Rousseau versus Voltaire on Optimism

Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra

University of Oxford

1. *Candide*, published in 1759, is perhaps Voltaire’s most famous piece, in which Voltaire satirizes Leibniz’s optimism, which can be encapsulated in the idea that the actual world is the best possible world. But three years before, in 1756, Voltaire published his first attack on optimism, the *Poem on the Lisbon disaster*. This was Voltaire’s reaction to the massive and devastating earthquake and subsequent tsunami that destroyed much of Lisbon on the 1st of November of 1755. A current estimate is that a total of between 15,000 and 20,000 people died with up to 10,000 in Lisbon alone, but the estimate at the time of Voltaire’s was much higher and in some cases of about 100,000 dead (see Van der Lugt 2021: 131). It has been argued that the earthquake was the last in a series of events, rather than the initial cause, that led to Voltaire’s attack on optimism – other events were the death of his lover, Émilie Du Châtelet, in 1749, an increased hostility towards him on the part of the French court, and the bad reception some of his plays were receiving (Havens 1930: 190, cited by Brooks 1964: 85). In the poem Voltaire attacks the idea that “all is good”, which he associates with Pope and Leibniz. Indeed, the full title of the poem is *Poem on the Lisbon disaster, or examination of this axiom: “all is good”*. Shortly after the publication of the poem Rousseau replied to Voltaire in a letter, sometimes known as ‘Rousseau’s letter on Providence’, where he defended optimism from Voltaire’s attack. In this article I shall be concerned with the differences of opinion between Voltaire and Rousseau in the *Poem on the Lisbon disaster* and the letter on Providence.

The main targets of Voltaire’s poem are Leibniz and Pope. At the time it was debated whether Pope’s version of optimism was the same as Leibniz’s. This was, indeed, the topic of the Essay Prize of the Prussian Academy of Sciences in 1755, which was won by Adolf Friedrich Reinhardt, a follower of Crusius who became professor of law at the University of Bützow (for a discussion of Reinhard’s essay and Kant’s take on it see Rodriguez-Pereyra 2018 and for a discussion of Crusius’ views on the best possible world see Krouglov 2018). Leibniz’s optimism consists in the idea that the actual world is the best possible world, both in a metaphysical and a moral sense. It is the best possible world in a metaphysical sense because it balances means (laws) and content (facts) optimally, and it is the best possible world in a moral sense because it balances good and evil optimally (Leibniz 2020: 7, 10–11 and for discussion see pages 64–65)

It is important to make a couple of preliminary remarks about optimism and pessimism in the context of Voltaire’s poem and Rousseau’s letter. The first is that the relevant sense of optimism for our discussion is the moral one – although Voltaire correctly considers the moral sense of optimism to be a metaphysical thesis, there is nothing in the poem or the letter about the metaphysical conception of the best possible world, that is, about whether the actual world balances means and content optimally.

The second is that there are several senses of optimism and pessimism that are relevant to the *Poem on the Lisbon disaster* and the letter on Providence. Sometimes Voltaire and Rousseau fail to distinguish clearly between some of these senses, and sometimes they seem to miss the relevant sense for the point they are making or they need to make, and sometimes they have different senses in mind. In one sense optimism and pessimism are doctrines or positions about the *total* value of the world, that is, about the net balance between good and evil in the actual world *across all times*: optimism being the idea that such a balance is positive and pessimism the idea that it is not positive. This sense of optimism is clearly an implication of the Leibnizian optimist thesis that this is the best possible world. For, even if the proposition that this is the best possible world does not entail that there is more good than evil, it is clear that according to Leibniz, the net balance between good and evil in the best possible world is positive, i.e. overall more good than evil. The contrast is with a *time-restricted* version of optimism and pessimism as doctrines or attitudes about the net balance between good and evil in the world *at a certain period of time*. The most common version of the time-restricted version of optimism and pessimism are *future-oriented* versions, where they are basically attitudes or ideas about the future: optimism is the idea, or hope, that things are going to get better in the future, while pessimism is the idea that they are not going to get better, or at least that we have no reason to expect them to get better. The future-oriented versions of optimism and pessimism are the most prevalent nowadays, especially in non-academic discourse. But it is important to note that the time-restricted versions of the doctrines allow for *present-oriented* versions, the views that the net balance between good and evil in the world *at the present time* is positive (optimism) or not positive (pessimism).[[1]](#footnote-1) As we shall see below, at one point in the poem Voltaire contrasts the present-oriented and the future-oriented versions of optimism. But there are other senses of optimism and pessimism that feature in Voltaire’s poem and Rousseau’s letter. One is Rousseau’s idea that it is better to exist than not. Two much more prominent ones in the poem and the letter are the ideas that everything is good, or all is well, and that the actual world is the best possible world.

