

THE PATHS OF PROVIDENCE: VOLTAIRE AND ROUSSEAU ON THE LISBON EARTHQUAKE¹

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ABSTRACT: The existence of evil seems to imply, according to the old Epicurean dilemma, that God cannot be both benevolent and omnipotent, and the search for the tortuous paths of Providence tends to become particularly urgent in the wake of great disasters. Voltaire's *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*, and Rousseau's *Lettre à Monsieur de Voltaire* are two important attempts to provide philosophical answers to the questions raised by the great Lisbon earthquake of 1755. Voltaire's alternative is simply to refuse the optimistic "all is well" philosophy of Leibniz and Pope, and proclaim that genuine and not only apparent evil is indeed loose on Earth. Rousseau undertakes the more arduous task of defending Providence, and manages to present some original considerations based on the idea of human responsibility in the disaster. In spite of a seemingly clear-cut opposition between the two authors, I hope to show in this paper that their disagreement is not so radical as it might seem, and that both are more interested in the practical consequences of their interpretations than in a dry re-enactment of old metaphysical and theological discussions.

1 The Great Lisbon Earthquake

Exactly 250 years ago, a great earthquake, followed by a tsunami and big fires, ravaged the Portuguese capital, Lisbon, causing between 10,000 and 15,000 deaths and immense devastation. Not least because it took place on All Saints Day, destroying churches full of people, it brought about another earthquake in the optimistic mind-set of the times, dominated by the belief in a watchful and benevolent God that looked after His creation. If God could prevent such disaster, why did He let it happen? And why would a benevolent being consent in the brutal deaths of so many innocent people?

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In order to properly understand the impact of the disaster, it is necessary to keep in mind that Lisbon was then a much more important city in the European context than it is now. With around 275,000 inhabitants in 1755, it was the fourth European city in population, after London, Paris and Naples; and, as the center of a large Empire extending across America, Africa and Asia, it was comparable to those cities in commercial and political importance. One must also consider the sheer magnitude of the disaster: although the death toll never came close to the “cent mille infortunés” lamented by Voltaire in his poem, the physical destruction of the city was immense. Large palaces, great mansions of the nobility, churches, convents and monasteries, besides libraries and invaluable works of art, were reduced to rubble in minutes, and the resulting fires consumed most of the wooden houses of the common people that were left standing after the quake. Estimates are that from the 20,000 buildings in the city only three thousand were inhabitable after the disaster.

Confronted with such a calamity and the panic and confusion it caused, one single man seems to have kept his head in the immediate aftermath. “Bury the dead and feed the living”, was the legendary answer of the Marquis of Pombal² to the question of what was to be done. His practical stance went much beyond this prescription for the moment, and showed also in the way he planned and built a new and modern city out of the ashes; and, in a higher level of statesmanship, in the way he masterly took the opportunity to rebuild the whole structure of power in the Portuguese State.

Pombal’s steps in the ascent to almost unlimited power received in fact a decisive boost from the earthquake. His projects of economical and intellectual modernization of Portugal had been opposed by the old nobility and, chiefly, by the powerful and influent Company of Jesus, with whom Pombal was already having a bitter clash on account of the Jesuitical Missions in Brazil and Paraguay. When some Jesuits proclaimed that the Lisbon disaster had been sent by God as a punishment for the sins of the population and lack of devotion in men in higher government circles, they put themselves in open conflict with Pombal, who, in the enlightened spirit of the time, wanted to see in the earthquake only the operation of natural causes.

² These words may very well be apocryphal. The powerful Chief Minister Sebastião José de Carvalho e Melo was raised successively by the king D. José I to the dignities of Count of Oeiras (1759) and Marquis of Pombal (1770). I will refer to him retrospectively, as it is customary, by this later title.

The most vocal among these Jesuits was Gabriel Malagrida (1689-1761), who enjoyed immense prestige at the time and was hailed almost as a saint in Brazil and Portugal. Malagrida published his sermons in a pamphlet entitled *An Opinion on the True Cause of the Earthquake Suffered by the Court of Lisbon on November the 1st 1755*, in which, besides insisting on the divine punishment thesis, he condemned severely those that were building shelters in the fields and working in the reconstruction of the city, recommending instead processions and penitence.³

This was intolerable for Pombal, who wanted to concentrate all efforts and resources in the rebuilding of the city. Seeing a good opportunity in a rather ill-advised prophecy by some members of Malagrida's circle that the catastrophe would repeat itself in its first anniversary, Pombal waited until the appointed day elapsed without any earthquake and, accusing the author and his supporters of terrifying the people and playing on crude superstition, had the pamphlet burned by the public executioner as heretical and its author and supporters banished from Lisbon and the Court.

