

**Not for quotation: a more recent version of this paper is under copyright. To obtain a copy for academic use, please email Eric Palmer.**

**Eric Palmer, [epalmer@allegheny.edu](mailto:epalmer@allegheny.edu)**

Prepublication copy, October 2001, "Pangloss Identified," French Studies Bulletin 84, Autumn 2002. 7-10.

## **Pangloss Identified**

Eric Palmer, Allegheny College

Scholars have associated the character of Pangloss in Voltaire's *Candide* variously with the ideas of Gottfried Leibniz, Alexander Pope, and Christian Wolff. With them he is associated, but on whom is he modeled? Pangloss is the image of a French *monseigneur* of science celebrated in his day but little noticed in ours: Noël Antoine Pluche (1688-1761), the author of a highly popular work, *Le Spectacle de la Nature*.

Candide's pedantic professor is famous for his unfailing ability to compose explanations:

Il est démontré, disait-il, que les choses ne peuvent être autrement: car, tout étant fait pour une fin, tout est nécessairement pour la meilleure fin. Remarquez bien que les nez ont été faits pour porter des lunettes, aussi avons-nous des lunettes. Les *monse* sont visiblement instituées pour être *monseign*, et nous avons des chausses. Les pierres ont été formées pour être taillées, et pour en faire des châteaux; aussi *monseigneur* a un très beau château: le plus grand baron de la province doit être le mieux logé...<sup>i</sup>

[*"It is demonstrable, said he, that things cannot be otherwise than as they are: for all things having been created for some end, they must consequently be created for the best. Observe, that the nose is formed for spectacles, and therefore we come to wear spectacles. The legs are visibly designed for stockings, and therefore we come to wear stockings. Stones were made to be hewn, and to construct castles; therefore my lord has a magnificent castle: for the greatest baron in the province ought to be the best lodged."*]

In his *Dictionnaire Philosophique*, Voltaire mentions a similar figure. The entry “Causes Finales,” straightforwardly identifies his target, and clearly alludes to Pangloss’s very first speech in *Candide*:

...en vain M. le prieur, dans le *Spectacle de la nature*, prétend que les marées sont données à l’Océan pour que les vaisseaux entrent plus aisément dans les ports, et pour empêcher que l’eau de la mer ne se corrompe. En vain dirait-il que les jambes sont faites pour être bottées, et les nez pour porter des lunettes.<sup>ii</sup>

[“We have already remarked that M. le Prieur, in “*The Spectator of Nature*,” contends in vain that the tides were attached to the ocean to enable ships to enter more easily into their ports, and to preserve the water from corruption; he might just as probably and successfully have urged that legs were made to wear boots, and noses to bear spectacles.”]

Who is “M. le prieur?” Not an author, but a character in a work, the first volume of which was published in 1732: *Le Spectacle de la Nature, ou Entretiens sur les Particularités de l’Histoire Naturelle, Qui ont paru les plus propres à rendre les Jeunes-Gens curieux, et à leur former l’esprit*. Pluche’s *Spectacle* presents polite dialogues on natural history and human artifice among four fictional characters: a knowledgeable Prior, an inquisitive Knight, a Count and a Countess. The discussion tends relentlessly toward the discovery of good design in its exposition of natural phenomena and of their usefulness for human industry. The Prior repeatedly notes, as a consequence, “ce que nous devons à l’Auteur” of nature for His beneficence. On the topic of the tides, the mechanism of which is found to remain in dispute, the Prior remarks:

...du flux et du reflux, cherchons plutôt à quelle intention ce bel ouvrage a été fait. Le premier avantage que nous procurent les grandes marées c’est de repousser l’eau des fleuves, de les faire remonter bien avant dans les terres, et d’en rendre le lit assez profond pour pouvoir amener jusqu’aux portes des grandes villes, les énormes charges des marchandises étrangères, dont le transport leur seroit impraticable sans ce secours.

Un autre avantage que le Créateur a eu en vûe dans ce perpétuel balancement des eaux, a été d'empêcher qu'elles ne vinssent à croupir, ou à s'infecter par un trop grand repos. Il ne s'est pas reposé de ce soin sur les vents. Il les destine à purifier l'air de nos habitations...[etc.]<sup>iii</sup>

[“... of the Flux and Reflux of the Sea, let us endeavour to discover the End and Intention of Providence in this wonderful Oeconomy.

*The first Benefit that high Tides are of to us, is repelling the Waters in the Rivers, and causing them to flow back again a great Way within their Banks, thereby opening their Channels, and making them deep enough for the carrying up large Ships of Burden to the great Towns, which without this would be impracticable.*

*Another Benefit which our wise Creator designed for Man, by thus exactly balancing the Motion of the Waters, was to prevent their corrupting, and thereby breeding any Infection that might arise from too long a Stagnation of them. He has not therefore committed this Trust to the uncertain Care of the Winds, which though appointed to purify the Air we breathe...[etc.]”]*

Elsewhere, the Prior presents one of Pangloss' own examples, that God placed stone in the earth expressly for human use in building. He also expostulates on the advantages to humanity of apparently harmful natural features. The ferocity of wild animals is explained as an opportunity provided by God for our training in arms against the depredation of fellow humans. In another example, God's purpose for burrowing worms is said to provide commerce and productivity to the Norwegians and the Dutch: the Norwegians manufacture pine tar and the Dutch apply it to ship hulls in efforts to halt the worms' divinely commissioned devastation.<sup>iv</sup> The identification of the two pedants, Pangloss and Prieur, is strongly suggested by these passages in particular, and many others.