Clearly the theses that everything is good and that this is the best possible world are not equivalent. That everything is good does not entail that this is the best possible world, since there are degrees of goodness, and so the fact that a world might contain only what is good does not mean that the amount of good in every other possible world must be less. Similarly, that this is the best possible world does not entail that there is no evil in the world. And this is indeed the way in which Leibniz understood his thesis that this is the best possible world, since he is clear that evil exists, where this means that there are people, actions, and events that are truly characterized as evil.

It is important to point out this inequivalence because both Voltaire and Rousseau understood both Leibniz and Pope to have thought that all is good (“Tout est bien”). This is based on an assimilation between what Pope said and what Leibniz thought (the assimilation is often implicit, but sometimes it is explicitly made, for instance when Voltaire claims, in the preface to his poem, that Pope’s poem deploys Leibniz’s system (Voltaire 1961: 301)). But this is based on a double confusion. First, what Pope said was not that whatever is, is good, but that whatever is, is right (Pope 2016: 27), and the concepts of good and right are different concepts (Krouglov points out that the translation of Pope’s phrase as “Tout est bien” was criticised by Mendelssohn and Lessing in 1755; see Krouglov 2018: 11). Furthermore, Pope explicitly declared the existence of partial evil, just two lines before stating his famous phrase that whatever is, is right. What he says is that all partial evil is universal good (Pope 2016: 26). So it is not correct to attribute to Pope the idea that all is good. Second, Leibniz never thought that everything is good – indeed, Leibniz never doubted that there is evil in the world. Interestingly, the confusion persisted beyond the poem since, for instance, in the article “All is good”, in the *Pocket Philosophical Dictionary* of 1764, Voltaire says that Leibniz ‘erected the edifice known as “the best of all possible worlds” and he imagined that “everything was just fine’ (Voltaire 2011: 45). However, Voltaire does not consistently interpret Leibniz as maintaining that all is good and nothing is evil. As we shall see, he sometimes says things that touch the view that all is good, and sometimes he says things that touch the view that the actual world is the best possible world. Thus, Voltaire’s confusion consists in failing to distinguish clearly between the thesis that all is good and the thesis that the actual world is the best possible world.[[2]](#footnote-2)

2. Voltaire makes basically four points in the poem against those who, he imagines, maintain that all is good. One is that they are wrong. The second one is that they cannot explain how it is that everything is good. The third one is that the message that everything is good, far from being consoling, is cruel because it increases our suffering and pain. And the fourth one is that they are hypocritical, since they pretend to be content or happy, but in fact they are not.

Sometimes Voltaire says that his opponents are wrong because there is evil on Earth: ‘Vous criez: “Tout est bien” d’une voix lamentable,/L’univers vos dément…/Il le faut avouer, le mal est sur la terre’ (Voltaire 1961: 307). Of course, if everything is good, there cannot be evil on Earth. Voltaire can only think that the presence of evil is sufficient to refute the idea that this is the best possible world because he does not distinguish sufficiently between the ideas that this is the best possible world and the idea that everything is good.

But at other times Voltaire’s objection is better focused on the idea that this is the best possible world. Indeed, earlier in the poem he wrote:

“Tout est bien, dites-vous, et tout est nécessaire”

Quoi! L’univers entier, sans ce grouffe infernal,

Sans engloutir Lisbonne, eût-il-été plus mal?

Etes-vous assuréz que la cause éternelle

Qui fait tout, qui sait tout, qui créa tout pour elle,

Ne pouvait nous jeter dans ces tristes climats

Sans former des volcans allumés sous nos pas? (Voltaire 1961: 305)

Here Voltaire is not simply denying that everything is good because there is evil, he is saying that the world wouldn’t be worse without the destruction of Lisbon. This objection hits the idea that this is the best possible world. The mere existence of evil is irrelevant to the thesis that this is the best possible world, but the fact that this world would not have been worse without the destruction of Lisbon is relevant to such a thesis. But although relevant, the objection is not effective against Leibniz, since Leibniz argued that without any of the actual facts the world would have been indeed worse. Indeed, since God is perfect, he creates the best, and therefore if he had not created this world, he would have created a worse world – this is how Leibniz would have replied to Voltaire.

