christianity to ‘natural religion’ was made; with de Sade, it led further to a ‘religion of Nature’ itself, and for de Sade, of a ‘malevolent’ Nature.

In response to the problem of evil, the Marquis de Sade opted for the position of atheism and took it to its outer limits. ‘Look around,’ says de Sade, ‘a world that contains so much imperfection, injustice and intense suffering is totally at odds with the possibility of its having a creator who is omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good.’ There is no possibility of believing in any kind of traditional theism. Moreover, with de Sade, Deism is also denounced as an ‘amorphous Hybrid’ and a weak compromise: ‘Who wants to believe in a God who is detached from the pain and sorrow of the world, a God who somehow evades the suffering of the world he is supposed to have created?’ Arguing the atheist’s case from the existence of ‘evil,’ de Sade will then attempt to explain ‘evil’ from a materialist view of the world. It is interesting to note that atheists and materialists such as Diderot, Holbach and Claude Adrien Helvétius (1715-1771) who, like de Sade, despised Deism as a compromise one step away from superstition, also feared moral anarchy as much as Voltaire did and

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307 For a definition of ‘moral nihilism’ in the context of de Sade’s thought, see page 181.
recognized that there was an urgent need for a totally different and more effective basis for ethics.\(^{309}\)

So what I am suggesting in this chapter, is that, drawing on the Epicurean paradox as Voltaire did in his *Candide*, de Sade in his novel *Justine* appeals to the world’s ‘evil’ as a demonstration that belief in God’s goodness and in God’s providential care, -as traditionally conceived-, is no longer viable. In *Justine*, de Sade’s primary intent is to demonstrate over and over again that there can be no God in a world where Virtue is seen to be punished every time, and Vice is rewarded. And subsequently, that theistic ideas that try to account for the world’s ‘evil’ by asserting that each and every instance of ‘evil’ that exists is necessary for the existence of a ‘greater good’ (or the prevention of greater ‘evil’ that God could not bring about without the ‘evil’ in question), are sophistries which can only lead to radical egotism. De Sade’s position is confirmed in the other thousand pages of his ‘black’, or ‘clandestine’ works which include: *Justine, La Nouvelle Justine* (*the New Justine*), *suivi de l’histoire de sa soeur, Juliette* (*followed by the story of her sister, Juliette*), *La Philosophie dans le Boudoir* (*Philosophy in the Boudoir*), and *Les cent vingt Journées de Sodome* (*The 120 Days of Sodom*).

In the introduction of *Justine*, de Sade refers to the ‘Leibnizian ideas’ that are expounded by the angel Jesrad towards the end of Voltaire’s *Zadig* (see Chapter4):

“Somewhat better informed, if one wishes, and abusing the knowledge they have acquired, will they not say, as did the angel Jesrad in Zadig, that there is no evil whereof some good is not born? and will they not declare, that this being the case, they can give themselves over to evil since, indeed, it is but one of the fashions of producing good? \(^{310}\)"


\(^{310}\) *Justine, or Good Conduct Well Chastised* (1791), Seaver & Wainhouse,1965, p.457.
In *Zadig*, Jesrad demonstrates that human wisdom is impossible, since human beings cannot know the mysterious designs of Providence, and since what seems good is ‘evil’ and what seems most obviously ‘evil’ is good, for ‘true theodicy’ had established how everything happens for the best: ‘Whatever is, is Right.’ In his *Justine*, de Sade will push to its extreme conclusions the kind of argument that proposes that ‘evil’ (e.g. intense human suffering) might be justifiable if it leads to some greater good, one not obtainable without the ‘evil’ in question. For de Sade, ‘nihilism’ is the logical conclusion to be drawn from the fact of an absurd universe.

Central Theme and Moral Lesson (the ‘sublimest parable’) in *Justine*: Egoism versus Altruism

The central theme that emerges in *Justine* is that benevolence towards others and unreasonable attachment to virtue attracts nothing but misfortune, -as in the story, virtuous and kind Justine is exploited and abused physically and sexually by almost everyone she encounters, men and women, and is even framed for crimes she has not committed. This is so because Justine lives in a brutal and amoral world where the ‘cruel and wicked’ vastly outnumber the ‘sympathetic and the good;’ where benevolence as a value only appears against the background of malevolence, becoming the exception rather than the rule; and where Virtue which is embodied in the character of Justine is thus exposed, by de Sade, as a Vice: “[...] Virtue,” says de Sade, however beautiful, becomes the worst of all attitudes when it is found too feeble to contend with vice [...]” De Sade’s ‘moral lesson’ to Justine and subsequently to the reader is thus that: given the numerical minority of the ‘good’ and the rarity of acts of

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311 Id.
human kindness, given that the natural and universal state of humanity seems one of enjoyment of cruelty rather than pity or horror, the safest way to live one’s life “in an entirely corrupted age, [...] is to follow along with the others. [That] if misery persecutes virtue and prosperity accompanies crimes, those things being as one in Nature’s view, far better to join company with the wicked who flourish, than to be counted amongst the virtuous who founder?” Adapt to this godless brutal universe by becoming one of the ‘vicious,’ says de Sade to ‘virtuous’ Justine, or you won’t survive. As we mentioned it earlier, the concept of ‘Virtue’ is used by de Sade to refer to natural and uncorrupt features; Vice, or the search for sensual pleasure, however is understood by the author as an acquired character-trait that allows one to avoid the feelings of guilt, which otherwise follow from ‘evil’ intentions and actions. Once Virtue has been eliminated and replaced by Vice, the ‘vicious’ is in a powerful state of being because no one can really do him or her any harm; the ‘vicious’ can never be a victim, because he or she never relinquishes control, -as ultimately what is experienced as terrible and damaging in a ‘virtuous state of being’ becomes pleasurable in the ‘educated vicious state of mind.’ De Sade’s libertines try to educate Justine in the ways of the ‘vicious’ which entails overcoming guilt, disgust, retribution and shame. De Sade’s insight was to demonstrate that the repression of one’s conscience has a progressive desensitizing effect; perpetrators of crime (the ‘vicious’) can become accustomed to their shocking atrocities and cease to react strongly to them; extraordinary ‘evil’ thus can become habitual and ‘routinized.’ Most problematic is the fact that desensitization to violence gradually extinguishes inhibitions among many perpetrators, blunting their sensitivity to the suffering of their victims. In this way, ‘desensitization’ offers an explanation for

312 Id.
the cruelty, excesses and perverse enjoyment of de Sade’s libertines.313 In the words of Justine:

“The Comte de Bressac (that was the name of the young man into whose hands I had fallen) possessed a mind containing a great fund of wickedness and libertinage; no very abundant amount of sympathy dwelled in his heart. Unfortunately, it is only too common to find men in whom pity has been obliterated by libertinage, whose ordinary effect is to harden: whether it be that the major part of his excesses necessitates apathy of the soul, or that the violent shock passion imparts to the nervous system decreases the vigor of its action, the fact always remains that a libertine is rarely a man of sensibility.314”

In Justine, de Sade’s libertines will thus propose an account of morality which is the mirror-image of what ‘everyone else’ tends to reasonably trust, counting our virtues as vices and our vices as virtues, and demanding that ‘we,’ meaning here the libertines, should do to others just what ‘we’ would least want done to ourselves, -making a mockery of the ‘Golden Rule,’ the Christian notion of treating people as you would have them treat you. I should stress here that in his fictional universe, de Sade expounds a social philosophy dividing society into ‘ordinary’ persons, who must suffer abuse and the ‘extraordinary,’ who are all actual or potential ‘destroyers’ and who, being extraordinary, ‘have a right’ to commit any crime. In this social system, ordinary people, who are portrayed as weak, are utilitarian objects, the plaything of the utterly unloving libertines who by being in the position of power (either from money or rank) also have greater opportunities to engage in violent and destructive behavior. As we will discuss further in this chapter, de Sade’s libertines have come to believe that they are immortal and invincible, wielding on others the ‘destructive power of gods.’ De Sade’s libertines are ‘dangerous’ men and women (mostly men) who come from the highest to the lowest echelons of society, -aristocrats, churchmen, surgeons, judges or

313 Waller, 2002, pp.244-246; Blanchot, in: Seaver & Wainhouse, 1965, p.49; Airaksinen, 1991, p.28
314 Justine, or Good Conduct Well Chastised (1791), Seaver & Wainhouse,1965, pp.505-506
brigands. According to Michel Feher, for de Sade, “the true libertine must be absolutely independent and thus must consider other men and women as mere instruments of his own pleasure. [However, the] Sadian libertine’s refusal to acknowledge the existence of a “fellow man” [also] forces him to overcome the fear of solitude and the need for security […]”

As a side note, we should point out that even though the ‘Golden Rule is often associated with religion, it might be derived from elsewhere. Contemporary psychologist and science historian, Michael Shermer proposes that the ‘Golden Rule’ could be understood as the ‘first moral principle,’ as it is based on the foundation of most human interactions and exchanges and can be found in numerous texts throughout recorded history and from around the world. For Shermer, the ‘Golden Rule’ is most probably a derivative of the basic principle of exchange reciprocity and reciprocal altruism which might have evolved as one of the primary ‘moral sentiments.’ In its essence, this is what the ‘Golden Rule’ is telling us to do: by asking yourself, ‘How would I feel if this were done unto me?’ you are asking, ‘How would others feel if I did it unto them?’ In other words, in adjuring us to do unto others as we would have others do unto us, this moral principle exhorts us to surpass our selfishness into empathy for others.