A few years later Pombal was able to deal a fatal blow to the aristocracy on the occasion of a failed attempt on the life of the King José I on September 3, 1758. Members of two of the highest noble houses in the country, the Távoras and the Mascarenhas, were arrested and publicly executed in a particularly horrifying way, in order to make very clear that the new power would not tolerate contestation. Never a man of half measures, Pombal also managed to imply the Jesuits in the assassination attempt, and thus sealed the fate of the order in Portugal. Exactly one year after the attempt on the king, he issued the decree of expulsion of the Jesuits from Portugal, Brazil and all Portuguese dominions in the world. Thus, by associating the nobility and the Society of Jesus in the same crime, Pombal disposed in one single blow of all his significant opponents, and his power became thereafter impregnable.

Some of the fiercest and most rebellious Jesuits did not get the gentle benefit of exile, and were thrown to prison for life. The charges against Malagrida were of a more damaging nature, and he was declared guilty of high treason and condemned to death. As a priest, the consent of the Inquisition was needed for his execution. Since that consent was proving

³ It is important not to generalize Malagrida's attitude to the whole order. Jesuits were always deeply involved in scholarship, in science and in exploration. By 1750, 30 of the world's 130 astronomical observatories were run by Jesuit astronomers and 35 lunar craters have been named to honor Jesuit scientists.

difficult to obtain, Pombal's younger brother assumed the place of Inquisitor General and presided over the judgment. Malagrida was found guilty of planning regicide and also of heresy. He was publicly executed on September 21, 1761 in an auto-da-fé that lasted all day, two hours of which were devoted to the reading of his sentence. Strangled, his body burnt, and his ashes thrown into the river, Malagrida was the last victim of the Portuguese ecclesiastical Inquisition (which thereafter was converted by Pombal into a disciplined State tribunal), and, almost six years after the earth trembled in Lisbon, the last victim of the earthquake as well.

The Lisbon earthquake figures briefly in Voltaire's *Candide*, as just another episode intended to disparage the Panglossian/Leibnizian thesis that "all is well". But Voltaire's depiction of the facts in that episode does not do justice to the complexity of the political issues involved. He certainly displays quite a bit of his usual sarcastic humor when he writes

Après le tremblement de terre qui avait détruit les trois quarts de Lisbonne, les sages du pays n'avaient pas trouvé un moyen plus efficace pour prévenir une ruine totale que de donner au peuple un bel auto-de-fé. Il était décidé par l'université de Coïmbre que les spectacles de quelques personnes brûlés à petit feu, en grande cérémonie, est un secret infaillible pour empêcher la terre de trembler⁴

but this poetical license made him miss the finer irony that the only victim actually executed in an auto-de-fé in Lisbon after the earthquake was exactly Malagrida, who had insisted on a religious interpretation of the disaster.⁵

While Voltaire could insist in the backward and fanatical character usually attributed at the time to Portugal and Portuguese society and institutions, the fact is that many eyes in Europe were carefully watching Pombal and his political reforms. By promoting bureaucrats, members of the bourgeoisie and the low clergy to higher positions, he was able to undermine the nearly feudal structure of power in Portugal, and get strong support from the lower social strata for his struggle with the nobility and the high clergy. The gruesome execution of the Távoras was seen as barbaric in France, but it was in fact a forerunner of the purge of the nobility in the coming French Revolution. And, although Pombal was not able to fulfill his dream of creating a national Portuguese church under State control, based on the model of

⁴ Voltaire, *Candide, ou l'optimisme* VI, Edition. Moland, xxi.448. All subsequent references of Voltaire's quotes are to this edition.

⁵ Voltaire was in fact familiar with much of the real story, and he describes Malagrida's fate in his *Précis du siècle de Louis XV*, chap. 38, focusing, however, in his alleged participation in the attempted regicide, instead of in his sedicious role at the time of the earthquake. For details see my "Voltaire e um episódio da História de Portugal" *Mediações*. Londrina, Vol. 9 n. 2, 2004, p. 37-52 (in Portuguese).

England, he made decisive and pioneer steps on the road of secularization of the society. Under Pombal, Portugal became the first Catholic country in Europe to remove the influence of the Church in the government, and the example of the expulsion of the Jesuits from the kingdom and colonies in 1759 was soon followed by France (1762) and Spain (1767).

2 Providence and the Scientific Background of the XVIIIth Century

The Lisbon earthquake acted, thus, as a decisive catalyst for political and social reforms in Portugal which created a model that could be followed by other countries. But it had an impact also on the field of ideas, especially on the discussion of the relation between natural catastrophes and God's providence. The earthquake became the topic of a vast popular literature (including theater plays) that provided graphic descriptions of the catastrophe, speculated on its causes and proposed moral and religious interpretations of its meaning. As expected, much of it centered in the idea of divine punishment for the city's sins, although the anecdotic episode of a whole row of brothels full of sinners left untouched in the "Dirty Street", while most of the churches collapsed over their congregations, made this explanation less than completely satisfactory.

But to appreciate the true importance of the Lisbon earthquake in the history of ideas, we must leave aside this circumstantial literature, with its religious and even superstitious concerns, and move to a higher level of abstract and philosophical considerations, as exemplified by the analyses offered by Voltaire and Rousseau, two major figures of the Enlightenment. In these analyses we can see how the disaster raised questions that were not merely theological in nature, but affected the whole intellectual mind-set of the period.