But Voltaire has a better objection to Leibniz:

Leibnitz ne m’apprend point par quells noeuds invisibles,

Dans le mieux ordonné des univers possibles,

Un désordre éternel, un chaos de malheurs,

Mêle à nos vains plaisirs de réelles douleurs,

Ni pourquoi l’innocent, ainsi que le coupable,

Subit également ce mal inévitable (Voltaire 1961: 308)

This is a powerful criticism of Leibniz. According to it, Leibniz has not explained how it is that particular evils contribute to the goodness of the whole, nor has he explained how it is that there is no better world with less evil or no evil at all. Admittedly, this does not refute Leibniz’s thesis that this is the best possible world. But it raises doubts and undermines the credibility of Leibniz’s thesis. And this is as much as Voltaire wants to affirm: that he does not know and he does not understand the presence of evil in the world. Indeed, after those verses, he says:

Je ne conçois pas plus comment tout serait bien:

Je suis comme un docteur; hélas! je ne sais rien. (Voltaire 1961: 308)

Voltaire’s point is that the presence of evil and the fact that this is not the best possible world are too evident while the thesis that this is the best possible world is not even properly understood. Indeed, Voltaire is sceptical of all hypotheses concerning the origin of evil. He says in a note to the poem that only revelation can teach a solution that the human mind cannot understand, and in the article “All is good” of the *Pocket Philosophical Dictionary* Voltaire says that the origin of evil is an abyss such that no one has seen the bottom of it (Voltaire 2011: 46). Voltaire’s scepticism about the origin and causes of evil is part of a long-standing scepticism about metaphysics in general. Brooks (1964: 65) argues that such anti-metaphysical stance goes back at least until the time of the Henriade of 1723. The *Pocket Philosophical Dictionary* expresses the stance very vividly: “Let us put at the end of every chapter on metaphysics the two letters that Roman judges used when confronted with a case they could not understand: N.L. (*non liquet*), ‘that is unclear’” (Voltaire 2011: 49).

Thus, for Voltaire, optimism, as expressed in the dictum ‘All is good’, and including the idea that this is the best possible world, is both wrong and not properly understood. These are, in a very broad sense of the word, epistemological objections to optimism. But Voltaire also advances moral objections against optimism and optimists, namely that optimism is cruel (in the derived sense that declaring the truth of optimism is a cruel reaction to the fact of suffering) and optimists are hypocritical. According to optimism evil in general, and suffering in particular, contributes to the general good. But this cannot console those suffering and it amounts to ignoring and dismissing their pain and misfortunes; such dismissal is an insult which exacerbates that pain and this is why optimism is a cruel philosophy:

Les tristes habitants de ces bords désolés

Dans l’horreur des tourments seraient-ils consolés

Si quelqu’un leur disait: “Tombez, mourez tranquilles;

Pour le bonheur du monde on détruit vos asiles;

D’autres mains vont bâtir vos palais embrasés,

D’autres peuples naîtront dans vos murs écrasés;

Le Nord va s’enrichir de vos pertes fatales;

Tous vos maux sont un bien dans les lois générales;

Dieu vous voit du même oeil que les vils vermisseaux

Don’t vous serez la proie au fond de vos tombeaux?”

A des infortunés quel horrible langage!

Cruels, à mes douleurs n’ajoutez point l’outrage. (Voltaire 1961: 305).[[3]](#footnote-3)

Voltaire’s point is that optimism is not the right moral reaction to the existence of suffering. This should not be surprising given that, according to Voltaire, optimism denies the existence of evil. The existence of evil is a fact that cannot be denied: “Il le faut avouer, le mal est sur la terre” (Voltaire 1961: 307). And this is a sad and ancient truth which is recognised by all men, Voltaire says in the preface to the *Poem on the Lisbon disaster* (Voltaire 1961: 302). But if the existence of evil is recognised by all men, then optimists cannot but be hypocritical when preaching their doctrine. And this is what Voltaire implies in the poem:

‘Vous criez: “Tout est bien” d’une voix lamentable,

L’univers vos dement, et votre propre Coeur

Cent fois de votre esprit a réfuté l’erreur (Voltaire 1961: 307)

Here is a point of connection between the *Poem on the natural Law* and the *Poem on the Lisbon disaster*. The main message of the former is that there is a universal moral law that men can find in themselves. If men know intimately that optimism is false, which is what the *Poem on the Lisbon disaster* maintains, then they should know that optimism does not console and it is cruel to proselytize it to the suffering.

