

Voltaire

Poem on the Lisbon Disaster¹

Or an Inquiry into the Axiom, "All is Well"

Unlucky mortals! O deplorable earth!
All humanity huddles in fear!
The endless subject of useless pain!
Come philosophers who cry, "All is well,"
And contemplate the ruins of this world.
Behold the debris and ashes of the unfortunate —
These women and children heaped in common ruin,
These scattered limbs under the broken marble.
See the hundred thousand whom the earth devours!
Torn and bloody, they are still breathing,
Entombed beneath roofs, and they die without
Relief from the horror of their suffering lives.

As the dying voices call out, will you dare respond
To this appalling spectacle of smoldering ashes with:
"This is the necessary effect of the eternal laws
Freely chosen by God"?
Seeing this mass of victims, will you say,
"God is avenged. Their death is the price of their crimes"?
What crime, what fault had the young committed,
Who lie bleeding at their mother's breast?
Did fallen Lisbon indulge in more vices
Than London or Paris, which live in pleasure?
Lisbon is no more, but they dance in Paris.

Tranquil spectators — you brave souls
Who contemplate your brothers' wreck —
You research in peace the cause of thunderstorms,
But your calmness will vanish when you feel its fury.
Your humanity will return, and you'll cry as we do.
When, like hell, the earth opens beneath you,
You'll know my pleas are innocent and my cries justified.

¹ Translation by Antony Lyon, 2013. Revised 2018.

We are surrounded by the cruelties of fate,
The fury of the wicked, and the snares of death;
So, companions in our misfortunes, indulge our complaint.

“It’s pride,” you say, “seditious pride
That says we might fare better than we do.”
Go to the banks of the Tagus,²
Dig through the ruins of that mess,
And ask the dying in this terrible time
If it is pride that makes them call to heaven
For help and to pity the suffering.

“All is well,” you say, “and all is necessary.”
Do you think this universe would be worse
Without the pit that swallowed Lisbon?
Are you certain that the great eternal cause,
The creator and knower of all things,
Could not have thrown us into this miserable world
Without forming volcanoes seething under our feet?
Do you set this limit for the supreme power?
Would you forbid him from exercising mercy?
Doesn’t the eternal craftsman have
Infinite means available for his handiwork?

Without offense to my master, I humbly wish
Only that the pit of fire and sulphur erupted
And spewed its fires in the desert wasteland.
I respect my God, but I love the universe.
When one dares to moan of a terrible scourge,
It is not arrogance; it is sensitivity!

In the midst of their torments, would it comfort
The sad inhabitants of these desolate shores
If someone said to them: “Fall, die in peace;
Your homes are destroyed for the good of the world;
Other hands will rebuild your ruined palaces;
Other people will be born from the rubble of your walls;
The North will grow rich from your terrible loss.
To the universal law, all your troubles are for the best.

² The Tagus River runs through Lisbon.

To God, you are the same as the vile worms
Waiting for you at the bottom of your graves”?
What a horrible speech to the unfortunate!
Do not add such cruelty to their pain.

And do not press on my troubled heart
These immutable laws of necessity,
This chain of bodies, minds, and worlds.
O dreams of scholars! O profound chimeras!
God holds the chain but he is not himself chained.³

³ [Voltaire’s Note] The great chain of being is not, as has been said, a series of links binding all beings together. There is probably a great distance between human beings and animals, and between human beings and beings superior to us. There is an infinite gap between God and all creatures. The spheres that circle our sun are not part of the series of links, neither in their size and their distances, nor in their satellites.

[Alexander] Pope says that man cannot know why the moons of Jupiter are smaller than Jupiter. He is wrong about this, but it’s a forgivable mistake, an error that escaped his great genius. Any mathematician could have demonstrated to Lord Bolingbroke and Mr. Pope that if Jupiter was smaller than its satellites, then they could not rotate around it. However, there is no mathematician who can discover the great chain in the fabric of the solar system.

It’s not true that if the world were deprived of a single atom, the world would not exist. M. de Crousaz, distinguished geometer, argued this well in his book against Mr. Pope. On this point he was right, although on others he was convincingly refuted by M. Warburton and M. Silhouette.