The first half of the eighteenth century was characterized by a generally optimistic view of the world, whose sources are difficult to explain adequately. This optimistic attitude could be summarized in the belief that the world order was the product of a benevolent design, and was therefore conducive to human happiness, or at least to some appropriate measure of it. This attitude was not a consequence of a particular social or political environment, since it was the same both in parliamentary England and absolutist France. It did not depend on a particular religious environment either, since it was shared by Protestants, Catholics and Deists. And it could not be attributed simply to the progress of science, because science had been progressing steadily since the previous century, and the optimistic mind-set was a relatively recent feature.

Some common characteristics of the time, however, could at least provide a partial explanation. After the tumultuous seventeenth century, with its devastating religious conflicts, a period of peace, social stability and economical expansion had opened up. More importantly, religion and science arrived at a truce after the bitter feuds of the former century. In a sense, each party reached out for the other: Christians began to put less emphasis in the notions of the Fall and original sin, and scientists and philosophers accepted that all over the world one could find the marks of a beneficent Creator. Optimism was the common ground on which they could build their agreement.

In order to understand what made this alliance possible, we must keep in mind that, at the turn of the century, science had undergone a major change in its metaphysical and methodological foundations. The scientific worldview in the seventeenth century had been dominated by a Cartesian mechanistic approach that treated everything in the material universe, including living organisms, as machines governed by inflexible laws of matter in movement. In spite of the important role attributed to God by Descartes in his epistemological works, it was clear that no divine intervention was needed in his system to keep living beings and celestial bodies going on: intrinsic properties of matter were enough. The same mechanistic view of life was defended by Thomas Hobbes, who extended it even to the domain of the mental life of human beings. Moreover, the strong rationalistic bias of Descartes' and Hobbes's methods made scientific activity appear as a mere deduction of consequences from first principles, and little attention was paid to experience and discoveries.

By the end of the seventeenth century, however, new epistemological foundations for science had been provided by Locke in his monumental *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. In that book, great importance was attributed to experience as a source of knowledge, and serious doubts were raised concerning the powers of human reason to discover the principles governing the inner workings of things. Cartesian self-confidence in the powers of human intellect gave place to the belief that the real essence of things and their workings would be eternally hidden from us by a veil of mystery. Natural science ceased to be deductive and certain, and became experimental and conjectural. Humbled by the realization of their ignorance, scientists could more easily admit that a divine principle was at work in the world.

Thus, paradoxically, it was the very progress of science that led to this new religious-friendly attitude. The single most important cause of this was Newton's discovery of the

universal law of gravitation (1687), which made necessary to postulate a mysterious force of attraction between bodies acting instantaneously at a distance through the vacuum. Although formulated in precise mathematical terms and perfectly verified in practice, the nature of this attraction was left unexplained, and Newton speculated in *Principia* and in the *Optics* that space acted everywhere as the *sensorium Dei*, through which God perceived things and acted on them. Moreover, Newton believed that the solar system was inherently unstable, and God's constant action was needed to prevent the planets from spiraling into the Sun⁶.

Going from the very large to the very small, important discoveries had been made possible by the use of microscope, showing that even the smallest organisms were much more complicated than the simple machines imagined by Descartes and Hobbes. The more was discovered about the complexity of the functions and the perfect adequacy of means to ends in organisms, the more they appeared to be the product of an intelligent design. Particularly intractable was the problem of the generation of living beings, for which the Cartesian explanations seemed at the time completely unhelpful⁷. However incredible it may appear to us today, the accepted explanation during the first half of the eighteenth century was the *preformationist* hypothesis⁸, according to which embryos existed, preformed and infinitesimally small, in the egg or the sperm. What happened in generation was just that these infinitesimal and invisible embryos became large enough to be seen. In a particularly impressive version of the theory, called "encasement", all embryos contained the embryos of their future descendents, and thus successively. From the point of view we are interested in, the preformationist theory, favored by Leibniz and Voltaire, refuses any power of auto-organization to matter and reinstates God as the creator of all life at the moment of Creation.

In this new scientific and philosophical environment, an agreement, at least on some points, could be reached among religious and secular thinkers concerning the old question of Providence. The word "providence" is related to Latin *providentia* and Greek *pronoia*, words which primarily mean foresight or foreknowledge, and also forethought. Besides these primary meanings, *providentia* and *pronoia* also have a religious meaning, indicating a

⁶ The proof that the solar system is dynamically stable was to be provided by Lagrange and Laplace, almost a century later.

⁷ Curiously, Descartes mechanical explanation of conception, according to which parts of male and female semen locked on to each other, was much closer to the truth than the later epigenetic and preformationist alternatives.

⁸ Formulated by Jan Swammerdam, *Historia Generalis Insectorum*, 1669.

particular intervention and care of God, or the gods, on behalf of man or the created world. This religious use of the word is actually very old: the first example of *pronoia* in this sense occurs in Herodotus, back in the 5th century B.C.