Thus Voltaire’s conclusions in his Poem are very pessimistic, and they are completely opposed to the idea of a Providence. As is well known (see, for instance, Havens 1941 and Villar 1995: 69), this worried some of Voltaire’s friends and they suggested him to moderate the poem and one of them, Dr Tronchin, even asked Voltaire to burn it (see Havens 1941: 425). Voltaire’s response was to tone the poem down by adding some lines at the end containing a message of hope in the after-life, and writing a preface where he makes clear he is not against Providence as such but against the idea that Providence has ordered things for our *present* well-being (Voltaire 1961: 301). Thus, there is some reason to think that the message of hope from the end of the poem and its preface does not represent a sincere expression of Voltaire’s thought. Further reason for thinking this is that there is a copy of the poem with annotations from Voltaire where (a) he altered the text from the end of the poem to dilute the message of hope, for instance by calling it a frail hope rather than our hope: “quelle frele [sic] espérance!”, and (b) he changed the last line of the poem to make it a question rather than a statement: “Mais pouvait-il encore ajouter l’espérance?” (see Havens 1929). Interestingly, whether or not he knew that they were changes Voltaire made in response to his friends’ worries, Rousseau does not seem to have taken the verses on hope seriously and he takes Voltaire’s poem to leave him only with a shaken hope and reduced to despair (Rousseau 2019: 241).

Some commentators, for instance Van der Lugt (2021: 135–138), suggest that the final part of the poem advances another objection against optimism: the hope objection. This is, basically, that if this the best possible world, then hoping that things will improve makes no sense and, consequently, optimism is a philosophy of despair (Van der Lugt 2021: 135). As Van der Lugt notes, this objection does not really work against Leibniz, since Leibniz’s thesis is that the world considered as a whole, stretching both across space and time, is the best possible one, and so it is consistent with things improving in the future (Van der Lugt 2021: 135).

I think Voltaire advances no hope objection against optimism, as I shall explain below. These are the relevant lines from the end of the poem:

Le passé n’est pour nous qu’un triste souvenir;

Le présent est affreux, s’il n’est point d’avenir,

Si la nuit du tombeau détruit l’être qui pense.

*Un jour tout sera bien*, voilà notre espérance;

*Tout est bien aujourd’hui*, voilà l’illusion.

Les sages me trompaient, et Dieu seul a raison.

Humble dans mes soupirs, soumis dans ma souffrance,

Je ne m’élève point contre la Providence.

Sur un ton moins lugubre on me vit autrefois

Chanter des doux plaisirs les séduisantes lois:

D’autres temps, d’autres moeurs: instruit par la vieillese,

Des humains égarés partageant la faiblesse,

Dans une épaisse nuit cherchant à m’éclarer,

Je ne sais que souffrir, et non pas murmurer.

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. (Voltaire 1961: 309)

The first reason why I think Voltaire is not advancing the hope objection in these lines is that here Voltaire takes the optimism he opposes to be a present-oriented idea: the idea that *in the present* everything is good. But this idea is clearly consistent with the possibility of a happy after-life, which can be the object of our hope (although not of mine, I hasten to add). Indeed, such a conception of optimism is even compatible with the possibility of things improving on Earth in the future. Thus, objecting to optimism thus understood (and it is thus understood in the final verses of the poem) that it cannot make sense of hope, is ineffective: such an objection does not touch its target. The second reason why I do not believe that Voltaire is advancing the hope objection in these lines is that a reading of the end of the poem reveals that Voltaire is not saying that the optimism he opposes makes no room for hope. Instead, what he is saying is that present-oriented optimism is false (“an illusion”), and that he, Voltaire, has hope in the after-life. But to say that he has hope and can make sense of it is not the same as saying that what he claims to be false or an illusion cannot make sense of it. Thus, there is no hope objection against optimism in the *Poem on the Lisbon disaster*.

But even if Voltaire is not advancing the hope objection against optimism, is he not changing his conception of optimism to a time-restricted one and adopting the future-oriented version? The poem, in its final lines, does contain such a move. But given the available evidence that those lines were added under pressure and that in his revised copy of the poem he altered it to dilute the message of hope by calling it a frail hope, I don’t think Voltaire himself was adopting a future-oriented version of optimism.

3. What is Rousseau’s response to the poem?[[4]](#footnote-4) Rousseau begins by pointing out that there is some opposition between the two poems Voltaire collected together, the *Poem on the Lisbon disaster* and the *Poem on natural Law*. Are the two poems opposed to each other? I agree with Victor Gourevitch (2000: 578–79) that Rousseau is right that there is an opposition between the two poems. First, in the exordium of the *Poem on natural Law* Voltaire says that only through Pope’s poem man can know himself and at the end Voltaire says that God has given him so many good things (Voltaire 1961: 287). Furthermore, in the second part of the *Poem on natural Law* Voltaire says that all the plagues that we suffer are the inevitable effect of the clash between the elements, while in the *Poem on the Lisbon disaster*, he remained agnostic about the origin of evil.