This chain of events was accepted and ingeniously defended by the great philosopher, Leibniz. It deserves to be clarified. All bodies and all events depend on other bodies and other events. This is true, but all bodies are not required for the order and preservation of the universe, and all events are not essential to the chain of events. A drop of water or a grain of sand more or less does not change the general order of the universe. Nature is not bound to any certain quantity or specific form. No planet moves in a mathematically perfect orbit. No known object conforms to a precise geometrical shape. No precise quantity is ever required for any chemical reaction. Nature is never so rigorous. So there’s no reason to think that depriving the earth of a single atom would result in the destruction of the world.

It is the same with events. The cause of each event lies in the preceding events; no philosopher has ever doubted this. If Caesar’s mother had not had a cesarean section, Caesar would not have destroyed the republic; he would not have adopted Octavius; and Octavius would not have left the empire to Tiberius. Maximilian married the heiress of Burgundy and the Netherlands, and that marriage is the source of two hundred years of war. But, if Caesar had spat to the right or to the left, or the heiress of Burgundy had done her hair this way or that way, it would not have altered the course of events.

So there are events that have effects and others that do not. The great chain is like a genealogical tree; we see that some branches die after the first generation while others continue the family. Some events have no descendants. Similarly, in any machine there are some necessary effects and other insignificant effects, which result from the first but produce nothing themselves. The wheels move the carriage, but if they kick up a little more or a little less dust, it does not affect the journey. Such is the general order of the universe, the links of the chain are not broken by a little more or a little less matter, a little more or a little less irregularity.

The chain does not exist in a space absolutely full of matter. It’s shown that the revolutions of heavenly bodies meet no resistance in space. Space is not full; therefore, there is no series of atoms linked from one atom here all the way to the most distant star. There can be much space between sentient beings and insensible objects. Thus, one cannot be certain that humans are placed in a causal chain, connecting everyone with an

By his beneficent choice, all is determined,
But he is free and just, not unrelenting.
Why, then, do we suffer so under our fair master?⁴

This is the knot that needs untying.
Does denying our ills, cure them?
All peoples, trembling at the divine hand,
Have sought the origin of evil.
The eternal law moves all things.
The rocks dropped by the power of the wind
And the sturdy oak destroyed by lightning
Do not feel the crushing blows,
But I live and feel. My oppressed heart
Appeals to the heavens for relief.
As children of the Almighty, born in misery,
We extend our hands to our Father.

The vessel does not say to the potter,
“Why am I so vile, coarse, and frail?”
It lacks speech and has no thought.
When this urn breaks, it is nothing,
For the potter formed it no heart
That could desire good and feel misery.

“Yet, this misfortune,” you say, “is another’s good.”
Yes, from my corpse a thousand insects will be born.
When death ends my pain, what a relief to be eaten!
Sad calculators of human misery,
You don’t console me; you embitter me.
In you, I see the useless effort
To mask fear with false happiness.
I am a small part of the great whole,
But all the animals — all sentient beings
Born under the same law — are condemned
To live in pain and die just like me.

uninterrupted series of links. *Everything is linked in a chain* means only that everything is arranged. God is the cause and master of this order. Homer’s Jupiter was the slave of fate, but in a more refined philosophy, God is the master of all fates.

⁴ [Voltaire’s Note] “Under a just God, no one suffers unless he deserves to,” Saint Augustine

The fierce vulture grasps its timid prey
And feeds on its limbs with great joy.
All's well, or so it seems to him, until
He is devoured by a sharp-beaked eagle.
The proud eagle is then felled by a man's rifle.
Then, the man, in the dust of the battlefield,
Dies among the fallen soldiers and
Serves as the terrible food of ravenous birds.
And thus, all the world groans —
We torment and are tormented by each other!
In this horrific chaos, you say,
"The misfortunes of each make up the good of all!"
What happiness! Mortal, weak, and miserable.
You shout, "All is well" — O lamentable voice —
The universe contradicts you, and your heart
Refutes your mind's error a hundred times over.

Everything is at war: the elements, animals, and man.
We must confess: there's evil on earth.
Its source remains unknown to us.
Could evil spring from the author of all good?
Is it the black Typhon or barbarous Ahriman⁵
Who condemns us to suffer under this tyrannical law?
My mind rejects these heinous monsters
The trembling world made into gods.