The belief in Providence, thus, is the belief that God (or the gods) not only created the world but also governs it and cares for its welfare, particularly for men's welfare. Or, as it has been said in less respectful terms, *pronoia* (as opposite of the popular sense of *paranoia*) is the suspicion that the whole universe is a conspiracy on our behalf.

In Christian orthodoxy, the term has a more precise meaning, being connected with the infinite power and benevolence of the Christian God. The main characteristic is that the Christian concept of Providence not only implies that God originated the whole universe, but also that He bears a perpetual and active relation to it, marked by his omnipotence and perfect benevolence.

In contrast to the Christian conception, we can identify at least two other possibilities of understanding God's relation to the created Universe. The first is the Epicurean idea that it would be inconsistent with the blessedness and perfections of the Creator to suppose that he should have any particular likings or anger, care or concern in the events of the worlds. Although admitting an intelligent Deity, this stance is not different in practice from atheism and denial of Providence.

The second possibility is the view of Deists, Socinians, and many rationalists, that God's concern with the Universe is not special and constant, but only general. That is to say, God established general laws of action, and left each individual being subjected to the operation of these laws. God, in this case, only exercises a general oversight of the laws, and not of specific agents. This is the peculiar sort of Providence that philosophers were prone to accept, and on which an agreement with religion could be negotiated.

But the orthodox Christian view of Providence, by stressing the infinite power and benevolence of God, leaves the flank open to a well-known dilemma, traditionally attributed to Epicurus, which has come to us in a formulation due to Lactantius, a Christian apologist of the fourth century.

God, [Epicurus] says, 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 is 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 wicked, which is equally at variance with God; if He is neither willing nor able, He is both wicked 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?⁹

Schematically, the alternatives are shown in the table below:

	God doesn't want to remove evil	God wants to remove evil
God is unable to remove evil	God is neither benevolent nor omnipotent	God is not omnipotent
God is able to remove evil	God is not benevolent	Then whence evil?

The reasoning is simple but powerful, and Lactantius himself acknowledges that “many of the philosophers, who defend providence, are accustomed to be disturbed by this argument, and are almost driven against their will to admit that God takes no interest in anything, which Epicurus especially aims at.”¹⁰ In fact, since the dilemma seems to exhaust all possibilities, the only way to avoid it and preserve the Christian concept of Providence would be to argue that evil doesn't really exist, or, rather, that everything that appears to us as evil is only apparently such. This has been traditionally done in several ways: (i) by postulating a future state in which earthly suffering will be compensated; (ii) by interpreting evil as just retribution for individual sins, and, more generally, as the effect of the Fall of man; (iii) by considering the existence of suffering as a necessary instrument for the moral and intellectual development of mankind; and (iv) by attributing our perception of evil to our failure to see the big picture and the complex web of relations that articulates all events in the world. Alternatively, one could retract from religious orthodoxy and settle for a conception of Providence that is concerned with Creation as a whole and not with the fate of individuals, and does not give a special privilege to mankind above all other beings.

3 Voltaire's *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*

Voltaire's writings throughout his long philosophical career reflect his changing opinions concerning the possibility of reconciling the belief in God and the Providence with the thorny problem of the existence of evil and suffering in the world. Starting from a marked optimism, well in accordance with the spirit of the early eighteenth century, Voltaire moved gradually to

⁹ Lactantius. *On the Anger of God*, chap. XIII.

¹⁰ Lactantius. *On the Anger of God*, chap. XIII.

a more and more skeptical attitude and in this also he responded to a general tendency of the century as it advanced to its end.

Voltaire was a thorough man of his times: he was young with the century, and took part as a loyal and enthusiastic fighter in all the intellectual battles that were shaping the new world. By his criticism of Pascal, he attacked the religious orthodoxy of the past and its pessimistic account of a decayed and sinful mankind. In his *Le Mondain* (1736) he shamelessly defended the search of earthly pleasures, and put forward a proud defense of luxury, refinement, taste and material goods as the foundation of happiness, against ascetical religiosity and nostalgic yearnings for a Golden Age of frugality and simplicity.

From England, where he lived from 1726 to 1728, Voltaire brought to France two major staples of Enlightenment: Newton's new science of physics and Locke's new epistemology and political philosophy. Although not a scientist, nor particularly endowed with scientific aptitude, Voltaire's literary gifts made him a powerful popularizer of Newton's system in France, and a decisive contributor to the demise of Cartesian physics and the mechanist worldview it entailed. Voltaire was also involved in a famous polemic with the English cleric and scientist John T. Needham, who allegedly had observed the spontaneous generation of life in laboratory. *Epigenesis*, or the theory that embryos could be formed anew from disorganized matter, was proposed then as an alternative to the current doctrine of preformationism, and quickly accepted by scientists like Maupertuis and Buffon. Voltaire stood up as a fierce opponent of this theory and a defender of preformationism, showing, as in the case of his support of Newton, his preference for scientific theories that left open a place for God's intervention in the world over those that attributed some power of auto-regulation to matter and thus, in his view, could lend support to materialism and atheism.