But it is also important to emphasise that the basic messages of the poems are perfectly compatible with each other. The basic message of the *Poem on natural Law* is that there is a universal moral law (the natural law of the title of the poem), known intimately by all men even if sometimes they deviate from it, and that following it is all God requires from us. The law basically orders men to adore a god, be just, and love our homeland (Voltaire 1961: 276). Such a message is perfectly compatible with the main contentions of the *Poem on the Lisbon disaster*, namely that not all is good, and that it is cruel and hypocritical to advocate the doctrine that all is good in the presence of terrible human suffering.

Rousseau considers first Voltaire’s claim that optimism does not offer consolation to those suffering and it is a cruel message to them. His response is that optimism is indeed consoling and it is Voltaire’s pessimistic message that is cruel. Rousseau finds optimism consoling because evil is a necessary consequence of man’s nature and the constitution of the universe, and so a better world than this one is not possible. Indeed, according to Rousseau, God wanted to protect us and if he created this world it was because a better one could not be created. What makes this message consoling is precisely that things could not have been better than they are. Instead, Rousseau takes Voltaire’s position to be cruel because it tells those suffering that everything is evil, which can only increase their pain (Rousseau 2019: 241). There is an interesting double misinterpretation between Voltaire and Rousseau concerning optimism and pessimism. While Voltaire, as we have seen, thinks that optimists deny the existence of evil, Rousseau affirms that Voltaire denies the existence of good (Rousseau says that according to Voltaire, ‘tout est mal’, Rousseau 2019: 241).

Needless to say, it is not part of Voltaire’s position that everything is evil. Of course, Rousseau could have made the point that Voltaire’s pessimism is cruel simply because reminding those suffering that things could have been better can only increase their afflictions. In effect, what seems to be the case is that neither optimism nor pessimism are consoling to those who are victims of earthquakes or other catastrophic events. Voltaire is right that mentioning to them that the world is the best possible one, or that from every evil good consequences are drawn, will not console anyone in those circumstances, but Rousseau is also right that telling them that the world is not the best possible one and that one must acknowledge the existence of evil will not console them. But the fact is that Voltaire did not intend his message to be a consoling one, while the philosophy of optimism has typically been advanced as a message of consolation based on hope. Thus it seems to me that Rousseau is missing Voltaire’s point here, and he has not adequately dealt with Voltaire’s criticism that optimism is a cruel philosophy.

As far as I can tell, Rousseau does not explicitly deal with Voltaire’s accusation of hypocrisy, but Rousseau claims that he experiences that Pope’s poem alleviates his evils, and he bases this on the evidence of his feeling (‘sentiment’). Thus, he says he is speaking with his heart. But if he is being sincere about the consoling effects of Pope’s poem, presumably he is also being sincere in his defense of optimism. Of course, Voltaire’s accusation of hypocrisy was based on his misunderstanding optimism as the rejection of all evil, but this is not the way Rousseau understands optimism. Hence, there is a sense in which Rousseau is not really responding to Voltaire’s accusation of hypocrisy, but he does not really need to.

Rousseau’s strategy to deal with Voltaire’s point that optimism is wrong is based on the distinction between moral and physical evils, and the claim that while moral evils have their source in man’s freedom, physical evils are inevitable. The reason why physical evils are inevitable is that man is both material and sensitive, but sensitive and impassive matter is a contradiction, and therefore physical evils are inevitable in every system of which man is a part. Thus, Rousseau concludes, the question is not why man is not perfectly happy but why man exists (Rousseau 2019: 242).