Different forms of support may also be found. The date of composition of the *Dictionnaire* generally coincides with *Candide*. The *Dictionnaire* was conceived during a dinner with Frederick of Prussia in the early 1750's and found its first published form as the *Dictionnaire Philosophique Portatif* in 1764. Voltaire reports that he is particularly

absorbed in its composition early in 1760, one year after the publication of *Candide*. Evidence suggests that Voltaire composed the *Dictionnaire* in alphabetical order (with exceptions), reaching “Enfer” near to that time.<sup>v</sup> Six of seven obvious references to Pluche, the only ones noted by Louis Moland, appear clustered higher in the alphabet, from “Bacon, Francis” to “Causes Finales,” with the seventh present in “Fable.”<sup>vi</sup> It is plausible, then, that Pluche was much on Voltaire’s mind around the period of composition of *Candide*.

Other authors were certainly in Voltaire’s thoughts, and references to them also lie on the pages of *Candide*. “Où est le bel optimisme de Leibnits?” is to be found in Voltaire’s correspondence just about the time that *Candide* was in press, and Pangloss explicitly avows that he is a follower of Leibniz’s philosophy.<sup>vii</sup> Christian Wolff appears to be the first to have used the term “cosmology” in modern philosophy, and this and other Wolffian terms are built into the name of Pangloss’s fantastic discipline, “la métaphysico-théologo-cosmolo-nigologie.”<sup>viii</sup> Lastly, Pope’s claim that “Whatever is, is right,” in the *Essay on Man* appears to be the source for, “tout est bien;”<sup>ix</sup> a proposition that Pangloss augments by arguing, as Pluche often had done, that “il fallait dire que tout est au mieux.” These three, Leibniz, Wolff, and Pope, are most commonly cited by recent scholars as the primary targets of *Candide*, and Leibniz and Wolff are often taken as models for Pangloss.<sup>x</sup> Only W. H. Barber provides any indication that lesser figures, such as Pluche, were also of importance to Voltaire for his parody.<sup>xi</sup>

Lesser figures were important targets, and Pluche was foremost. None among Leibniz, Wolff, and Pope, nor any other author, fits so conspicuously as a model for Pangloss; and Pluche’s life history provides further telling parallels. Pluche’s entire

career was centered upon educating youth of approximately Candide's age and quality, and Abbé Pluche is recognized as the model for the Prieur by his own biographer.<sup>xii</sup> Shortly before Pluche composed *Spectacle*, he was employed in the service of an official in Normandy, whose son he tutored in natural history. If we are looking for a model for Pangloss's edifying displays, then, Pluche's stature is as fitting as his style.

Could Voltaire have found Pluche worthy as the central focus of ridicule in *Candide*? It should be unsurprising that such a figure ought to be included among his targets. To the *philosophe* concerned with public action, what was fantastically popular was at least as important as what was most carefully and systematically reasoned by great minds. Pluche was important because his work proved widely popular, passing through at least fifty-seven French editions before 1800, and spawning Dutch, German, Spanish, Italian, and two English translations. It was, by Daniel Mornet's accounting, the fourth most common work to be found in private libraries between 1750-80.<sup>xiii</sup> As Pluche's success continued through the 1730's to 50's, seven further volumes of *Spectacle* and other relevant writing by Pluche issued from the presses. *Spectacle* built from natural philosophy to political philosophy and theism (v. 6, 1746), and finally, Roman Catholic apologetics (v. 8, 1750). What seemed to Voltaire in 1732 "un succès assez équivoque" had grown into a significant – and explicitly Catholic – guide for public opinion, authored by "le charlatan des ignorants."<sup>xiv</sup>

---

<sup>xii</sup> All quotations of Voltaire are from Voltaire, *Œuvres Complètes*, ed. Louis Moland (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1877-85). XXI, 438. [English supplement: *Candid: or, All for the Best* (London: Nourse, 1659) 2-3.]

---

<sup>¶</sup>Voltaire, XVIII, 102-3. [Voltaire, *A Philosophical Dictionary*, trans. S. R., ed. E. R. Dumont (England: Coventry House, 1932) 494. A similar exposition is found on 138ff. in “Des Singularités de la Nature,” Voltaire, *Œuvres Complètes*, ed. Louis Moland, 52 vols. (Paris: Garnier, 1877-85). See XXVII, 125-191.]