Needham's experiments were eventually shown to be faulty some years later by Lazzaro Spallanzani, another cleric-scientist. Voltaire understandably was very happy with this result, but this alone was not a proof that the preformationist theory was true. Moreover, the cause of epigenesis got a decisive impulse after the discovery that blood vessels in embryos could develop from different tissues. Preformationist theory, therefore, although it continued to have followers well into the following century, began to lose much of its appeal towards the end of the eighteenth century.

Another important scientific result in the second half of the century was Laplace's proof of the long-term stability of the solar system, which made possible to dispense with the

periodical corrections by divine intervention that Newton thought necessary.¹¹ Thus, after the friendly interlude in the first half of the century, science began to follow a new path that was no longer useful for religious purposes. With the defection of science, belief in a divine Artificer and in a benevolent Providence was deprived of one of its most important supports. The door was open for the materialist d'Holbach to declare bluntly, in his *Système de la nature* (1770), that there were no divine purpose, no master plan, and no metaphysical lessons to be learned from the spectacle of nature.

Other factors might as well explain the general trend towards pessimism in the second half of the eighteenth century. Two big wars – the war of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748) and the Seven Years War (1756-1763) – had shaken Europe and brought about tensions and instabilities that would eventually explode in the French Revolution. This general climate could not but influence a man so deeply in touch with his times as Voltaire. Having praised in *Le Mondain* the comforts of civilized life, he had to contemplate the folly of men who preferred war and destruction to the peaceful relations necessary to develop commerce between the nations and provide lasting material prosperity. And, to make matters worse, the earth trembled in Lisbon in 1755, showing that not only men but Nature itself seemed intent on senseless destruction.

It would be very illustrative to follow Voltaire's progressive change of mind concerning Providence, from optimism to skepticism, in some of his most important philosophical tales written before and after the fateful year of 1755: *Micromégas* (first draft in 1739, published in 1752), *Le Monde comme il va* (1746), *Zadig* (1747), and finally his masterpiece *Candide* (1759). However, in view of space limitations, I will limit my commentary to the first tale, and then proceed directly to the *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne* (1756).

In *Micromégas*, Voltaire narrates the adventures of two extraterrestrial giants in a “philosophical journey” to Earth, intent to learn about it and its inhabitants. Since human beings, compared to those giants, were of a microscopic dimension, they were not perceived at first by the travelers; but afterwards, a communication was established. The giants were surprised by the technical skills of these seemingly insignificant beings, but also amused

¹¹ Hence the anedoctic answer by Laplace to Napoléon who noticed that Laplace's theory did not mention God as the creator of the universe: ‘Sir, I do not need that hypothesis’.

when they learned from one of those microscopic philosophers that the whole Universe existed only to serve the human race:

...il regarda de haut en bas les deux habitants célestes ; il leur soutint que leurs personnes, leurs mondes, leurs soleils, leurs étoiles, tout était fait uniquement pour l'homme. A ce discours, nos deux voyageurs se laissèrent aller un sur l'autre en étouffant de ... rire¹²

Voltaire wants to teach men a lesson in humility, by putting them side by side with beings of a vastly larger intellectual and physical power, and, moreover, beings that admit that there are other beings that exceed them as much as they exceed men. At the same time, the tale conveys a reassuring thought: each creature participates in the order of the Universe according to its means and specificity, as the result of a providential agency that accords to each its just proportions:

J'admire en tout sa sagesse [of the Creator]; je vois partout des différences, mais aussi partout des proportions. Votre globe est petit, vos habitants le sont aussi; vous avez peu de sensations, votre matière a peu de propriétés: tout cela est l'ouvrage de la Providence.¹³

Micromégas, in fact, is the closest Voltaire ever came to the "all is well" doctrine famously defended by Pope¹⁴ in his *Essay on Man* (1732-34). In spite of being a Catholic himself, Pope based his defense of Providence not in any particular concern with individual men, but only with mankind as a whole:

Remember, man, "the Universal Cause
Acts not by partial, but by general laws;"
And makes what happiness we justly call
Subsist not in the good of one, but all. (*An Essay on Man*, Epistle IV)

Moreover, in another departure from orthodoxy, mankind itself should not be considered as the final cause of Creation, but as occupying an intermediate place and rank in the general order of things:

Above, how high, progressive life may go!
Around, how wide! how deep extend below?
Vast chain of being! which from God began,
Natures ethereal, human, angel, man,
Beast, bird, fish, insect, what no eye can see,
No glass can reach; from Infinite to thee,
From thee to nothing. [...]. (*An Essay on Man*, Epistle I)

¹² Voltaire, *Micromégas* VII. xxi.22

¹³ Voltaire, *Micromégas* II. xxi.439-40.