How should we think of God, goodness itself,
Who lavishes gifts upon the children he loves,
While also pours abundant pain upon them?
What eye may perceive the purpose of his designs?
From the perfect Being, no evil can arise,
But there is no other principle.
God alone is master; yet evil exists.
O sad truth! O dumbfounding contradictions!
God came to console our distressed race;
He visited the world and changed nothing!
An arrogant sophist says he could not.
"He could," another claims, "but did not want to.
In time, he will, no doubt." Meanwhile,

⁵ Typhon was the Egyptian's principle of evil; Ahriman, the Persian's.

The subterranean thunder engulfs Lisbon
And thirty cities are reduced to ruins
From the banks of the Tagus to the Gulf of Cadiz.⁶

Either God punishes men born guilty,
Or the master of space and time punishes
Without anger, without pity. Tranquil and indifferent,
He follows the original stream of his eternal decrees.
Either shapeless matter resists the master's good
And carries in itself all the necessary faults,
Or God is testing us, and this mortal life
Is only a narrow passage to the eternal world.
Here we suffer only a passing pain and
With death our misery mercifully ends.
Yet when we make this awful passage,
Who will claim he deserves happiness?

No doubt, whatever course we take, we must tremble.
We know nothing and fear everything.
Nature is silent — we appeal to her in vain.
We need a god who can speak to humanity,
Only he can explain his works to us,
Consoling the weak and enlightening the wise.
Without him, we're abandoned to doubt and error.
We seek in vain some reed to prop ourselves up.
Leibniz⁷ taught me neither what invisible knots
Tie our little pleasures to such pain
In this best of all possible worlds —
This endless disorder and chaos of misfortunes —
Nor why the innocent and guilty
Suffer the same under this necessary evil.
I can't conceive any better how all is well.
I am like a doctor — I know nothing!

Plato says that man formerly had wings
And bodies invulnerable to all mortal injury;
Pain and death did not touch him.

⁶ The Gulf of Cadiz lies southwest of the Iberian peninsula, south of Portugal.

⁷ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) famously argues, "This is the best of all possible worlds." Voltaire uses Pangloss in *Candide* to caricature Leibniz and his philosophy of optimism.

How different we are from this bright state!
Man crawls, suffers, and dies —
All who are born die in this empire of destruction.
Our frame of nerves and bone
Cannot sustain the shock of the elements.
This mixture of blood and dust
Was assembled to dissolve.
The quick, sensitive nerves
Were made for pain — the minister of death —
So the voice of nature tells me.
I abandon Plato and reject Epicurus.⁸

I turn to Bayle, who knows more than all of them.⁹
With the balance in hand, he teaches me to doubt.
He, wise and great enough to need no system,
Has destroyed them all and battles even himself.
Like the blind conqueror of the Philistines,¹⁰

⁸ Two great Athenian philosophers whose ideas are often contrasted. Plato is an idealist who argues that true knowledge and happiness come in the contemplation of ideas, not in material things. Epicurus is a materialist who argues that only material things exist and the goal of life is to maximize pleasure.

⁹ [Voltaire's Note] A hundred comments throughout [Pierre] Bayle's *Dictionary* have made his immortal reputation. He has left the dispute over the origin of evil undecided. In his work, he presents all the differing points of view, gives all the arguments in support as well as those that undermine them with equal depth. He's like a lawyer who is prepared to represent any philosopher, but he never tells us what his own views are. He's like Cicero, who in his philosophical works often plays the undecided skeptic, as noted by the learned and judicious Father Olivet.

I think I should try to soothe those who have recently been attacking Bayle with such force and in such vain. I'm wrong to say "in vain," because they have made people more eager to read Bayle. They should learn from him to reason and to be measured. Nowhere has Bayle, the philosopher, denied Providence or the immortality of the soul. We translate Cicero, we comment on him, and we use him to educate our princes, but what do we find on almost every page of Cicero among the many admirable things? We find: "If there is a Providence, it is at fault for giving men intelligence it knew they would abuse" (*The Nature of the Gods*, 3.31). "Nobody has ever thought that virtue came from the gods, and they were right" (ibid. 3.36). "When a criminal dies unpunished, you say the gods will strike his posterity. Would a city suffer a legislator who condemns grandchildren for the crimes of their grandfathers?" (ibid. 3.38). Even stranger, Cicero ends his book *The Nature of the Gods* without refuting these assertions. In *Tusculanes*, he maintains in a hundred places that the soul is mortal after having claimed that it is immortal.

