



LEIBNIZ'S *THE THEODICY*, OR THE DYSTOPIA OF A WORLD WITHOUT TEARS

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Leibniz's theodicy, according to which, our world is the best it can be has often been mocked by progress-mongers like Voltaire. How, indeed, can we justify the existence of a good God and a harmonious world when, on the contrary, the latter contains so many misfortunes? This question, less heard than it might seem, lies at the heart of the works of Dostoevsky and Aldous Huxley, who question the truly utopian nature of a society without tears. Would not a world without tribulations be a world deprived of freedom and poetry?

In *The Theodicy*, the philosopher Leibniz sought to demonstrate that we live in "the best of all possible worlds," a claim that earned him much ridicule, starting with Voltaire. In *Candide*, Voltaire ironized the naïveté of Leibnizian optimism through the character of Pangloss, who repeats at every turn "everything's for the best in the best of all possible worlds." How could anyone believe that the best of all possible worlds existed, given the wars and epidemics, the misery and death? For Voltaire, the world cannot be said to be the best it can be as long as the question of Evil remains.

"One day, all will be well, that is our hope / All is well today, that is the illusion." In these verses, written after the Lisbon earthquake in November 1755, a catastrophe that claimed between 50,000 and 70,000 lives, Voltaire reaffirmed the idea that is at the heart of the Enlightenment: the perfectibility of the human race, the march of progress towards a world free of "useless pain," towards a "Christianity without tears," to quote Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World*. To get there, we must, like Candide, "cultivate our own garden," working to establish human happiness here on earth rather than in the next world. Yet Leibniz is not blissfully optimistic, nor is he blind to suffering or injustice. Voltaire pretends not to have understood Leibniz's idea that Evil is necessary for the Best. "It is true that we can imagine possible worlds without sin or misfortune, and we could make novels and utopias out of them... but these same worlds would be much inferior in goodness to our own," comments Leibniz in his *The Theodicy*. These utopias, these novels, are what we find in the writings of Aldous Huxley and Dostoyevsky.

Towards a Christianity without Tears

Indeed, we can reread Aldous Huxley's masterpiece *Brave New World* as a hermeneutic of this controversy between Leibnizian and Voltairian ideas. From this perspective, the title translated into French [*Le Meilleur des mondes*] is perhaps more meaningful than the original *Brave New World*. The novel, undoubtedly less Manichean than it appears (less so than George Orwell's dystopian *Nineteen*

Eighty-Four, to which it is often compared), deals with the establishment of an earthly Jerusalem, a system that rationally defines human happiness.

Moreover, Huxley does not dispute the eutopic character of Fordian civilization, i.e., its happiness. The new world state he has imagined truly brings happiness to mankind. Its Controller, Mustapha Mond, affirms: "The world's stable now. People are happy; they get what they want, and they never want what they can't get. They're well off, they're safe; they're never ill; they're not afraid of death." The happiness Voltaire had hoped for has finally arrived. But this "never grandiose" happiness can only be established at the price of renouncing "high art," freedom, nobility, heroism, poetry, danger, sin, in a word, Shakespeare, everything that, for the Controller, is merely "overcompensations for misery." For the Controller, if Edmund, the character in Shakespeare's tragedy *King Lear*, had known Fordian civilization, he would undoubtedly have renounced his tragic and grandiose destiny for a seat in an inflatable armchair, a sexual partner and the harmless drug Soma.

As a counterpoint to this end-of-history civilization, a reserve of savages, as if placed in a jar, bears witness for the new man to what the free world was, the world before its rationalization. Here, animality confronts sterilization. Misery, old age, solitude, cruelty and whipping still reign on the Reservation. This world may seem crueler than the Fordist World State, but contrary to what the Controller thinks, Edmund may not give up his destiny. John, the savage who lived on the Reservation, has known anguish and tears. He has known Lisbon, he has found Shakespeare, and Shakespeare is worth Lisbon to him. For *Othello*, he goes so far as to "[claim] the right to be unhappy" from the Controller. In his view, the best of all worlds is not one that "[gets rid of] everything unpleasant", but one that "[learns] to live with it". The best of all worlds is one of nobility rather than ease. For the savage, "Othello is better than those feelies." No Othello without passion, no passion without suffering. Here is Leibniz: a world without unhappiness would not be as good as ours.