But Justine suffers most of all because she fails to perceive that, in this cruel and disordered world, there is no moral and just God who will make all things right in the

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end and that self-interest, or self-centeredness (egoism), -and more specifically the gratification of desire-, is the only reality. Even though she repeatedly finds herself kidnapped, exploited and abused by almost every man and women she encounters, she maintains her religious faith and the belief that God will pay them back for their crimes; but instead, her tormentors go on to achieve wealth and power. And when she finally escapes from these predators, she is killed by a morally indifferent thunderbolt.

de Sade’s way of showing that in this world, the only one which exists, there is no God who can right our wrongs. That the only truth is the law of Nature according to which, in de Sade’s metaphysical understanding of the world, the ‘wicked and the strong’ not only survive but flourish at the expense of the ‘innocents and the weak.’

For de Sade’s libertines, who believe in a meaningless universe, ‘evil’ is not really a problem at all, it is just the way the world is; the problem of evil is only a problem for those who, like Justine, believe in a loving God and yearn for a fair universe. The thunderbolt seems to have been used by de Sade as a metaphor for the sheer perversity of providence and as an attack on the idea of a benevolent providence. Further, de Sade clearly demonstrates, throughout his novel Justine, the fallacy of the kind of theodicy which claims that suffering is sent by God to punish people for their sin (either for one’s own sin, or for sin in general). Indeed, as we recall, the Old Testament repeatedly states that God will reward and bless those who obey ‘his’ law, and punish those who do not (e.g. Psalm 128; Deuteronomy 11: 26-28). If the Bible does teach that suffering occurs in this life in proportion to the wickedness of people, one quick look at the world, and especially at the ‘Sadean world,’ would reveal the
fallacy of that argument: the ‘vicious’ certainly get away with many things while the ‘virtuous’ have to suffer their whole lives.\(^{318}\)

At this point, I would like to make some speculations in regard to de Sade’s choice of ‘death by thunderbolt’ for his heroine, and in regard to the two different endings of Justine (chance event) and La Nouvelle Justine (deliberate action by conspirators). As the level of violence and depravity increases with each version of the story of Justine, her death becomes more twisted and cruel. Why? De Sade does not explain himself but what we do know is that Juliette and La Nouvelle Justine were written after de Sade’s witnessing of the bloodiest period of the French Revolution. In Justine, the heroine’s death is due to the blind force of Nature, nature acting alone; whereas in La Nouvelle Justine, de Sade’s libertines become in some way the embodiment of Nature in ‘her operation.’ For de Sade, by committing crime, the libertines are only responding to the desires of Nature itself; it is then that they come the closest to the ‘savagery and cold violence of Nature,’ and thus participate in the ‘universal effervescence.’ I will be exploring these ideas further in this chapter. With both versions of Justine’s death, de Sade manages to attack both the logic of benevolent providence and benevolent humanity.

Another clue to the meaning of the thunderbolt as a ‘weapon of death’ in Justine can be found in a passage of the novel Juliette. Here, Sade’s heroine, Juliette, while in Florence, ponders about the significance of the volcanoes surrounding the city,

wondering what kind of association they have to biblical scripture. Thinking of biblical stories that are based upon volcanic eruptions, she arrives at the conclusion that:

“It is to be feared that the many volcanoes ringing Florence may someday cause it harm: these fears are amply justified by the signs of past upheavals one notices everywhere in the area. They suggested some comparative ideas to me: is it not very probable, said I to myself, that the fiery destructions of Sodom, Gomorrah, etc, made up into miracles for the purpose of instilling in us a terror of the vice which held universal sway among the inhabitants of those cities; is it not altogether likely that the famous conflagrations were caused, not by supernatural agencies, but by natural forces? [...] I came swiftly to conclude that the irregularity of human behavior is closely related to Nature’s own caprices, and that wherever Nature is depraved she also corrupts her children.”

People have always been awed and frightened by natural phenomena such as comets, eclipses, lightning as they were believed to be supernatural events used by angry and powerful gods. Like Bayle (see Chapter 2), de Sade wanted to free human beings from ancient superstition and from the institutions which used superstitious beliefs to keep people in a state of fear. But unlike Bayle, de Sade’s emancipated individuals justify their offenses on morality and religion by claiming a scrupulous respect for ‘Nature’s wisdom.’

Moreover, the thunderbolt as a divine manifestation has been a powerful symbol across time and cultures. Thunderbolts as divine weapons can be found in many mythologies often as the weapon of a sky and storm god, and as such have become a powerful symbol of retributive justice (e.g. amongst many others, we can recall the god Indra in Hindu mythology; Thor, in Germanic mythology; Tharanis, in Celtic mythology, all gods of thunder and lightning). Early Greeks believed that thunderbolt was a weapon of Zeus. It is easy to draw an association between Zeus and de Sade’s heroes, as violence and lust marked the exploits of Zeus and the god-like libertines.

Indeed Zeus’ powerful desires, combined with his remarkable capacity for self-transformation, made him a scheming, insatiable and predatory lover. Moreover, in early Greek thought, stories of Zeus were interwoven with philosophical reflection; just as in de Sade’s black novels, the rapacious libertines have long philosophical discourses in between their carnal acts, giving a wide assortment of philosophical justifications for, and reflections on, their deviant and violent sexual practices.320

A Universe without God

In Justine, de Sade’s ‘philosophes-criminal libertines’ will try to demonstrate time after time to Justine that God and ‘evil’ cannot possibly co-exist. Echoing Epicurus, they will critically formulate the ‘theological problem of evil’ resolutely. ‘How can such a world where the weak and the innocents suffer be considered the creation of a God who is both all-good and all-powerful?’ Either your God is evil for rewarding the vicious and for punishing you for your piety and virtue, or there is no God at all.’ In many forceful theological conversations, all of de Sade’s libertines will proclaim themselves fervent adepts of atheism with the exception of Saint-Fond, in Juliette (Second Book) who professes a belief in the existence of an ‘evil God,’ in the soul’s immortality and in hell.

For de Sade’s libertines, the problem of evil is a liberating one: if there is no God and the material world is all that exists, human beings can free themselves from all idols, from all illusions concerning the original cause of things, and by doing so they can thus

succeed in ordering and establishing the world according to their own ideas. By inviting humanity to imagine a world without God, de Sade’s libertines offer to Justine and the readers what they see as a morally compelling vision: a world in which humanity could think and do as it pleases without having to look over its shoulder at some disapproving deity. But Justine does not listen even though she spends most of her life the bewildered plaything of destiny and the victim of the ‘strong.’ De Sade speaking through the character Dubois, a female libertine and highway bandit who through the prosperity of crime has become a Baroness, says to Justine:

“I believe [...] that if there were a God there would be less evil on earth; I believe that since evil exists, these disorders are either expressly ordained by this God, and there you have a barbarous fellow, or he is incapable of preventing them and right away you have a feeble God; in either case, an abominable being, a being whose lightning I should defy and whose laws contemn. Ah, Thérèse322 I is not atheism preferable to the one and the other of these extremes? that’s my doctrine, dear lass, it’s been mine since childhood and I’ll surely not renounce it while I live.322”

And in the words attributed by de Sade to Coeur-de-Fer, a male libertine and highway bandit, he adds:

“Examine for one cold-blooded instant all the ridiculous and contradictory qualities wherewith the fabricators of this execrable chimera have been obliged to clothe him; verify for your own self how they contradict one another, annul one another, and you will recognize that this deific phantom, engendered by the fear of some and the ignorance of all, is nothing but a loathsome platitude which merits from us neither an instant of faith nor a minute’s examination; a pitiable extravagance, disgusting to the mind, revolting to the heart, which ought never to have issued from the darkness save to plunge back into it, forever to be drowned. May the hope or fear of a world to come, bred of those primordial lies, trouble you not, [Justine], and above all give over endeavoring to forge restraints for us out of this stuff. 323”

At this point I would like to take note that the word ‘libertine’ comes from the Latin adjective libertinus, of a freed man, from libertus, freedman. The word appears for the first time in French in a translation of the New Testament in 1477 and reappears eighty years later, in 1545, in the title of Calvin’s treatise Contre la Secte phantastique et

321 At some point of the story, Justine takes on the first name of Thérèse.
322 Justine, or Good Conduct Well Chastised (1791), Seaver & Wainhouse,1965, p.698.
323 Justine, or Good Conduct Well Chastised (1791), Seaver & Wainhouse,1965, p.497.
furieuse des libertins qui se nomment spirituels. From the mid-sixteenth to the late seventeenth centuries, the term ‘libertine’ was used to describe a number of disparate literary, social and philosophical groups in France. In the sixteenth century, the French word libertin emerged as firstly as a term of abuse directed at those who were thought to have rejected traditional authority and were indifferent or irreverent in matters of religion (free thinkers and atheists). The concept slowly evolved from heresy and atheism to debauchery: during the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the word libertin (or, ‘libertine’) came to designate a person leading a dissolute lifestyle and the word libertinage came to mean a way of living and of thinking that evoked sexual freedom, seduction and frivolity. It has kept that sense today: a libertine is a man, or a woman, ‘living a dissolute life.’ By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the libertine novel, which depicted the unfettered sexual activities of libertine characters, had become an important, if socially marginal, genre which frequently attacked conventional morality, as well as religious orthodoxy. Many such novels were sexually explicit, graphically descriptive, and obscene. Libertinism and pornography thus became closely associated. By the mid-eighteenth century, both served an increasingly political agenda, satirizing a corrupt and unpopular church, aristocracy, and monarchy. Sade’s own contribution to this tradition is significant with regard to the graphic and, at times, obscene representation of libertine debauchery for the purposes of political and religious satire.324