¹⁴ Alexander Pope (1688-1744), English essayist, critic, satirist, and one of the greatest poets of Enlightenment. Only 1.35 m. tall, he was also humpbacked and crippled by tuberculosis of the bone.

What appear, then, as man's imperfections are just the necessary effects of his perfect adequacy to its proper place and rank in that "vast chain of beings", and it is therefore just madness, extravagance and pride to complain against Providence for something that is beyond our comprehension:

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*. (*An Essay on Man*, Epistle I)

Later, in *Le Monde comme il va*, Voltaire seemed less convinced by Pope's optimism, although he could still say, at the conclusion, that "si tout n'est pas bien, tout est passable"¹⁵. His doubts went still deeper in *Zadig*, and by the time he wrote the *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*, whose subtitle is, precisely, "Examen de cet axiome: tout est bien", he was finally prepared to make a frontal attack on Pope's thesis that "all is well".

Or rather, as he puts it in the Preface, he wanted to attack, not Pope's work as such, in which he sees many commendable things, but some abusive conclusions that could be drawn from that thesis. It seems strange, says Voltaire, to proclaim that all is well when one has seen such disasters as the Lisbon earthquake. What he condemns most is the sort of fatalism that may come from that view:

Si tout est bien, disait-on, il est donc faux que la nature humaine soit déchue. Si l'ordre général exige que tout soit comme il est, la nature humaine n'a donc pas été corrompue; elle n'a donc pas eu besoin de rédempteur. Si ce monde, tel qu'il est, est le meilleur des mondes possibles, on ne peut donc pas espérer un avenir plus heureux. Si tous les maux dont nous sommes accablés sont un bien général, toutes les nations policées ont donc eu tort de rechercher l'origine du mal physique et du mal moral. [...] le mot *Tout est bien*, pris dans un sens absolu et sans l'espérance d'un avenir, n'est qu'une insulte aux douleurs de notre vie.¹⁶

The *Poème* examines several attempts to justify Providence in the face of the earthquake and criticizes them all. Was that a punishment? But what crime did commit the innocent children that died in the disaster (verses 18-20)? Were London and Paris less sinful than Lisbon (verses 21-23)? If there is compensation in an afterlife, how many of us are prepared to claim we merit it (verses 155-160)? The condition of man is frightening, nature

¹⁵ Voltaire, *Le Monde comme il va* XII. xxi.16.

¹⁶ Voltaire, *Préface du Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*. ix.467-68.

and God are mute and do not give us the explanations that could console the weak and enlighten the sage (verses 163-166).

Leaving aside these properly Christian justifications, Voltaire is no longer receptive to the Deist considerations presented by Pope (and also formerly by himself in *Micromégas*). Let us accept that Providence acts by general laws, and that there is indeed a chain of beings to which man is fastened in its unchangeable place; would these considerations be enough to console him for his sufferings? And could not all this be different, had only God decided otherwise?

Non, ne présentez plus à mon coeur agité
Ces immuables lois de la nécessité
Cette chaîne des corps, des esprits, et des mondes.
O rêves des savants! ô chimères profondes!
Dieu tient en main la chaîne, et n'est point enchaîné
Par son choix bienfaisant tout est déterminé:
Il est libre, il est juste, il n'est point implacable.
Pourquoi donc souffrons-nous sous un maître équitable? ¹⁷

Voltaire's indignation is particularly aroused by the idea that it is pride that makes men aspire to a better sort and to be free of suffering:

C'est l'orgueil, dites-vous, l'orgueil séditieux,
Qui prétend qu'étant mal, nous pouvions être mieux.
Allez interroger les rivages du Tage;
Fouillez dans les débris de ce sanglant ravage;
Demandez aux mourants, dans ce séjour d'effroi
Si c'est l'orgueil qui crie "O ciel, secourez-moi!" ¹⁸

Finally, Pope's argument that all perceived evil would appear as good if only we could grasp the big picture of the Universe seems now unable to convince Voltaire. Why would the world be a worse place had Lisbon not been destroyed by the earthquake (verses 42-44)? Why is man's body made so sensible and so vulnerable to physical pain and discomfort if it is destined to death and destruction (verses 181-187)? By raising such questions Voltaire lays bare the powerlessness of rational argumentation in the face of intense and incomprehensible suffering. In his poem Voltaire began to sharpen the tools that he would put so brilliantly into use against Leibnizian optimism in *Candide*.

¹⁷ Voltaire, *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*, verses. 71-78. ix.472-73.

¹⁸ Voltaire, *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*, verses 35-40. ix.471.

4 Rousseau's *Lettre à Monsieur de Voltaire*

Voltaire concluded his poem in January 1756 and sent a copy to Rousseau through a common friend. One year earlier Rousseau had sent a copy of his *Discours sur l'inégalité* to Voltaire, who acknowledged the receipt with the caustic words: "J'ai reçu, Monsieur, votre nouveau livre contre le genre humain". Now it was Rousseau's turn to say that he might as well refer to Voltaire's work as a "poème contre la providence"¹⁹. And in fact the bitter and somber tone of the work must have shocked Rousseau and appeared as a menace to the religious beliefs to which he had recently begun to give so much importance.