There's more. In his plea for Cluentius in front of the Roman Senate, he says, "What harm did death do him? We reject all the foolish fables of hell, so what has death taken from him other than the experience of pain?" (ibid. 3.61). Finally, in his letters, where one's heart speaks, does he not say: "When I am no more, all sensations perish with me" (*Personal Letters*, 6.3)? Bayle has never said anything like that. Yet we give Cicero to our children to read, and everyone attacks Bayle. Why? Because men are inconsistent and unjust.

¹⁰ Samson (Judges 13-16)

He's buried beneath the walls he knocks down.
So what is the verdict of our greatest mind?
Nothing: the book of fate is closed to us.

Man is a stranger to himself. He wonders:
"What am I? Where am I going? Where am I from?"¹¹
We are atoms tormented in this murky soup,
Swallowed by death like fate's playthings.
With eyes to see and mind to guide,
We thinking atoms have measured the heavens.
We rush toward the infinite,
Though we neither see nor know ourselves.
This world, this theater of pride and error
Is full of unfortunates who speak of happiness.
They complain while seeking well-being;
None of them wants to die or to be reborn.¹²
Sometimes, in our lives consecrated to pain,
The hand of pleasure wipes away our tears,
But it passes like a shadow.
Our sorrows, regrets, and losses are without number.
For us, the past is a sad memory,
And the present is awful if there's no future,
And the sleep of the grave takes every thinking being.

One day, all will be well — this is our hope.
All is well today — that is the illusion.
The wise deceived me; God alone has reason.
Humble in my sighs, submitting in my suffering,
I do not raise myself against Providence.
In a less melancholy voice, I once sang
Of the sweet pleasure of the charming laws of nature.

¹¹ [Voltaire's Note] It's clear that man cannot know this on his own. The human mind does not acquire any idea except by experience. Experience can teach us neither what was before our existence, nor what happens after, nor what animates our present existence. How were we given life? How is it maintained? How does the brain hold ideas and memory? How do our limbs instantly obey our will? We don't know. Is this the only world with life? Was it made after other worlds or in the same moment? Does each species of plant originate from a first plant? Is every species of animal descended from an original two of its kind? The greatest philosophers don't know more on these matters than the most ignorant. We must return to the popular proverb: "Which came first, the chicken or the egg?" The proverb is unsophisticated, but it confounds the wisest who know nothing about first principles without supernatural assistance.

¹² Erasmus (1466-1535) makes this claim and Bayle (1647-1706) repeats it in "Xenophanes" (*Dictionary*).

Yet, with manners taught by old age,
Sharing in the frailty of humanity,
In the midst of the dark night, I seek clarity and
Know only suffering, but I won't complain.

Once a caliph, in his last hour,
Prayed to God, whom he loved:
"I bring thee, O only and almighty king,
That, which in your immensity, you lack —
Faults, regrets, pain, and ignorance."
He could have added *hope*.¹³

¹³ [Voltaire's Note] Most human beings had this hope even before revelation came to their aid. The hope of surviving after death is based on love for living this life and the probability that what thinks will continue to think. It's not supported by any proof because to demonstrate the opposite of something requires self-contradiction, and once a truth has been demonstrated that ends all argument about it. Lucretius, to destroy this hope, gives a set of arguments so strong they give pain. However, he only makes plausible arguments that he sets against other more plausible ones. Many Romans thought as Lucretius did, and they cried out in the Roman theatre: "There is nothing after death!" But instinct, reason, the need to be comforted, and the good of society prevailed, and human beings have always hoped for a life to come—a hope, to be honest, often accompanied by doubt. Revelation destroys this doubt and replaces it with certainty. But it's awful to have to argue about revelation all the time. Awful to see unsociable Christian society divided into a hundred sects over revelation—to slander, to persecute, and to destroy for revelation. Awful that revelation led to St. Bartholomew [St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, 1572], to the assassination of Henry III and Henry IV, to the beheading of Charles I, and to dragging a king of Poland bloody through the streets. All for revelation! O God, reveal yourself, for we need to become humane and tolerant!