So, Dubois and Coeur-de-Fer clearly think that the argument from ‘evil’ is of sufficient strength to justify belief in atheism. For Coeur-de-Fer and Dubois, the idea of God is only a ‘chimera’, dreamed up by ignorant men in all cultures to assuage the fear of

forces they could not explain, a terrible tyranny from which we need to free ourselves; they will declare it to be outdated, enslaving, and a downright self-contradiction. Throughout the narration, they will repetitively express a firm and principled commitment to the non-existence of God and try to demonstrate (in theory and practice) to Justine and thus to the reader the liberating impact of this belief. For the libertines, all is matter: there is no Supreme Being defining absolute right and wrong, no soul, no afterlife, thus no goods realizable is some future state of the world and no fears of divine punishment or eternal damnation. The only governing force in the universe is Nature, thus conventional, religion-based morality can have no more meaning in ‘Justine’s world.’ So without a transcendent moral order based on God, all things are lawful: human beings are free of all values, all morality; there are no more barriers that prevents humanity from really enjoying its vices, or for the libertines to simply pursue their own desires to the fullest extent, regardless of what that means for those around them. Justine fails to understand these basic truths and this is why she does not find happiness in this earthly life.325

Here, de Sade really faces each individual with the question of how would we behave if there was no God. How, then, do we decide what is right and what is wrong? As we recall, Bayle had claimed that morality could be independent of religion, suggesting for instance that atheists could be more virtuous than Christians, who were guilty of many crimes, and that a society composed of atheists was viable. Drawing on his own life experience and on history, Bayle had shown that religious people were more than capable of committing ‘evil,’ and nonreligious people were more than capable of being

moral. That there existed, it seems, some kind of universal agreement about what we do as a matter of fact consider right and wrong, and which had no obvious connection with religion.

So really, if I agree with de Sade that in the absence of God, I would commit robbery, rape, torture, and murder, it is more a reflection of the kind of person I have chosen to be, which is an immoral person. If on the other hand, I choose to continue to be a ‘good person’ even when not under divine surveillance, I am proving to be a moral and trustworthy person, and at the same time I have managed to undermine the claim that God is necessary for us to be good.326 As Richard Dawkins expresses it in The God Delusion:

“it seems to me to require quite a low self-regard to think that, should belief in God suddenly vanish from the world, we would all become callous and selfish hedonists, with no kindness, no charity, no generosity, nothing that would deserve the name of goodness. [...] The majority of us don’t cause needless suffering, [...] we don’t cheat, don’t kill, don’t commit incest. Don’t do things to others that we would not wish done to us.”327

Hedonism is the view which bases ethics upon a consideration of pleasure and pain and defines goodness as that which provides the greatest amount of pleasurable feelings. What de Sade’s libertines are revealing themselves to be are extreme hedonists and cruel individuals who not only see the pleasure of the individual as supreme but also derive pleasure from the psychological and physical pain and distress of those whom they subjugate. It is interesting to note that De Sade’s libertines actually fit the profile of what we generally describe today as psychopaths328; they are social predators who seem to have totally quit humanity, doing what they want and do as they please without the slightest sense of guilt or regret; they are ruthless

individuals who have total disregard for the rights and feelings of others. For de Sade’s libertines, what is ‘good’ is indeed simply what pleases them (sensual pleasure), and what might be good for the libertines is generally very bad for others (their victims).

But de Sade’s libertines would argue that it is good that people should be significantly free and that they can only be free by allowing themselves to act badly. For this reason, de Sade’s libertines deems human wrong-doing to be accountable in terms of means to an end (the end being a world of free creatures; the means, setting themselves up as gods and allowing themselves freedom). They would also propose that ‘evil’ might be justifiable if it leads to some greater good, one not obtainable without the ‘evil’ in question. Indeed de Sade’s libertines see the domination of the weak by the strong as a universal natural law, designed to maximize the health and promote the survival of the species, the ‘greater good.’ By the same token, laws whose purpose is to protect the weak undermine Nature’s plan.

The ‘Evil God Hypothesis’

“The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully. Those of us schooled from infancy in his ways can become desensitized to their horror.”


In Justine and all of de Sade ‘black’ novels, all ‘philosophes-libertins’ will proclaim themselves passionate adepts of atheism. The exception to this rule is the character Saint-Fond in Juliette whose radical theological proposal I would like to examine in

329 Dawkins, 2006, p.31
some details. Speaking through the words of Saint-Fond, de Sade explores the hypothesis of the existence of an ‘evil God’ which for Saint-Fond is the most obvious explanation for why there is so much suffering in the world, why human beings are so wicked, and especially why the ‘vicious’ prosper while those who try to keep faith with God suffer. Saint-fond declares that it is the amount of unnecessary suffering, wickedness and injustice in the world that convinced him that the creator could not be good: “I raise up my eyes to the universe: I see evil, disorder, crime reigning as despots everywhere.”

De Sade clearly indicates that the acuteness of the problem is not so much why suffering exists, but why it afflicts some people and not the others; the problem being not the fact of suffering itself but the way it is ‘distributed.’ Indeed, the world is certainly not governed by the principle of equal measure because in the everyday reality ‘evil individuals’ get rewarded and ‘righteous individuals’ receive unwarranted punishment (cf. the central theme in Justine, and interestingly, in the Book of Psalms). Here we have to recall the whole idea of divine retribution which is so important a theme in the Hebrew Bible: the idea that if the human party stick to their contract with God (cf. the idea of a covenant) and behave correctly they shall be rewarded by God’s grace, and that if on the other hand they go astray, God will punish them, either directly or through the agency of others, and they will suffer. The doctrine of the ‘reward of good and the punishment of evil’ as well as the idea that all suffering is deserved has somehow persisted as an explanation of ‘evil’ since the Deuteronomic Judaic tradition (For instance: Deut. 5:9; 7: 12-14; 16: 20; 28) even though, -and de Sade is acutely aware of this-, it is not confirmed by the experience of the individuals.

One can wonder, says Saint-Fond, what sort of God allows these things to happen, or actually make them happen: the Judeo-Christian God can only be a wrathful, vengeful, ‘evil’ tyrant. Indeed we just have to recall the frightening curses, penalties and punishments in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy to agree with de Saint-Fond, -e.g. the stoning to death prescribed for rebellious children (Deut 21: 18-21), blasphemers (Lev 24:16), wizards (Lev 20: 27), or adulterers (Deut: 22:22).

Further, for Saint-Fond, there is also the problem of the horror of hell, the experience of everlasting physical and spiritual torment. ‘How can anything like the doctrine of hell be consistent with an all-powerful and all-loving God?’ ‘How could there be a dogma more abominable than this one?’ Indeed, the traditional understanding of hell teaches that for some momentary, particular immoral action, humans will experience agonizing pains (physical and mental) in the endless torments of hell. This is perhaps the most challenging argument for traditional theism and the belief in the existence of a benevolent God. It is hard to justify how there can be a God who would torture the vast majority of humankind forever. Saint-Fond’s thesis is straight forward: if one has to believe in God, the only rational explanation for all the injustice and suffering of the world, for all the horrors human beings commit, and for the existence of hell, is that God is the source of ‘evil;’ if God exists, God must be more vicious than the worst of criminals: “The author of the universe is the most wicked, the most ferocious, the most horrifying of all beings.”

In a long dissertation addressed to Juliette and her friend Clairvill, Saint-Fond goes on telling how he constructed his own religion, founding the resources and symbols for...
it in his own imagination, leaving it unclear whether or not he truly believes in this
spiritual reality beyond the human mind, -a reminiscence of Descartes’ malin
génie/malign demon. However what Saint-Fond seems to be alluding to is that if one
must have a religion it can only be the religion of the ‘evil God.’

Saint-Fond’s speculation reminds us in some way of Pierre Bayle’s thesis (cf. Chapter 2)
that on a posteriori grounds, Christian theologians could not give an explanation of
‘evil’ consistent with divine perfection without exposing themselves to overwhelming
difficulties. As we recall, for Bayle, the dualistic solutions to the problem of evil
proposed by those sects such as the Manichaeans which ascribed ‘evil’ to a rival
power, because the simplest, or the best at explaining the facts of experience, was
indeed the only true reasonable solution to the problem. However, by declaring God to
be the essence of ‘evil’ itself, Saint-Fond proposes a far more radical hypothesis than
Bayle and a far more sweeping theology than Manichaeism. As we recall, Manichaeism
and other forms of such dualism accept that God is good but by positing a co-equal
and co-eternal cosmic principle of ‘evil’ to explain all the cruelties of the world, denies
that God is almighty; whereas Saint-Fond’s solution to the ‘problem of evil’ is a monist
theodicy, that is to say a theodicy which regards everything including ‘evil’ as an aspect
of God.

“[...] there exists a God; [...] evil is his essence, and all that he causes us to commit is
indispensable to his plans. [...] a very vindictive being, very barbarous, very wicked, very unjust,
very cruel; that because vengeance, barbarity, wickedness, iniquity, criminality are the
necessary modes, vital to the principle that governs this vast creation, of which we only
complain when it brings us hurt: to its victims, crime is bad; to its agents, good.”

So by locating the source of ‘evil’ as God himself, Saint-Fond not only offers a simple solution to the problem of evil but also a way to ‘deculpabilize’ human beings for their actions; by favoring an understanding of sin which places the ‘fault elsewhere,’ Saint-Fond also releases ‘us’ from all moral responsibility (now, we do not have to deal with ‘our own faults’). As we recall, traditionally, the Church had explained human suffering and calamities as the consequences of human sinfulness; the doctrine of original sin had been developed by Augustine to explain that the whole of humankind partakes in the original sin of Adam, and consequently shares a common state of guilt before God.