Curiously, the first thing that Rousseau criticized in Voltaire's poem was its lack of consolatory power. As we saw above, Voltaire had accused Pope's *Essay* of precisely the same thing, and the contrasting reactions of the two authors provide an interesting glimpse on their personal views of Providence. "Pope's poem", says Rousseau,

adoucit mes maux et me porte à la patience, le vôtre aigrit mes peines, m'excite au murmure, et m'ôtant tout hors une espérance ébranlée, il me réduit au désespoir. « Homme prends patience, » me disent Pope et Leibniz. « Tes maux sont un effet nécessaire de ta nature, et de la constitution de cet univers. L'Être éternel et bienfaisant qui te gouverne eût voulu t'en garantir. De toutes les œconomies possibles, il a choisi celle qui réunissait le moins de mal et le plus de bien, ou ... s'il n'a pas mieux fait, c'est qu'il ne pouvait mieux faire. »²⁰

On the other hand,

Que me dit maintenant votre poème? « Souffre à jamais, malheureux. S'il est un Dieu qui t'ait créé, sans doute il est tout-puissant ; il pouvoit prévenir tous tes maux : n'espère donc jamais qu'ils finissent; car on ne saurait voir pourquoi tu existes, si ce n'est pour souffrir et mourir. »²¹

Voltaire himself must have thought that the poem in its original version was too pessimistic, and he revised it to attenuate that impression. This is the case, for example, with the verse "je n'interroge point la suprême puissance" that becomes, more piously, "Je ne m'élève point contre la Providence" (verse 222), and especially with the original conclusion:

Que faut-il, O mortels? Mortels, il faut souffrir,
Se soumettre en silence, adorer, et mourir.

in which Voltaire first changed the last verse into:

¹⁹ Rousseau, *Lettre à Voltaire*, OC, iv.1061.

²⁰ Rousseau, *Lettre à Voltaire*, OC, iv.1060.

²¹ Rousseau, *Lettre à Voltaire*, OC, iv.1060. One should observe that Rousseau, if pressed to choose between the two horns of the Epicurean dilemma, would happily concede that God may not be omnipotent, as long as he can preserve his faith in God's complete benevolence.

Se soumettre, adorer, espérer, et mourir.

and afterwards replaced it by the exhortation to hope we read today:

Un calife autrefois, à son heure dernière,
Au Dieu qu'il adorait dit pour toute prière:
« Je t'apporte, ô seul roi, seul être illimité,
Tout ce que tu n'as pas dans ton immensité,
Les défauts, les regrets, les maux et l'ignorance »
Mais il pouvait encore ajouter *l'espérance*.²²

Such corrections, however, may appear insincere and contrived,²³ and there can be little doubt that the pessimistic tone, after all, conveys the true meaning of the work. Seeing such thoughts coming from a major figure of the *République des Lettres*, and one with a great influence on public opinion, Rousseau must have decided that a strong answer was needed, and he was the one to deliver it. He worked feverishly on that answer for two months, and the resulting *Lettre à M. de Voltaire*, dated August 18, 1756, was a carefully argued text, obviously written with an eye towards publication.

But Voltaire's poem makes an elusive target, being not so much a reasoned discussion of the concept of Providence as a passionate *cri de coeur* by a man who sees his certitudes crumbling and for whom the Lisbon disaster is more a scandal to be denounced than a theoretical problem to be solved. It is true that God's existence is never put in doubt by Voltaire, but one cannot either deny that "le Mal est sur la terre" (v. 126), and this coexistence of God and evil is something that Voltaire cannot – and does not try to – make sense of.

Rousseau, on the other hand, found himself in the difficult position to defend Providence with rational or experimental evidence, something that, as we have seen (and Voltaire was beginning to feel in his bones), was turning into a quite difficult task after the first half of the century. And, in fact, there were not many arguments available for Rousseau to deploy, although he made a valiant effort to make use of those he could lay his hands on.

A first line of reasoning may strike us as crudely sophistic: we would not be able to tell for sure whether all those deaths in the earthquake were bad in an absolute sense – they might have been relatively good, in that they spared worse sufferings:

De tant d'hommes écrasés sous les ruines de Lisbonne, plusieurs, sans doute, ont évité de plus grands malheurs; et, malgré ce qu'une pareille description a de touchant, et fournit à la poésie, il n'est pas sûr qu'un seul de ces infortunés ait plus souffert, que si, selon le

²² Voltaire, *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*, verses 229-234. ix.476.