<sup>¶</sup> Pluche, *Spectacle* v.3 (Utrecht: Chez Etienne Neaulme, 1736), 189-91.  
[*Spectacle de la Nature: or, Nature Display'd. Being Discourses on such particulars of natural history as were thought most proper to excite the curiosity and form the minds of youth. The Eighth Edition, Revised and Corrected.* (London: R. Franklin, et. al., 1757) 4<sup>th</sup> English edition, 394.]

<sup>¶</sup> Pluche, *Spectacle*, v. 1, Nouvelle Edition, 1736, 533-4; v. 2, 1735; and v. 3, “Lettre du Prieur au Chevalier.” Morize notes that William Derham presents a similar example regarding providential causes for stones in his *Physico-Theology* (1713, with three French editions, 1726, 1730, 1732). Voltaire, *Candide*, ed. André Morize (Paris: Librairie Marcel Didier, 1957). 5, fn. 4. Derham does not, however, generally present elucidation of providence that reaches the heights suggested by the other two examples here cited.

<sup>¶</sup> See René Pomeau, “Histoire d’une œuvre de Voltaire: Le Dictionnaire philosophique portatif,” *L’Information Littéraire* 7, 1955, 43-50. Reprinted in Marie-Hélène Cotoni, ed. *Voltaire: Dictionnaire Philosophique* (Klincksieck, 1994) 35-47.

<sup>¶</sup> Voltaire, LII, 284-5. “Causes Finales” is also found as “Fin, Causes Finales” in some editions of the *Dictionnaire*, and the section containing the explicit references to Pluche are not present in editions prior to the 1770 retitling, *Questions sur l’Encyclopédie*. The absence need not, however, indicate that composition of the section occurred later than the original entry. Another entry, “Julien,” was at least partly penned in 1752, yet made its first appearance in the dictionary three years after the first edition. See Pomeau, 37 and Voltaire, *Dictionnaire Philosophique*, ed. Julien Benda (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1936). xxxv.

<sup>¶</sup> Voltaire, *Candide*, ed. Christopher Thacker (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1968). 269, and *Candide*, Ch. 28.

<sup>¶</sup> Morize, 3 fn. 1.

---

<sup>a</sup>Voltaire, *Candide and Related Texts*. trans. and ed. David Wootton (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000). xii, and *Candide*, Ch. 1.

<sup>v</sup>The primary targets for the satire, and in many cases models for Pangloss are: *Leibniz*: Gordon, 21; Gray, 23; Korsmeyer, 207; Mason, 7; Pearson, xx (and perhaps Rousseau, xxvi); Bottiglia 233, 252 (and various others, 143). *Wolff*: Barber, 195 (though he adds others: see 231-2). *Leibniz & Wolff*: Morize, xiv; Rihs, 28. *Leibniz & Pope*: Ayer, 140. *All three*: Frame, 4; Williams, 14f. See the following: Voltaire, *Candide*, trans. and ed. Daniel Gordon (Boston: Bedford/St Martins, 1999). John Gray, *Voltaire* (New York: Routledge, 1999). Carolyn Korsmeyer, “Is Pangloss Leibniz?” *Philosophy and Literature*, Spring 1977, 201-8. Voltaire, *Candide and Other Stories*, trans. and ed. Roger Pearson (New York: Oxford, 1990). William Bottiglia, *Voltaire’s Candide: Analysis of a Classic* [SVEC v.7] (Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1959). Haydn Mason, *Candide: Optimism Demolished* (New York: Twayne, 1992). W. H. Barber, *Leibniz in France: From Arnauld to Voltaire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955). Charles Rihs, *Voltaire: Recherches sur les origines du matérialisme historique* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1962). A. J. Ayer, *Voltaire* (New York: Random House, 1986). Voltaire, *Voltaire’s Candide, Zadig and Selected Stories*, trans. and ed. Donald Frame (USA: Indiana University Press, 1961). David Williams, *Voltaire: Candide* (Spain: Grant and Cutler, 1997).

<sup>vi</sup> Barber acknowledges the breadth of Voltaire’s attack, without singling out Pluche in particular, and placing more emphasis on Derham. (108, 232) Pluche also enters briefly into the footnotes in Morize, 5; Thacker, 268. Beyond these scant references, he is entirely missing from all recent critical sources I have investigated; e.g., Bottiglia, Pearson, Williams, Wootton, Voltaire, *Candide*, ed. Pierre Chartier (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), and René Pomeau, editor, *Candide in Œuvres Complètes de Voltaire*, v. 48 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1980).

<sup>vii</sup> Dennis Trinkle, “Noël-Antoine Pluche’s *Le Spectacle de la nature*: An encyclopaedic best seller,” *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 358, 93-134. 100.

<sup>viii</sup> Trinkle (and Mornet cited in Trinkle) 93, 97.

<sup>xiv</sup> Voltaire, *Voltaire’s Correspondence*, ed. Theodore Besterman (Geneva and Banbury, England: Voltaire Foundation, 1968-75), D 545, circa 15 December, 1732.

“Remerciement Sincère à un Homme Charitable,” [1750] XXIII 459-60.