Sin being thus a depravity that contaminates all dimensions of human existence (see in Chapter 1: Theodicy prior to the Seventeenth Century – a Brief Summary).

Saint-Fond totally disrupts the function of the traditional Christian theodicy that operated with the argument that human beings are responsible for all that is bad in the world, and demonstrates why this traditional dogmatic approach holds little weight. For those who want to keep on believing in a God of love who is all-powerful and all-knowing, the dilemma of the problem of evil reappears as soon as we ask whether God intended the events of the ‘Fall’ to happen. If God did, God would seem to be the author of ‘evil,’ and if he did not, God would not appear to be all-powerful. So, there will always remain the difficulty of reconciling the punishment of human errors with the conception of a moral and at the same time all-powerful creator of the world who is ultimately responsible for these actions ‘Himself.’ If God controls the destiny of the world, accordingly God becomes responsible for its conditions, thus ultimately responsible for all its badness (NB: up to this point we have the same
reasoning than Bayle but it will lead to a very different kind of conclusion- cf. chapter 2). For Saint-Fond, the simplest and most rational solution for why human beings, -who according to the Christian view are the ‘noblest earthly creations’ of a good and omnipotent God and made in ‘his’ own image-, should be the most wicked of all creatures, is that ‘God is evil.’ Since God is ‘evil,’ says Saint-Fond, all of God’s creation, human beings included, reflects this essential ‘evilness.’

The ‘Indifferent Universe Hypothesis’

However, apart from the character Saint-fond in *Juliette*, all of de Sade’s libertines proclaim that there is no God, either ‘good or evil,’ and that God’s non-existence reduces the universe to a purely materialist Nature, an organic whole which is a self-running, self-supporting and self-explanatory mechanism. Adapting the materialistic philosophy of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), Holbach, and especially of Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709-1751) whom de Sade quoted more often than any other writers, de Sade’s libertines in their philosophical speeches propound the view that matter in motion is all that exists; the universe is material, infinite, and eternal, and was formed by the chance arrangement of parts into a whole on mechanical principles. De Sade’s Nature is understood in terms of the classic atomistic model, according to which there is only one kind of thing in the world-atoms; matter is composed of separate and minute elements that are ‘uncutable’ (*atoma*) and loaded with energy, and *conatus*

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335 See: *Leviathan* (1651)
336 See: *L’Homme Machine* (1747)
(self-preservation - see Spinoza\(^{337}\)) that move in an empty space, or void. In brief, these atoms differ only in shape and size, and all changes occur by the transfer through direct contact of movement from atoms in motion, thus the collision of atoms is the truth of nature. Nature’s order is simply the chain of causes and effects, and human beings are in this world of deterministic physical causation.

“[…] the universe runs itself, and the eternal laws inherent in Nature suffice, without any first cause or prime mover, to produce all that is and all that we know; the perpetual movement of matter explains everything […]\(^{338}\)

So for de Sade’s libertines, all the processes of nature, including those commonly called ‘intellectual,’ the whole physical and moral order of things, are reducible to matter and motion and are completely explicable in terms of these two concepts. Human intelligence arises from purely mechanistic sources indifferent to human values. Matter produces mind, and mind creates the categories of ‘good and evil’ to explain natural phenomena. But in Nature, there is no value-system at work behind the scenes: nothing is just or unjust, and there is no force for ‘good or evil’ working through the basic natural forces. ‘Good and evil,’ or ‘right and wrong’ are simply make-believe concepts; human constructs used for the practical aspects of human relationships, not absolutes; ‘evil’ being simply our own designation of a part of the working of an indifferent Nature, and civilized life by its inherent violence is simply part of this state of Nature. And if Nature sanctions a certain human behavior in any society whatsoever, Sade explains, that is evidence of the necessity and value of that behavior. Infanticide for instance, is found throughout history amongst all people of the world,


\(^{338}\) The Marquis de Sade, Juliette, book one, 1968, p.43.
and this, for de Sade, demonstrates the ‘stupidity of regarding such a very trivial activity’ as wrong. In Justine and in de Sade’s other ‘black’ novels, the lessons in History, -what we might call social or cultural facts-, are referred to at length to support de Sade’s contention that all violent crimes are natural behavior. The customs of Madagascar, Greece, Rome and China are especially quoted by de Sade’s libertines; merely the child of local custom, morality is relative to culture and geography, and therefore fictive. Virtue and Vice are purely matters of opinion and place, and are but custom and habit.

"Without question the silliest thing in the world […] is to wish to dispute a man’s tastes, to wish to contradict, thwart, discredit, condemn, or punish them if they do not conform either with the laws of the country he inhabits or with the prejudices of social convention. Why indeed! Will it never be understood that there is no variety of taste, however bizarre, however outlandish, however criminal it may be supposed, which does not derive directly from and depend upon the kind of organization we have individually received from Nature."

For de Sade’s libertines, ‘Mother Nature’ is the universal governing force, and it is from Nature’s principle that human beings can derive a code of conduct. Because de Sade chooses to focus on the brutal and the cruel, de Sade’s Nature tends to lean towards ‘evil,’ -an inconsistency in de Sade’s system of thought, as ‘evil’ is meant to be a category we should have left behind-; de Sade comes close to make Nature a divinity. It was de Sade’s belief that destructiveness is one of Nature’s first law and throughout Justine, there are many lengthy philosophical monologues which describes the Natural world as one of disorder, chaos, death and destruction, of the blind proliferation of life and the recycling of matter. Nature uses matter from dead life forms to create new ones; crime, destruction, and death are necessary and pleasing to ‘her.’ To destroy can never be a crime, and as murder is no more than a form of destruction, it is thus to be

339 Justine, or Good Conduct Well Chastised (1791), Seaver & Wainhouse, 1965, pp.598-599
approved. By their callous, violent and destructive behavior the ‘criminal-libertines’ are simply aiding Nature’s ultimate goal; in other words, even by murdering, the libertines are simply furthering the ends of Nature340:

"Tis the ridiculous value we attach to this life which eternally makes us speak drivel about the kind of deed to which a man resorts in order to disencumber himself of a fellow creature. Believing that existence is the greatest of all goods, we stupidly fancy we are doing something criminal when we convey someone away from its enjoyment; but the cessation of this existence, or at least what follows it, is no more an evil than life is a good; or, rather if nothing dies, if nothing is destroyed, if nothing is lost to Nature, if all the decomposed parts of any body whatsoever merely await dissolution to reappear immediately under new forms, how indifferent is this act of murder! and how dare one find evil in it?341"

In the world of Nature and of natural human beings, -because all beings and all happenings are equal in value and validity and all phenomena are necessary-, the balance of ‘good and evil’ makes it indifferent whether we as individuals are benevolent or malevolent to one another. Moreover no problem of evil exists, because in all of us each degree of good is allied with an equal degree of ‘evil,’ and the total quantity of each is at every moment equal, so there is no more dilemma of trying to make sense of all the terrible things in terms of a supposedly perfect creator. The problem of evil is thus a liberating one: de Sade’s universe is now empty of moral value; free from God, from hell, from all idols, and from all illusions concerning the original cause of things, ‘his heroes-libertines’ can thus proclaim their freedom from all moral bonds and establishing the world according to their own ideas.342

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341 Justine, or Good Conduct Well Chastised (1791), Seaver & Wainhouse,1965, p.554.

De Sade’s thesis that destructiveness, cruelty and thus suffering are built into the process of Nature is used by ‘his libertines’ as strong evidence against the existence of a creator/designer God who is both loving and powerful. In *Evil in Modern Thought*, Susan Neiman suggests that, in his works, de Sade “presented an argument from design in reverse: wherever you look, you see miracles of horror.” And In *Women and Evil*, Nel Nodding writes: “de Sade wanted to rub humankind’s face in the fate it had accepted as decreed by a good and loving God. Here is what it looks like, says de Sade. Glory in it!” And de Sade certainly does ‘rub our faces’ in everything which is dirty, disgusting, and forbidden. In his fictional universe, de Sade demands of his readers to not turn their eyes away from the cold calculus of child flogging, cannibalistic practices, rape, torture, murder and countless other atrocity, while calmly philosophizing about the role of religion in human society, cultural relativism or human beings’ natural impulses.

So however convincing some of de Sade’s philosophical views might feel, common sense tells us that any understanding of the world that sees only beauty or, in this case, only cruelty is false; and that the victimization of the ‘weakest,’ particularly women and children, -the libertine’s favorite targets-, is always immoral, deeply shocking and offensive. De Sade’s extreme espousal of Nature’s destructiveness as the law of being leaves his readers with a horrific vision of a world in which there seems to be no moral difference between the slicing of a carrot and the mutilation of a child. In seeking to justify human cruelty, de Sade offers an anthropomorphic account of Nature that is misleading. The natural cycle may include elements that are not friendly

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to humanity and cause human suffering (tsunamis and earthquakes, volcanoes, and so
on) but this does not mean that Nature is deliberately brutal.