How is this a response to the claim that optimism is wrong? First, Rousseau’s view in the *Second Discourse*, published one year earlier than he wrote his letter to Voltaire, is that freedom is a distinctive metaphysical mark of man (Rousseau 2009: 32–33). It seems to follow that there is no possible world where man is not free. But couldn’t God have created a world where man is free and good, and so there are no moral evils, and where nature is nice to humans so that they suffer no physical evils? Rousseau does not ask the question in such an explicit manner, but he implicitly answers it negatively. For, Rousseau claims, free and perfected man is thereby corrupted Rousseau 2019: 242). Indeed, for Rousseau another distinctive characteristic of humans is their perfectibility, a general faculty of self-improvement by which, aided by the circumstances, humans improve all their other faculties; and this faculty of self-improvement is the source not only of their virtues but also of their vices and unhappiness (Rousseau 2009: 33–34). Thus, moral evil is inevitable for humans. And so is physical evil, since wrong and corrupt choices will make humans victims of natural disasters. This is why Rousseau says in his letter to Voltaire that most physical evils are of our own making. In the case of the Lisbon disaster if the inhabitants of that city had not built their houses so close to each other, and had they not built houses having multiple levels, the catastrophe would have been much less damaging or there would even have been no damage at all (Rousseau 2019: 242). This is why Rousseau can conclude that evil, both moral and physical, is inevitable in every system of which man is a part, that is, there is no possible world where there is no evil, and where evil is not mostly a consequence of wrong and misguided free human actions.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Although based on controversial assumptions, this is a defense of the inevitability of evil (both moral and physical evil, although Rousseau only claims the inevitability of physical evil, see Rousseau 2019: 242), and an account of the source of evil, something which Voltaire thought we could never discover. But is this account a defense of optimism? It is not, since (a) there is nothing in it that defends the claim that we live in the best possible world and (b) there is nothing in it that defends the claim that there is more good than evil in the world we live in, or that things will get better in the future. If not a defense of optimism, is Rousseau’s account of the inevitability of evil at least an exculpation of Providence? One might think it is, since the source of evil is free man, rather than God or Providence. But, in fact, it is not a total exculpation of Providence. For animals suffer and often that suffering is not the result of human actions. Rousseau is aware of this since he acknowledges that earthquakes in deserts can harm wild animals, but he minimises their suffering (Rousseau 2019: 242–43). Nevertheless, it is a fact that animals suffer, and they can suffer a lot, even if that suffering is not the result of free human actions: think of an animal that that dies in the flames of a fire produced by a lightning bolt. But animals are not free according to Rousseau, and so he cannot hold them responsible for their suffering. Furthermore, he acknowledges in the *Second Discourse* that the fact that animals feel makes them subject to moral treatment so that men should not mistreat them unnecessarily (Rousseau 2009: 18). But then the order arranged by Providence is not morally justifiable at least in what respects to the suffering of animals. It is not clear to me what Rousseau could say in response to this point.

But Rousseau defends optimism in his letter to Voltaire. Rousseau claims that (a) we prefer to exist rather than not to exist, and (b) that if it is better for us to exist than not, our existence is thereby justified, even if there was no compensation to be expected for the evils we have to suffer, whether or not they are as bad as Voltaire takes them to be (Rousseau 2019: 243).[[6]](#footnote-6)

That it is better for us (or sentient being in general) to exist than not to exist is the version of optimism Rousseau will defend. It is interesting to note that securing this version of optimism does not thereby secure the versions that hold that all is well or that the world we live in is the best of possible world. But can Rousseau secure even his minimal optimism? The two assertions (a) and (b) are problematic. First, not all of us prefer to exist rather than not: Schopenhauer and Benatar are two cases that come immediately to mind, and Rousseau himself knew that Maupertuis had argued that existence was a bad thing (see Benatar 2006 for his own views and quotations from Schopenhauer, and Rousseau 2019: 94).[[7]](#footnote-7) Second, and more importantly, if our evils are not compensated, it seems to follow that existing is not better than not existing, and therefore our existence is not justified. That is, whether existing is better than not depends on whether our evils are compensated; but Rousseau implies that, if existing is better than not, this is independent of whether our evils are compensated.

But Rousseau seems to have an answer to these points. For he thinks that those who calculate the different quantities of good and evil forget to include the ‘sweet sensation of existing’, which is independent of any other sensation (Rousseau 2019: 244). For this to answer the points above such a sensation should be so sweet that it compensates for whatever evils we may suffer. But is there such a sensation? I very much doubt that there is. Existence by itself does not produce any feeling or sensation. And even if such a sensation exists, how plausible is it to think that it alone compensates for whatever evils we suffer? Not at all plausible. Thus, I think Rousseau’s argument based on the alleged sweet sensation of existing fails to defend optimism in an effective way.

Interestingly, Rousseau goes on to attempt a very different line of thought, one that does not appeal to the sweet sensation of existing. On this other line of thought Rousseau argues that there is compensation for our evils, and so there is consolation, without defending optimism. How is this?

Rousseau is clear that particular evils must be distinguished from the general good and that taking optimism, like Voltaire does, to be the doctrine that there is no evil is a straw-man that no philosopher has ever accepted. Instead, Rousseau takes optimism to be the idea that the whole is good (‘le tout est bien’), not that all is good (‘tout est bien’), and so, although evils are necessary for its constitution, it is good that the universe exists (Rousseau 2019: 249). This is a better conception of optimism and it is closer to the Leibnizian version of it. But Rousseau suspends judgement over the truth of this version of optimism, since, he says, to prove it or disprove it would require a perfect knowledge of the constitution of the world and the goals of its creator, and such knowledge is beyond the reach of human intelligence (Rousseau 2019: 249).