Is Shakespeare Worth Children's Suffering?

The question, then, is no longer, as Dostoyevsky thought, whether Shakespeare is worth a pair of boots ["The question that divides us all boils down to this: which is prettier, Shakespeare or a pair of boots?"—*The Demons*—the answer is all too familiar—but, as Huxley wrote, whether Shakespeare is worth "the right to grow old and ugly and impotent; the right to have syphilis and cancer; the right to have too little to eat; the right to be lousy; the right to live in constant apprehension of what may happen to-morrow; the right to catch typhoid; the right to be tortured by unspeakable pains of every

kind." If Shakespeare is worth the unhappiness, then let us affirm with Leibniz that we live in the best of all possible worlds. If not, let us swallow that blue Soma pill they are handing us.

It' is the same Cornelian dilemma that defeats Ivan's reason in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. On the one hand, Ivan revolts against the Leibnizian idea that a greater good can justify an evil. Nothing, for Ivan, not even the perfect happiness of all, "higher harmony" or Truth justifies the tears of a single child. Nothing great or beautiful can come of children's suffering, only disgust and rejection. Who can remain insensitive to the terrible account he gives of this little girl whipped and trampled every day, forced by her own parents to eat her own excrement, beating her chest and calling for help from a "Good God" who never comes? Or the boy who was fed to the dogs in front of his mother? Ivan refuses to allow this "absurdity" to promise a better plan, unless the loving God the little girl invokes is no better than Job's cruel, vengeful God.

On the other hand, Ivan also refuses the Soma, the "earthly bread" that the terrible figure of the Inquisitor—whom he invented to solve the problem of evil—offers man in exchange for his freedom. To make man happy, to "lighten his burden with love," the Grand Inquisitor, like Mustapha Mond, is ready to renounce his own happiness and salvation [The Controller smiled. "That's how I paid. By choosing to serve happiness. Other people's—not mine"]. Ivan has guessed the earthly consequences of establishing Voltaire's City: any attempt to rid the world of its misery and suffering can only lead to an even more absurd materialistic tyranny, whether consumerist, as in Huxley, or socialist, as professed in 19th-century Russia. The Grand Inquisitor is none other than the counterfeit double of the good shepherd he faces; his caricature who treats humanity not as a flock where each sheep has a priceless and promising value, but as mere cattle. Ivan recognizes the devil in the Inquisitor.

Take Up Your Cross...

In the naïveté of his twenty-three years, Ivan was full of love for life, that "enchanted cup" in which he "[became] intoxicated with tenderness" before heroism, the ideal and the "tender shoots of spring." He wanted to live, "even in spite of logic," without looking for meaning in his life. Yet he cannot help it—Ivan just does not know how to live; he is not Dimitri, his brother, the figure of the pure savage. [Dimitri, rather than Shakespeare, quotes the poets Goethe: "Man, be noble!" or Schiller: "Turn chaos into suns," but all from the same impulse]. Though he loses his faith, he does not believe salvation is possible without God. Though an atheist, he has none of the cynicism of Rakitin or Chigalev in *The Demons*. If heavenly happiness disgusts him as long as a single child experiences hell here below, earthly happiness is even

more repugnant to him if it comes at the price of human stupidity.

To deprive man of his freedom, even if it is for his own good, or to grant it to him, even if it means that he will abuse it and make his children suffer, is always too high a price for Ivan, who is incapable of simply relying on God, like his younger brother Alyosha, who, although frightened for a moment by his elder brother's words, answers, like John in *Brave New World*: "I want to suffer." Alyosha does not know how to respond to Ivan's science, but he does know how to forgive, and retains faith in a God who became incarnate to share our pain and misfortune. In *Brave New World*, the Bible is hidden from men, locked away with Shakespeare. But "if we drive God from the earth, we'll meet him underground!" exclaims Dostoyevsky's Dimitri, whose soul is resurrected when he is condemned to the mines. A tragic hymn to the God of joy rises from the underground ruins of Lisbon, and Leibniz lends his voice to it: "And Jesus wept" (John 11: 35). There is no Christianity without tears.

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Featured: *The Bridge in-curve*, by Grace Cossington Smith; painted in 1930.