Moreover what de Sade tends to ignore is that even though we might be biological
animals, we have also become cultural beings; so if in many ways our biological
instincts push us in the direction of self-centered survival, our cultural evolution offers
us the opportunity to transcend natural selection; our humanity is predicated on the
fact that we can choose how to behave. There is indeed a major difference between
human being and the self-regulating system that is Nature.345

As Steven Pinker summarizes well:

“It’s no mystery why organisms sometimes harm one another. Evolution has no conscience, and
if one creature hurts another to benefit itself, such as by eating, parasitizing, intimidating, or
cuckolding, its descendants will come to predominate, complete with those nasty habits. All
this is familiar from the vernacular sense of “Darwinian” as a synonym for “ruthless” and from
Tennyson’s depiction of nature as red in tooth and claw. If that were all there was to the
evolution of the human condition, we would have to agree with the rock song: Life sucks then
you die. But of course life does not always suck. Many creatures cooperate, nurture, and make
peace, and human in particular find comfort and joy in their families, friends, and
communities.”346

The Naturalistic Fallacy and the Problem of Determinism

So now that Sade’s philosophs have established that there are non-natural moral
facts in the world, no simple accounts of ‘good and evil;’ they will then try to
demonstrate that they are some facts about the Natural world, about human nature or
human desires that are unshakable and that when studied correctly, tell ‘us’ what we
should strive to be and to achieve and upon which they will attempt to construct a


‘persuasive counter-moral theory.’ They will present a philosophy of ‘nihilism’ flowing from their radical egotism, and illustrating its ‘evil’ consequences and implications. De Sade’s insight was to propose that the ‘evils’ of this world that are perpetrated by human beings result from an innate, natural self-centeredness, -which pushes us to give greater importance to ourselves and interfere with our ability to consider others as worthy human beings-, and to make a connection between self-centeredness and the instinct of survival.

I would like to take note that the term ‘nihilism’ employed in relation to de Sade’s thought might be seen as anachronistic. Indeed, even though the term ‘nihilism’ is very occasionally used in the late eighteenth century in France, its meaning here derives from its elaboration in nineteenth-century European philosophy (Turgenev, Nietzsche). ‘Nihilism’ as the situation which obtains when ‘everything is permitted.’ If there is no meaning within the world, de Sade’s libertines feel free to impose whatever meaning they please upon it. For them, to relinquish belief in God is simultaneously to affirm that their identity is placed beyond challenge and judgment, opening the way to new, creative ways of conceiving themselves and the world in which they live, -(in The context of de Sade’s thought, what seems to be the ‘imagination of vice and cruelty’). De Sade’s radical thinking contributed, I believe, to these transformations of human thinking that led to the explicit nihilism of the nineteenth century.

As we recall, in Justine, the ‘philosophes-libertines’ are claiming that by observing the workings of the Natural world, we can assert there is no intrinsic right or wrong, no justice or injustice, no crimes, and so on; only the violent collisions of atoms and the Natural Law of survival of the strongest; the key point being it seems that all is
indifferent in Nature, -its working are completely arbitrary-, and that nothing is forbidden. The state of Nature, -civilized life being part of this state of Nature-, is thus in a constant state of war where each individual is pitted against all others. These are not new ideas as Thomas Hobbes\(^\text{347}\) for instance, -with whom de Sade was familiar with, and whom he quoted freely-, had declared that ‘man (sic) is a wolf to man,’ and that ‘the state of Nature is one of war,’ but de Sade I believe pushes these ideas much further. De Sade’s ‘Law of Nature’ seems to amount to a complete denial of any moral Natural Law (Hobbes versus de Sade). In his novels, de Sade’s theory requires the individual always to act on the basis of the bare-right of self-preservation to the extent that no one should ever sacrifice oneself for one’s parents, children and certainly not for one’s religion; de Sade sets each against all, so ‘I’ have the right to defend myself against ‘you’ in any way I choose to. This view seems to differ from Hobbes’s understanding of the Right of Nature which even though it rests on the recognition of the salience for everybody of their own survival, is also, like any right, renounceable. For Hobbes, it is up to the individual to use his or her own judgment about preservation and to decide when to renounce this right for the benefit of others; and throughout \textit{Leviathan}, Hobbes argues that people can and should cooperate with each other and consider other people’s interests, because in everyday life doing so is in everybody’s interest, as without restraints, life would be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.”

For de Sade’s libertines, it is never the case; in their ‘anarchic universe,’ there is no room for ‘non-egoistic’ motivation by concern for others; born isolated, the individual is solely important, with obligations to nobody, and only selfish inclinations. De Sade’s

libertines can probably be designated as radical psychological egoists who rule out any biological possibility of altruism, -that is the claim that people sometimes do sacrifice what they take to be their own interests for the interests of others-, thus also any possibility for any moral theory that would propose that people sometimes ‘ought to’ sacrifice what they take to be their own interests for the interests of others. For de Sade’s libertines, human beings’ natural instincts are innately destructive, driven by natural forces which are not entirely within volitional control. Far from being reasonable, ‘we’ are instinct driven, naturally selfish and cruel, motivated only by our egoistic impulses and passions, and wishing ‘evil’ on others. So for de Sade’s libertines, the social contract proposal is a complete travesty; it is simply a scheme promulgated by the weak to hinder the strong. Nature is seen as a destructive force whose influence provides the frame for human actions and it causal consequences, so even when committing acts of unfathomable cruelty, de Sade’s libertines will argue that they are only conforming to the principle of Nature.

And de Sade’s libertines are certainly capable of just about any kind of unspeakable acts. They have a fascination with power, torture and death; acting from a cold, calculating rationality combined with a chilling inability to treat others as thinking, feeling, human beings, and they rationalize their grotesque and perverse sexual fantasies, and violent behaviors by appealing to the right which Nature gives to the strong (the ‘Vicious’) over the weak (the ‘Virtuous’), and to a determinist Nature which annuls moral responsibility: people are determinist machines, following the imprint of the primitive impulses which govern them, so they cannot help it if they are callous or depraved.
“Wolves which batten upon lambs, lambs consumed by wolves, the strong who immolate the weak, the weak victims of the strong: there you have Nature, there you have her intentions, there you have her scheme: a perpetual action and reaction, a host of vices, a host of virtues, in one word, a perfect equilibrium resulting from the equality of good and evil on earth; the equilibrium essential to the maintenance of the stars, of vegetation and, lacking which, everything would be instantly in ruins.”

So to resume, for de Sade’s libertines, the permanent battle between Vice and Virtue within humanity, -the viciously competitive war of survival where the strongest and the ruthless have the advantage over the vulnerable or most virtuous-, can be understood by looking at the creative and destructive impulses of Nature. In ‘Justine’s world,’ Nature which operates absolutely blindly and mechanically, knows not the individual; it is simply a self-regulating system that needs both the strong and the weak to maintain its ‘perfect equilibrium’ and that does not distinguish humans from animals or plants. In de Sade’s universe, there is no privileged position for humanity as human life is located simply within the physical processes of the universe; so what happens to a human being is of no greater significance that what happens to a carrot or a beetroot, shredded to be consumed in a salad. According to de Sade’s libertines, the realistic view is that murder is just a trivial matter.

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348 Justine, or Good Conduct Well Chastised (1791), Seaver & Wainhouse, 1965, p.608.
"[De Sade] could prove that the state of nature was devoid of limitations and rules and that the social contract was a fraud promulgated by the weak to fetter the strong. He could enshrine a kind of godless, meaningless materialism as the only rule of nature, and he could use cultural relativism to destroy any universal meaning in human nature—all in order to justify his own eccentric, selfish, alienated, and ultimately self-destructive feelings and behaviors. He had made a mockery, a parody, of the very idea of coherence—of authority, of meaning, of law, of family life. Essentially, he had destroyed the world and its people, their accumulated history of meanings and beliefs.\footnote{Schaeffer, 1999, pp.374-375.}

In many respects, de Sade’s demonstration that human beings are just a part of the Natural world, where paradoxically, death is essential for life (living things evolve through reproduction, so death allows existing forms of life to be replaced by ones that are better suited to the world) forces us to face our tendency to place too much importance on the significance of human mortality especially in the Western tradition. The Sadean world certainly can have a salutary humbling effect, cutting into our tendency to assume that being human make us superior to other species and thus deserve special moral consideration in comparison with non-human animals. Moreover, as we have already seen earlier, from our observation of the Natural world, it is hard to dismiss de Sade’s claim that nature is bloody, void of compassion and without moral direction (Tennyson’s “Nature, red in tooth and claw”). However, there are serious problems with de Sade’s attempt to derive moral values (in this case, ‘amoral’ values) or rules of conduct from an understanding of human life as located simply within the physical processes of a universe which is intrinsically valueless. Nature is constantly used to rationalize and justify the violent libertine way of life. Merely the ‘slave of passion,’ de Sade’s libertines invoke a ‘natural tendency’ to explain their conduct, and pins their hopes on ‘anatomy’ to explain the kind of ruthless
behaviors we would reserve the word ‘evil’ for, -that is specially horrific or shocking acts done by people who clearly intended to hurt or to kill others in an terribly painful way. For instance, in Justine, the libertine-monk Clement declares that:

“The man endowed with perverted taste is sick [...] is deserving of our sympathy and not of blame; that is the moral apology for the persons whom we are discussing; a physical explanation will without doubt be found as easily, and when the study of anatomy reaches perfection they will without any trouble be able to demonstrate the relationship of the human constitution to the tastes which it affects. [...] what is to become of your laws, your ethics, your religion, your gallows, your Gods and your Heaven and your Hell when it shall be proven that such a flow of liquids, this variety of fibers, that degree of pungency in the blood or in the animal spirits are sufficient to make a man the objects of your givings and your takings away?

If sometimes it is not clear where de Sade himself stands in the libertines debates, (as for instance, de Sade was not a murderer), in the above passage, Clement sounds very much like de Sade himself as he often would argue in his letters, that, since his sexual tastes were inherent in the constitution given to him by nature, fulfilling them could not be an unnatural act. Thus he rationalized his libertinage in terms he believed anyone could understand and sympathize with.