But it is not true that to prove (or disprove) optimism in that sense one would need perfect knowledge of the constitution of the world and the goals of its creator. All one needs is knowledge of certain properties of God. If one knows that God (if he exists) is perfect and that he does not act without a reason and one knows that not choosing what is best would be to act without a reason, one is in a position to establish that the world that God created is the best possible one and, since we know evil exists, that evil is a necessary constituent of the best possible world. This is, roughly, how Leibniz takes himself to have established that the world we live in is the best possible world. And nothing here requires that one has perfect knowledge of God or the world. Indeed, Rousseau himself, later in his letter, will say that one can infer that all is good simply from the proposition that God is perfect. It is a shame that he seems to go back to the less sophisticated characterization of optimism that he himself criticised a few lines earlier, but the point now is that he seems to concede that one can obtain substantial knowledge about goodness in the world without having perfect knowledge of God.

In any case, Rousseau says that the correct idea of Providence is one according to which, for those beings who can sense their existence, it is better to exist than not to exist.[[8]](#footnote-8) But this, Rousseau says, must apply to the whole duration of their existence and not just to a part of it, as it might be our life on Earth. Thus, Rousseau connects the issue of Providence with that of the immortality of the soul. And although he is aware that there are reasons to doubt the immortality of the soul, he is happy to believe in it as well as in the fact that there is no eternal punishment (Rousseau 2019: 251). Indeed, Rousseau says he believes in God more intensely than in anything else, and even when his reason wavers he finds motives to prefer the side of consolation and hope (Rousseau 2019: 251–52). From this, Rousseau says, one can prove optimism and justify providence, and since it is a ‘proof of sentiment’, it cannot serve as a demonstration to convince those who disagree with it (Rousseau 2019: 253). Since his conviction is based on ‘sentiment’, it is solid as a rock and reason-proof, and he finishes his letter with a good dose of enthusiasm: ‘Toutes les subtilités de la Métaphysique ne me feront pas douter un moment de l’immortalité de l’âme et d’une providence bienfaisante. Je la sens, je la crois, je la veux, je l’espère, je la deffendrai jusqu’à mon dernier soupir’ (Rousseau 2019: 256).

Thus, interestingly, both Rousseau and Voltaire think Metaphysics cannot change their (very different) convictions. But while Voltaire thinks Metaphysics cannot change his conviction given Metaphysics’ poor epistemic credentials, Rousseau’s conviction is impervious to Metaphysics due to the sheer strength of his conviction. It should also be noted that Rousseau’s reference to Metaphysics in this letter is out of place, since it is not from Metaphysics that Voltaire is arguing against optimism and so it is not from Metaphysics that Rousseau needs to defend it. What Voltaire opposed to optimism were not metaphysical subtleties but the force of facts or, in Neiman’s phrase, “the brute force of experience” (Neiman 1997: 146).

It is clear why Rousseau thinks that optimism is a consoling message, since it is based on the idea of an evil-free after-life which will compensate for our earthly evils. But is this kind of optimism truly consoling? It can be consoling only for those who are sufficiently detached from their earthly relations and projects to be able to find compensation for their evils in a completely different life. Think of a professional tennis player who loses his arms in an earthquake, or a newly wedded couple who were planning a life together and one of them dies in an earthquake – how are those losses compensated by a purely spiritual life of eternal bliss? There are evils for which there is no compensation – that is the truth Voltaire saw. And telling those who suffer them that their soul is immortal and that after death it will be eternally happy is no less cruel than telling them that their evils were an inevitable part of the best possible world.[[9]](#footnote-9)

*References*

Barber, W. H. 1955. *Leibniz in France. From Arnauld to Voltaire*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Benatar, D. 2006. *Better not to have been. The harm of coming into existence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Brooks, R. A. 1964. *Voltaire and Leibniz*. Genève: Librairie Droz.

Cassirer, E. 1954. *The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, translated and edited with introduction and notes by Peter Gay. New York: Columbia University Press.

Gourevitch, V. 2000. ‘Rousseau on Providence’, *The Review of Metaphysics*, 53, 3, pp. 565–611.

Havens, G. 1929. ‘Voltaire’s pessimistic revision of the conclusion of his *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*’, *Modern Language Notes*, vol. 44, No. 8, pp. 489–492.

Havens, G. 1930. *Selections from Voltaire*. New York: D. Appleton.

Havens, G. 1941. ‘The conclusion of Voltaire’s *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*’, *Modern Language Notes*, vol. 44, No. 8, pp. 489–492.