²³ Pomeau, R. *La religion de Voltaire*, p. 288-291.

cours ordinaire des choses, il eût attendu dans de longues angoisses la mort qui l'est venu surprendre.²⁴

This is certainly a far-fetched argument by all accounts, and a much unexpected one from a philosopher who praised so much in his works the value of existence and of the sentiment of merely being alive. But one should notice that what Rousseau had in mind here were sufferings inflicted by other human beings (doctors, lawyers, priests; that is, his favorite torturers), compared to which the sufferings imposed by nature are gentler and briefer, a point also often emphasized in the *Discours sur l'inégalité*. The evils we must fear more are those derived from civilization, for which we should not blame Providence.

Rousseau also resorts to classical Deist arguments that associate Providence to the unchangeable and predetermined order of the world and confine its action to the general laws that direct that order.

Il n'est pas question de savoir, si chacun de nous souffre ou non ; mais s'il était bon que l'univers fût, et si nos maux étaient inévitables dans la constitution de l'univers. Ainsi, l'addition d'un article rendrait ce semble la proposition plus exacte ; et au lieu de *Tout est bien*, il vaudrait peut être mieux dire : *Le tout est bien, ou tout est bien pour le tout*.²⁵

But as we have already seen, such arguments carried at the time very little weight with the author of the *Poème*. "Do not speak to me of those unchangeable laws of necessity and of that chain of beings and worlds. God holds the chain in his hand; he is not enchained. Why should we suffer under an all-powerful and benevolent master?" All those philosophical dreams and chimeras pale into insignificance and cannot provide any effective consolation when, as sensible beings, we are confronted with acute suffering.

It is, however, a mark of Rousseau's genius that even when fighting such an uphill battle he was able to raise at least one quite original and effective point. That was his comment on the social components of disasters, that is, his insight that catastrophes such as the Lisbon earthquake were in a large measure of our own making; a result to be expected given the way we choose to build our human communities:

Sans quitter votre sujet de Lisbonne, convenez, par exemple, que la nature n'avait point rassemblé là vingt mille maisons de six à sept étages, et que si les habitants de cette grande ville eussent été dispersés plus également et plus légèrement logés, le dégât eût été beaucoup moindre, et peut-être nul.²⁶

²⁴ Rousseau, *Lettre à Voltaire*, OC, iv.1062.

²⁵ Rousseau, *Lettre à Voltaire*, OC, iv.1068.

²⁶ Rousseau, *Lettre à Voltaire*, OC, iv.1061.

Not only was the crowded urban pattern of modern cities to be blamed, but also the corrupt attachment of civilized men to material goods, money and property:

Combien de malheureux ont péri dans le désastre, pour vouloir prendre, l'un ses habits, l'autre ses papiers, l'autre son argent? Ne sait-on pas que la personne de chaque homme est devenue la moindre part de lui-même, et que ce n'est presque pas la peine de la sauver quand on a perdu tout le reste?²⁷

In his poem, Voltaire expressed the wish that the earthquake had occurred in the middle of the desert (verses 54-55), sparing the people of the city – but in fact, replies Rousseau, earthquakes may take place everywhere, also, therefore, on deserts, although in these cases we tend to not pay much attention to them. And when Voltaire wonders how everything could be right when nature is allowed to engulf a whole city in an abyss of fire and sulfur, Rousseau effectively turn the tables on Voltaire's reasoning and puts the matter in a broader perspective:

Mais que signifierait un pareil privilège? Serait-ce donc à dire que l'ordre du monde doit changer selon nos caprices, que la nature doit être soumise à nos lois, et que, pour lui interdire un tremblement de terre en quelque lieu, nous n'avons qu'à y bâtir une Ville?²⁸

Even if his attempted defense of Providence was in the end doomed to fail, Rousseau called attention to something that was not properly recognized until much later: the fact that social and behavioral patterns have a large influence in the occurrence of catastrophes that affect large human groups and which were until then blamed only on nature's whims. As it happened in so many other fields of investigation to which Rousseau made pioneer contributions, we see here the first tentative steps towards a sociological theory of disasters and the modern concept of vulnerability, with the associated notion of the State's responsibility in the prevention of such occurrences²⁹.

As the first large natural catastrophe to affect an European country in the beginning of the Modern era, and as an opportunity for the State – through the measures efficiently put in practice by Pombal – to assume and fulfill its newfound obligations toward the collective welfare, the Lisbon earthquake was the catalyst of important social and political reforms in Portugal, which were later imitated in other European countries. It provided also the occasion for an exchange of ideas between two of the greatest figures of the Enlightenment, forming an

²⁷ Rousseau, *Lettre à Voltaire*, OC, iv.1061.

²⁸ Rousseau, *Lettre à Voltaire*, OC, iv.1062.

²⁹ A point very well made by Dynes (2000).

indispensable chapter in the history of ideas in the eighteenth century. In this exchange, Voltaire and Rousseau appeared to be interested not so much in the metaphysical or theological aspects of Providence, but in the practical consequences of that concept for the life of men in the challenging times to come. However different their personal attitudes towards life, science and religion might be, each man in his own way would probably agree that “bury the dead and feed the living” and “try to learn how to lessen the risks and respond better next time” would still be the best attitudes when facing such catastrophes.

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