De Sade’s libertines appeal chiefly to sensory, corporeal experience to show the cause of our sensations. Pleasure for instance is understood in terms of sensual titillation, and since materialism makes pleasure proportional to stimulus and that one of humanity’s attributes is the derivation of pleasure, primarily sexual pleasure, from the suffering of others, -the greater the cruelty, the greater the pleasure. In Justine’s universe, the libertines’ only maxim is to ‘Enjoy oneself, at no matter whose expense.’

Now, what is problematic is that pleasure is the only existing value in a wholly natural and valueless world, and that ‘good’ has been defined by the libertines, in terms of

351 Justine, or Good Conduct Well Chastised (1791), Seaver & Wainhouse,1965, pp. 602-603.
‘pleasure’ (‘Good’ means ‘pleasurable’); selfishness, crime and cruelty are therefore the proper course. So, de Sade’s libertines live their loveless life as solitary predators using other people as instruments of their own profit or pleasure. In de Sade’s world, the moral consequences of rejecting any transcendent dimension and the total acceptance of physical life are far-reaching and terrifying.352

We have to remember that the enjoyment of active cruelty, as described by the Marquis de Sade, was termed after his name. Indeed, the term ‘sadism’ was coined by Krafft-Ebbing (1898) originally to describe fantasies and behaviors focused on inflicting pain during sexual interactions. Krafft-Ebbing drew on the writings of de Sade and indicated that the ‘sadist’ experiences sexual arousal by exercising control and dominance, pain and humiliation on the object of their desire. According to modern psychiatry and psychoanalytic theory, sadism, and sexual sadism in particular, is another possible source of insight into whether people get pleasure from inflicting pain. In the “Demonic Side of Sexuality,” Adolf Guggenbüh-Craig writes:

“Sadism is in part to be understood as an expression of the destructive side of people: an expression of the core, of the shadow, of the murderer within us. It is a specifically human trait to find joy in destruction. [...] destructiveness is a psychological phenomenon with which every human being must come to terms. The joy of destroying, of obliterating, of torturing, etc., is also experienced within the sexual medium [...] Another component in sadism is the intoxication with power. It provides sexual pleasure to dominate the partner completely, to play with him like a cat with a mouse.”353

We do know from his correspondence that de Sade had a deep interest in the pleasure of gratuitous violence which figured importantly in his fantasies, and that he was clearly unafraid by his materialistic and sexual instincts. De Sade’s novels are, in this

respect, an honest and brave exploration of the depths of darkness that human beings are capable of sinking to; his daring attempts to look at the dynamics between the two primary drives of sex and aggression were influential in showing us what human nature is like. Even though generally speaking, we are non-violent most of the time and that most social interactions of most people involve no use of physical force, we also have to accept that every person is potentially violent and harbors some measure of hostility, aggression and sadism; and that given apparent justification people are capable of doing dreadful things to one another.354

Concluding Thoughts

Writing a thesis about the problem of evil has been a demanding task. It has been difficult not only on an intellectual level because of the complex and challenging questions one has to face, but especially on a psychological and emotional level because thinking about ‘evil’ and exploring the darkest regions of human experience and behavior for an extended period of time is inevitably distressing. My view of the human condition became more pessimistic as time went by. Moreover, on a theological and philosophical level, I became increasingly aware that so much had been written about the problem of evil that it seemed hardly possible to put forward anything new. However, throughout my research, I kept holding onto the possibility that it might well turn out that there were ideas to be wrested from the study of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thought that had perhaps become hard to identify in reflection on one’s own place and tradition, and that might be relevant for contemporary discussion and worth trying to resuscitate. By revisiting thinkers of the past, there was the prospect of hopefully finding a new angle, a slightly different perspective, or perhaps some helpful intellectual insights which might assist in my project to further the conversation on this age-old problem.

Rather than seeing ‘evil’ and suffering as simply a philosophical or theological endeavor, I thus began my research trying to start in a different place, by recognizing that the ‘problem of evil’ is a deeply meaningful human experience before it becomes an object for theological and philosophical reflection. Theodicy, for believers and non-believers alike, commences with the question, or lament of: “Why had this to happen?” Theodicy begins with the emotional and psychological need for comfort and
reassurance in the midst of life tragedy and crisis, with wanting to explain precisely ‘evil.’ Theodicy is about hoping to explain the ‘unexplainable,’ think the ‘unthinkable,’ and try to justify the ‘unjustifiable.’ Practicing theodicy, -in the theist and non-theist sense of the term-, being thus a way to cope with the sense of absurdity and hopelessness provoked by the reality of ‘evil’ and the vicissitudes of life, a way to deal with stressful events in order to obtain significance. By using the intellect as a rational tool, human beings are trying to deal with real, living human situations, focusing on words and ideas rather than be overwhelmed by painful and anxiety-provoking experiences. To resume, theodicists take ‘evil’ and suffering out of the world of experience and into the world of ideas, hoping for clarity of thought in the midst of fear and confusion.

However, the conundrum with the ‘intellectualization process’ is that by avoiding emotional engagement, we can fall into prioritizing philosophical abstractions over how human beings (and this extends to the suffering in the nonhuman world) are affected within a particular situation, and act. Voltaire warned us about this dilemma as he spoke impatiently and indignantly against the kind of theorizing which, he felt, did not actually dealt with the complexities of real people facing real experiences. For Voltaire, if a theodicy was viewed as an undertaking with exclusively theoretical implications without any necessary corollary of action, it was not much help to one’s suffering. Indeed rarely do the specifics of the lived reality of the human experience of ‘evil,’ pain and suffering enter into the philosophical equation. As I have worked on this research project, I certainly became more and more aware of falling into the ‘theodicy trap’ and of the shortcomings of such a philosophical enterprise. With his *Candide*, Voltaire provided an illustration of the inadequacy of ‘theoretical theodicy’ when it is
brought down from the level of universal, general theory to the particularities of a human experience of suffering. With his *Candide*, Voltaire tried to offer an immediate presentation of the problem of evil, and the practical solution of action (even if limited), resistance and cooperation which lay within humanity’s grasp. For Voltaire, it was clear that much of the horrors that went on in the world did not have to happen; it existed only because human beings chose that it should exist. I do embrace Voltaire’s way of thinking and do argue with him that much of the ‘evil’ and suffering of the world is of a moral nature, and that human beings are solely responsible for its existence, either because of the abominable ways human beings treat each other, or of the destructive ways we interfere with the natural world. Human greed, ignorance, poor planning or general apathy are, I believe, all sources of ‘evil.’ And even though we have to concede that many amongst us might still have the ‘intuitive’ need to postulate a deity (for the comfort, support and reassurance that faith in the existence of a supernatural being seems to bring for a lot of people), we must recognize that our fate is in our own hands and we must take initiative to make the world a better place. Hope that ‘things’ will improve, willingness to cooperate with others, finding beauty and meaning within the simplest activities of life, and treating the world just as it was one’s own garden might just stop us falling into complete utter despair and make the world a better place.

**The failures of theodicy**

As I examined what the thinkers of the past had to say and tried to hear first of all their voices, I became more and more convinced that traditional approaches to theodicy that seek to provide philosophical and theological arguments to explain ‘evil’ so people
can hold on the possibility of God in the midst of some life tragedy not only do not work, but can also be dangerous and have the potential to become sources of ‘evil in themselves. Indeed, proposed theoretical answers, no matter how reasonable, or widely accepted they might seem to be, must be carefully evaluated since people’s pain can certainly be worsened by false solutions to the problem of evil and suffering. For instance, despite the rise of biblical critical scholarship over the past two centuries and the development of modern science, original sin and divine retribution are still given as popular explanations for the apparently arbitrary suffering caused by natural disasters. God’s punishment of sinners was advanced to explain the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, but also proposed after the 2004 Asian Tsunami. Following the Lisbon disaster, Voltaire’s reply to the argument of divine punishment was to ask ironically if God in this earthquake had actually selected the 40,000 least virtuous of the Portuguese citizens to die on that day. Indeed, the sufferings of all sentient beings, especially young children and nonhuman animals-, cannot be accounted for as punishment for sin. There are so many awful events, in which people for no fault of their own undergo horrors we can hardly imagine, and these kinds of explanations can only inspire hopelessness and resignation, and ways of thinking that can easily become destructive rather than life-enhancing. From whatever deep-seated part of our psyche, these archaic ideas have survived in many of us, the premise that ‘natural evil’ is punishment because of the depravity of human beings still continue to be invoked. It is understandable that this kind of explanation was accepted as a ‘logical’ explanation in earlier times as nobody understood for instance the mechanism of plate tectonics (even now it is not fully understood), but we cannot accept such responses anymore.

355 This is also a thesis maintained by John Swinton in: Raging with Compassion – Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil, William, B., Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan & Cambridge, UK, 2007, p.3. I would like to note that although John Swinton’ s theological framework and conclusions differ significantly from the ideas presented in this thesis, the common thread running between his work and this project is the emphasis on the unsatisfactory nature of traditional theodicy and the need for practical rather than theoretical responses to the ‘problem of evil.’
These theological arguments offer little comfort to the relatives of the hundreds of thousands of victims of natural disasters, and keep us bound in unhealthy guilt and fatalism, possibly preventing many of us from acting and caring fully for the sufferers in front of us.