Krouglov, A. N., 2018. ‘Kant and the problem of optimism: origins of the debate’, *Kantian Journal*, vol. 37, no. 1, pp. 9–24, doi: 10.5922/0207-6918-2018-1-1.

Leibniz, G. W. 2020. *Discourse on Metaphysics*, translated with introduction and commentary by Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Neiman, S. 1997. ‘Metaphysics, Philosophy: Rousseau on the Problem of Evil’, in A. Reath, B. Herman, and C. M. Koorsgaard (eds.), *Reclaiming the History of Ethics: Essays for John Rawls*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, pp. 140–169.

Pope, A. 2016. *An Essay on Man*, edited with an introduction by Tom Jones, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Rodriguez-Pereyra, G. 2018. ‘Kant on the existence and uniqueness of the best possible world’, *Logical Analysis and History of Philosophy*, pp. 195–215.

Rousseau, J-J. 2009. *Discourse on Inequality*. Translated by Frank Philip. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rousseau, J-J. 2019. *Letter from J. J. Rousseau to M. de Voltaire*, in *Rousseau. The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, edited and translated by Victor Gourevitch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Van der Lugt, M. 2021. *Dark Matters. Pessimism and the problem of suffering*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Villar, A. 1995. *Voltaire-Rousseau. En torno al mal y la desdicha*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial.

Voltaire, 1961. *Mélanges*. Préface par E. Berl, texte établi et annoté par J. van den Heuvel. Paris: Librairie Gallimard.

Voltaire. 2011. *A Pocket Philosophical Dictionary*, translated by John Fletcher

1. Mara van der Lugt (2021: 10–11) has emphasised a similar distinction, between what she calls a value-oriented and a future-oriented version of optimism and pessimism. The main difference is that I have made explicit room for a present-oriented version of these doctrines. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As Barber points out the assimilation between Pope and Leibniz is encouraged by Pope’s appeal to the Leibnizian idea that this is the best possible world: “Of systems possible, if t’is confest/That Wisdom Infinite must form the best” (Pope Epistle I, II. 43). See Barber (1955: 111). Indeed Rousseau attributes the idea that God could not have created a better world than the one he created to both Pope and Leibniz (Rousseau 2019: 241). But despite (superficial) similarities between Pope’s and Leibniz’s ideas on optimism, Pope was apparently unacquainted with Leibniz’s works, and his sources for optimism were Bolingbroke and Shatfesbury (see Barber 1955: 118). It must be added that Voltaire is perfectly clear about the connection between Pope and Bolingbroke and Shaftesbury, a connection which he makes clear in the preface to the poem (Voltaire 1961: 301). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Compare with Schopenhauer, for whom optimism is a ‘wicked way of thinking, a bitter mockery of the unspeakable suffering of mankind’ (cited in Benatar 2006: 89). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rousseau’s response to the problem of evil is a much larger issue (see, for instance, Cassirer 1954 and Neiman 1997). Here I am concentrating only in Rousseau’s response to the problem of evil in his letter to Voltaire. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rousseau also believes that, at least in the actual world, the worst evils are the product of free human actions, since he claims that the evils produced by nature are less cruel than those we produce (Rousseau 2019: 243). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Interestingly, at one point, in *The Metaphysics of Newton*, Voltaire thought that the fact that few people desire death was an indication that there was more good than evil in this world (cited by Barber 1955: 213). Nothing like this idea is present in the *Poem on the Lisbon disaster*, of course. What Voltaire says in the poem is that although no one wants to die, no one wants to be born again (Voltaire 1961: 309), thereby suggesting that both death and life are evils which is why no one wants either. Rousseau replies that the majority of people (the exception might be rich people and men of letters) would be more than happy to re-live their lives (Rousseau 2019: 244). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Interestingly, though Maupertuis argued that earthly life is bad, his own position is not that far from Rousseau’s since Maupertuis argues that Christianity offers us a life of eternal happiness, a position that does not differ very much from Rousseau’s (Van der Lugt 2021: 174–75). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Although Rousseau refers to beings that sense their existence, this must not be interpreted as requiring that there is an independent sensation of existence (although, as we saw, Rousseau believes in such a sensation). Indeed, the text clearly indicates that by the phrase ‘those who sense their existence’ (‘qui sent son existence’) he means to refer simply to intelligent and sentient beings. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A previous version of this paper was given as my Tang Chun-I Public Lecture at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in September 2023. I thank all the members of audience for a stimulating discussion and, in particular, Chris Fraser, Saulius Geniusas, Yong Huang, Hayden Kee, Tien-Chun Lo, Franz Mang, Nick Rimell, and Jiyi Zhang. I also thank Mairéad Hanrahan for comments on a previous version of the paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)