Further, in the face of the problem of theodicy provoked by natural disasters such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and tsunamis, attempts at a justification fitting with Leibniz’s optimism were, and still are, sometimes suggested. As we recall, for Leibniz, the ills of the world are not gratuitous. Generally speaking, we can affirm that God does not permit any ‘evil’ to arrive in the world, unless God knows that a good will arrive thanks to it. But this does not mean we will necessarily be able to identify this good in particular. Moreover, the number of bad things is far outweighed by the number of good things, or the more expansive perspective provides a realization that the universe is not on the whole ‘evil.’ Voltaire rejected any attempt to see the good in Lisbon’s destruction. Voltaire’s insight was to identify that the crux of the problem was not the overall system and its overall goodness but the struggle for believers (and I would add, non-believers) with the challenge to the goodness of God, or the meaningfulness of life posed by specific cases of innocent suffering. There is indeed a real problem in affirming with Genesis 1:31 that this creation is ‘very good’ and that this is the creation of a good God. Even if the system as a whole is full of value, the suffering of individual creatures might lead one to conclude with de Sade’s Saint-Fond or Richard Dawkins that the world is the product of a sadistic monster rather than a loving father.
One of the core assumptions of Christian thought is indeed the affirmation that God’s creation is good. As we have discussed in chapter one, many theologians previously had blamed the suffering in nature on the fall of human beings. Nature had been peaceful, gentle and harmonious before the disastrous choice of Adam and Eve. All suffering was thus attributable to sin. That view can no longer be used. Today, there is no scientific evidence showing that the biological world was ever free of predation and violence. Evidence of predation and of the extinction of species, goes back as far as the fossil record can take it. So if our world may be the ‘best possible world’ for the evolution of living things such as ourselves, yet the question remains as to whether the creation of such a world is the activity of a good God, -that is a ‘worship-worthy’ God-, a God who tends to be more relational, more affected by human suffering, and more responsive to human needs. Leibniz’s conception of God remains problematic and the profound dilemma of ‘evil’ and suffering remains, beyond the reach of theological argument alone. Indeed Leibniz’s transcendent deity seems so far from being involved in human affairs; his portrait of God is one of a distant designer, coldly calculating the metaphysically richest world and then actualizing it without any thought or concern about what that world might mean to the creatures in it. In the Many Faces of Evil (2004), John Feinberg writes:

“In my opinion the worst indictment of Leibniz’s theology is that his God is utterly repugnant. [...] A God who personally cares about his creatures seems foreign to Leibniz’s portrait. If Leibniz’s God really cared about his creatures, it seems that he would look at the world he calculated, see how much sin and suffering it contains, and either refuse to actualize any world at all or actualize a world with less evil, even if doing so meant less variety of being. Of course, Leibniz’s God could not do that, since Leibniz’s system obligates God to create the metaphysically richest world, and that that world must contain evil. But that understanding of God’s moral obligation only further underscores how objectionable the Leibnizian world is. Surely all of this is quite foreign to the portrait of God one finds in Scripture.”

But it may be that the critique of such anthropocentrism is much needed in order for us to be able to look beyond narrowly human interests and concerns. We can recall, that in Réponse aux questions d’un provincial (1704), Bayle himself had traced the heart of the problem to be the inevitable contradiction between a theocentric view of human existence, and the actual experience of ‘evil’ and suffering. For ‘evil’ to be intelligible, in other words for a theodicy to be possible, one had to adopt the point of view of God and to see everything on a universal scale.357 In addition, I would argue that on an evolutionary level, Leibniz’s theodicy makes a lot of sense. We certainly can contemplate that the constant renewal of our planet by the very same mechanism of plate tectonics that slip and induce earthquakes and tsunamis has been proved to be beneficial to millions of lives on earth because it produces essential minerals and fertile soils; or that exactly the same biochemical processes that enable cells to mutate and produce new forms of life, can also induce malignancy.358 In Quantum Physics and Theology – An Unexpected Kinship (2007), John Polkinghorne writes:

“All parts of the created order are allowed to act according to their varied natures, being themselves and -through the evolutionary exploration of the potency with which the universe has been endowed-making themselves. In a non-magic world, [...] there will be an inevitable shadow side to fruitful process.359.”

Here, Leibniz’s comparison of the contrast of ‘evil’ with how “shadows enhance colors; even a dissonance in the right place gives relief to harmony”360 comes to mind. Indeed, in the Theodicy, Leibniz also reflects on the optimality of the world by reference to beauty and universal harmony, -as everything in the universe is connected with everything. If it might be difficult to outweigh aesthetic considerations with the world’s

357 Labrousse, 1983, p.63
359 Polkinghorne, 2007. P.71
360 Leibniz, Theodicy, 1990 edition, p.130
history of bloodshed, cruelty, diseases, exploitation, oppression, and so on; on a cosmological level however, Leibniz’s adoption of the ‘consider the perfection of the whole’ approach to the dilemma of ‘evil’ might help us to take a larger perspective on things. Indeed, part of this theodicy is the emphasis to ‘think bigger,’ -that is to think in terms of an entire universe where everything (not just human beings) is interconnected;- every intricate details of nature being all parts or aspects of one intelligible universe. Leibniz’s metaphysical theory of the ‘interconnectedness of its substances’ within an ordered whole might help us to recognize that every person is connected not only to every person but to all of nature, and might lead some of us to pursue a path of nonviolence (in Gandhi’s understanding of the term which entails not interfering with the ‘true moral and natural order’ of the universe361) or find peace on our own. If we are able to look at our own life as an ‘on-the-whole positive affair,’ we might be able to balance off the ‘evils’ of our life with the ‘goods,’ and by doing so, incorporate them into a meaningful positive whole. But we also have to recognize that we, as human beings, find it difficult to see the beauty and harmony of the whole, and find significance in the presence of chaos, sadness, death and destruction, as generally speaking we dislike experiencing any kind of physical pain or mental suffering.

For de Sade, theistic ideas that try to account for the world’s ‘evil’ by asserting that each and every instance of ‘evil’ that exists is necessary for the existence of a ‘greater good’ (or the prevention of greater ‘evil’ that God could not bring about without the ‘evil’ in question), are sophistries which can only lead to radical egotism. The significance of de Sade’s Justine in this respect, is the way he utilizes vividly horrible

361 Here, we have to recall that in Leibniz’s metaphysical theory, the world’s arrangements are so systematically connected that if we would improve something at one point of the system there would inevitably have damaging repercussions at another.
examples and details in order to evoke in the reader a sense that there can be no sufficient reason for a ‘good God’ to allow the ‘evils’ that ‘He’ does. All of de Sade’s ‘black’ novels are intended to shock, disgust and outrage; forcing us to reflect on the extreme examples of cruelty and torture (such as incest, rape, mutilation, cannibalism) and focus our attention on the most horrible details of human suffering and of radical ‘evil.’ After reading de Sade, we are left with a powerful sense of ‘evil.’ In The Poetics of Evil (2012), Philip Tallon writes:

“The use of horror in philosophical discussion seems [...] to be primarily about giving us a sense of the incredible disvalue of a state of affairs and expecting that sense to outweigh all possible responses that we can offer to it. Horror, [in this case], work to stump theodicy into silence”

As we recall, for de Sade, suffering, pain, waste, and extinction in the human and nonhuman world are just facts of nature. They have no moral content, and we should not project on them moral categories, (which by the way properly belong only to the sphere of human beings). De Sade urges us to be realistic about these phenomena, and to stop believing in the fiction of a warm and receptive providence we have created to escape the cold, unfriendly realities of a brutal world. De Sade’s insight in this respect was to show that ‘horror’ at the site of ‘evil’ is part of some human reaction to the process of nature, but not part of the process itself. For instance, certain evolutionary strategies such as parasitism and infanticide or cannibalism generally arouse a strong negative response in us, but for de Sade, this should not constitute any concern. De Sade understood the world to be blind, materialistic and purposeless. And for those, who believe in a meaningless universe comprised of nothing more than a random series of cause-and-effect events with no fixed direction or purpose, ‘evil’ is not really

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a problem at all, it is ‘just the way the world is.’ We might not like it, but there is no God to blame; just ourselves. And considering that by following our violent and destructive behavior we are simply aiding Nature’s ultimate goal, we do not have to blame ourselves either. Bad things just happen to people whether they are good or bad. And bad things very often happen in the world because people do bad things.

De Sade answered the theodicy question with a definitive conviction: there is no God. De Sade believed that his atheism is a logical conclusion drawn from the conditions of the world. If there is no God, the problem resolves itself. Without a belief in a creator God, and indeed a loving creator God, there is a natural and easy response to suffering in the nonhuman world: ‘that is just the way things are.’ In Justine, de Sade encourages us to contemplate the idea that human beings have created God(s) and religion(s) to keep themselves from seeing the universe as the impersonal and meaninglessness place it seems to be; providing themselves with a false sense of ultimate order, meaning and purpose that ‘protect’ them from the reality of world and themselves, - giving them a metaphysical grounding for their moral behavior. Indeed, in considering the possibility of a world without God, and without religion, the most important issue is the question of morality. If evidence does not support the common view that religiosity is positively correlated with morality, we cannot, I believe, so easily dismiss the fact that people have drawn on their religious beliefs and community (the same way as non-believers will draw on humanist views) to make judgments as to what is right and what is wrong. But as we have discussed earlier, there is indeed nothing to support the assumption that individual religious believers will be moral and tolerant people, that a lack of religiosity leads to less moral behavior, or that the Bible and
other sacred texts are reliable sources to determine moral right or wrong. But as a Voltaire or a Diderot had feared in their time, there is still an urgent need for a totally different and more effective basis for ethics suitable to our time and place. In The Biology of beliefs (2008), Bruce Lipton writes:

“Meanwhile we are leading lives without a moral context. The modern world has shifted from spiritual aspirations to a war for material accumulation. The one with the most toys wins.”

Indeed, when it comes to acting for the sake of others or the world, the well-being of self tends to be both preliminary and the ultimate consideration. Hopefully, de Sade is mistaken in his evaluation of the human condition, and our capacities for empathy, compassion and self-reflection might one day prevail over our baser instincts, and over what de Sade identified as our innate propensity to do ‘evil.’

‘Thinking conscientiously’

Here we can recall that basic to Bayle’s critique of ‘superstition’ was the proposition that simply because something has long been believed, or because everyone believes it, by no means signifies that there are adequate grounds for believing it to be true. Bayle showed us how important it is to think correctly especially in matter of religious beliefs and explanations. As we have discussed it in chapter two, Bayle’s Philosophical Commentary revealed a close connection between a lack of critical thought and the perpetration of ‘evil’ actions. Here, Bayle opened up the debate about the legitimization of violence which is still relevant for us today, especially in regard to religion and persecution, because religious belief is often used as a legitimate

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Justification for violence. Can an act be seen as less violent when justified by God’s supposed will? For Bayle, acceptance of a unique truth, exempt from rational inquiry, is simply not acceptable; where absolutist belief takes precedence over common sense and self-reflection, religious beliefs can easily lead to self-righteousness and to persecution of those whose beliefs differ from, or who question, the accepted dogma. I would thus argue with Bayle, that much ‘evil’ and suffering in the world could be avoided by making a serious examination of what we believe in, and that we should always scrutinize with utmost attention what we accept as truth; many of us are unthinkingly involved, individually or collectively, in actions and attitudes that are profoundly ‘evil’ but socially or ‘religiously’ acceptable within one’s culture or community. Bayle urged us to recognize that religion can have a violent nature; that by giving a moral justification to violence, -such as authorizing torture as a means to combat heresy or ‘terrorism’-, religion certainly has also the potential to legitimate political violence. Indeed, throughout our history, religious differences have provided a convenient tool for convincing people that a war being waged in the name of ‘absolute moral truth’ is a righteous war, -and this extends to any form of absolutist and dogmatic secular moral systems (e.g. Extreme Marxist regimes of the twentieth century). In The Science of Good and Evil (2004), Michael Shermer confirms Bayle’s insight that intolerance is clearly at the origin of many ‘evil’ actions:

“Absolute morality leads logically to absolute intolerance. Once it is determined that one has the absolute and final answers to moral questions, why be tolerant of those who refuse to accept the Truth? Religiously based moral systems apply this principle in spades. From the medieval Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition to the Holocaust and Bosnia, history is rife with examples of intolerance. In the name of God, religious people have sanctioned slavery, anti-Semitism, racism, homophobia, torture, genocide, ethnic cleansing, and war.”

Moreover, after witnessing the horrors of religious persecutions and weighed down by personal loss, Pierre Bayle became certain that any theodicy was not possible, -that is to say, any theory that would explain rationally how God’s omnipotence and goodness could be reconciled with the fact of ‘evil’ in the world. For Bayle, the problem of evil as traditionally understood was insolvable. So, if we did affirm God’s goodness, it could only be through an act of faith, never as the result of a ‘rational’ deduction. If we think of the large-scale horrors that took place in Auschwitz, Cambodia, Rwanda, Srebrenica, and more recently Sudan, Darfur, and Afghanistan, or of the equally horrifying things that keep on happening on a smaller scale, we have to agree with Bayle, that there is no possible way to rationally justify the goodness of God in the face of ‘evil’ and radical suffering. If we do, we will encounter aspects of theodicy that are either unsatisfactory, dangerous, or, for the theist, theologically questionable.

If we recall, Bayle had demonstrated that on purely rational grounds, the dualistic position, -that is the belief in two fundamental causal principles (or divine principles) which underlie the existence of the world-, was the only rational conclusion to be drawn from the mixed character of human experience, and a very simple and effective way to reconcile the existence of a good Creator with the presence of ‘evil’ in the world. In the ancient world, several traditions opted for dualism. For instance, the possibility which has been on the edge of the Christian tradition since its early centuries is that the material world is the product of a lower divine being and not the creation of the all-perfect transcendent God. Goodness, in this Gnostic view of the world, resided in the spiritual, and it was not surprising that material existence was full of struggle and suffering. For the Gnostics, it was not reasonable to believe that the
good all-loving God could have created a world containing ‘evil;’ it had to be the product of some incompetent or malevolent inferior powers independent of God. On a certain level, dualistic theodicies are quite successful at resolving the tension between the idea of a good God and the fact of ‘evil,’ by saying that this world embodies the never-ending conflict between ‘Good and Evil, eliminating at the same time the moral dimension of ‘evil’ and the personal accountability of the human being.

However, the weaknesses of such dualistic schemes is that they provide no ethical incentive to improve people conditions of living and material well-being, or to care for the earth and its ecology, as for the Gnostics, this world is so riddled with ‘evil’ that the best thing one can do is to gain spiritual knowledge (Gnosis) and act in order to obtain deliverance from it. Further, Manichaeism, like Gnosticism, sees things in dualistic terms. Hence ‘evil’ is seen as a fundamental principle or force which is run by an ‘evil’ being. Manichaean dualism promised the end of the dualistic system of ‘Good and Evil’ after the ultimate triumph of ‘Good and the destruction of ‘Evil.’ This makes it possible to externalize ‘evil:’ it is constructed as the other that represents the ‘evil’ force. Thus, the real cause of ‘evil’ and the miseries that we, the ‘good ones,’ confront is always the ‘evil others’. Today, we do meet this kind of Gnostic and Manichaean dualism not only in popular fiction, such as Star Wars, Harry Potter, The Lord of the Rings, the Narnia Chronicles and so on, but also in political, ideological and religious rhetoric. As we have discussed in chapter one, the harm done by labeling others ‘evil’ is well documented throughout our history and it is the kind of speech that dehumanizes others who differ from ‘us’ and which is still in use today by those who declare war on terrorism and by religious fundamentalists: by seeing the ‘enemy’ as the embodiment of the principle of
‘evil’, the fight for ‘good and justice’ are always on ‘our side.’ In Evil – Inside Human Violence and Cruelty (2001), Roy Baumeister writes:

“The need to justify one’s own aggressive actions is one of the perennial problems of war. [...] A common solution to the problem of justifying one’s aggression is to depict the enemy as evil. If your enemies are pure evil, there is little need for additional explanations of why you want to fight against them. Hence, the more thoroughly one can assimilate the enemy into the myth of pure evil, the less one needs to provide valid reasons for one’s aggression. In addition, people who are reluctant to enter a conflict or are undecided about their loyalties and interests can be effectively won over if they can be persuaded that the adversary is evil.365”

If we look at our contemporary world, it is easy to see it as a battle between lightness and darkness; however, apart from the entertainment and ‘release’ value that this kind of mythological and symbolic thinking might bring, I hope to have shown that there are certainly good reasons for turning away from these simple dualistic solutions to the problem of evil.366

Appendix

These are transcripts of original French texts that I had to translate and interpret for the purpose of my thesis as there were no translations available. I hope that I have done justice to Pierre Bayle and Voltaire.


“J’ai toujours la fièvre le 24 du mois d’auguste [...] Vous savez que c’est le jour de la St Barthelemi, mais je tombe en défaillance le 14 May où l’esprit de la Ligue catholique qui dominait encore dans la moitié de la France assassina Henri 4 par les mains d’un reverend père feuillant. Cependant les Français dansent comme si de rien n’était [...]”\(^{367}\)

App.B (cf. p.73): Pierre Bayle à Jean Bayle, 18 mai 1684

“Qu’il est dur de perdre des personnes si chères et qui sont de si belle espérance. [...] Si Dieu nous l’avait conservé, il se fut poussé assurément. Mais il en faut toujours venir là que Dieu ne veut pas que nous soyons heureux en ce monde. Pour moi, je compte pour un si petit avantage à la vie présente que, sincèrement parlant, de l’humour dont je me trouve, je voudrais que le sort fût tombé sur moi que sur mon cadet.”\(^{368}\)

“ […] La conclusion, c’est que nous avons tous deux sujet de pleurer et de nous affliger, mais il faut tâcher que ce soit en bons chrétiens qui adorent respectueusement la main qui les frappe […]”\(^{369}\)

App.C (cf. p.81): Pierre Bayle à Jean Bayle, 26mars 1682

“Toutes les nouvelles que nous recevons de France nous figurent le malheur de l’Église la plus triste de la terre. Je tremble quand je songe que vous êtes à la gueule d’un parlement qui s’est toujours signalé par ses violences contre ceux de la Religion, et rien n’est capable de me rassurer que la confiance qu’il faut avoir en cette protection invisible mais toute-puissante que Dieu accorde aux siens.”\(^{370}\)


\(^{368}\) Pierre Bayle to Jean Bayle, 18 may 1684 (Correspondance, t.IV, p.119). Cited in Bost, 2006, p.225

\(^{369}\) Pierre Bayle to Jean Bayle, 18 may 1684 (Correspondance, t.IV, p.120). Cited in Bost, 2006, p.226

\(^{370}\) Pierre Bayle to Jean Bayle, 26th March 1682 (Correspondance, t.III, p.285). Cited in Bost, 2006, p.201
App.D (cf.p.82):

“On s’est toujours choqué que sous un Dieu tout parfait les méchants prospèrent, & les gens de bien soient dans l’oppression, mais à mon sens, on devroit être plus surpris de ce qu’aucun homme n’a jamais été exempt de péché & d’afflictions sous un Dieu qui n’a qu’à dire la parole, & tout aussi-tôt, les hommes seroient saints &heureux.371”


“On sera bien embarassé à deviner comment les lois du movement opèrent les désastres si effroyables dans le meilleur des mondes possibles. Cent mille fourmis, notre prochain, écrasées tout d’un coup dans notre fourmillière, la moitié périsant sans doute dans des angoisses inexprimables […] 372”
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