

Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction

A Persian writes to his friend, Usbek, a Persian visitor to Paris, and asks: "I have often heard you say that men were born to be virtuous, and that justice is as innate in them as existence. Would you tell me what you mean?" Usbek, pleased to be consulted, does not offer abstract reasoning because, "There are certain truths of which one must not only be persuaded but also feel; such are the truths of morality."¹ So begins one of the most important morality tales of the Enlightenment, Charles Secondat, the Baron of Montesquieu's *Myth of the Troglodytes*.

The Troglodytes did not look like beasts but they were brutal, and "there was no principle of equity or justice among them." A foreign king tried to control them; they executed him, elected magistrates, and executed them. Without any constraints upon them, they pursued naked self-interest; thus they would harvest only what they needed—one year when part of the kingdom was too dry, the other part starved; the next year, when one part was too wet, the other part cried famine to no avail. The Troglodytes refused to bestir themselves to work in any but their own immediate interest, and all conflicts were resolved by physical violence and without justice. So Usbek notes, "the Troglodytes perished by their wickedness and became victims of their own injustice." Two families, headed by men "who were humane, just, and lovers of virtue," escaped the ruin of this early civilization. They banded together and resolved to work for their "mutual benefit." They worked, loved their wives, and raised virtuous children who were, above all, "taught that individual interest is always bound to the common interest, that to separate them was to invite ruin." They raised children in their example who, too, formed virtuous, productive, happy marriages and families. Troglodyte families vied in virtue. For example, a son would say, "Tomorrow my father is to work his field but I will get up two hours earlier, and when he goes to his field he will find it all done." But, as the kingdom grew, thinking so assiduously about the interests of others and pursuing justice became burdensome, and the Troglodytes chose a king. The king did not readily take on this stature, objecting strenuously: "I will die of grief to see the Troglodytes, free since my birth, submit to a master. . . . I see what is happening, Troglodytes, your virtue is beginning to burden you."²

Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction

What does this myth contribute to 18th-century moral discussion? It deliberately repudiates Thomas Hobbes' contention that Hobbesian men would have, in fact, constructed the *Leviathan*. Instead, Montesquieu insists, a Hobbesian world, where neither land nor women are secure, will produce inevitably a self-destructive cycle of desire, usurpation, and revenge, making all social organization and economic productivity impossible. As the myth suggests, two men can derail this cycle through pity for the depraved and their commitment to the common interest. But the new small society they form is not predicated on innate virtue; the founders commit to a communitarian ethos; and virtue must be inculcated by educating their offspring in the values of the community. This is not an idyllic, utopian community; the envy of their neighbors leads to war, and, Montesquieu suggests, war leads to the loss of liberty and the creation of monarchy—an issue of obvious and immediate topicality. He also presents the paradox that the conditions that make a nation happy and prosperous cannot survive in a wealthy and contented society.

What does this tale tell us about the broader parameters of Enlightenment moral discussion? It is open-ended and rather inconclusive, qualities that can be both appealing and frustrating; Enlightenment texts are more likely to suggest possibilities rather than to prescribe solutions. Because there is a sense that man is capable of both good and evil, the question becomes what conditions make the practice of virtue possible? In this tale, positive development requires not only the will and effort of individuals but also the development of a community ethos. Morality is also rooted in the family, an invocation of classical moral texts, but with a crucial difference: Enlightenment moral tales explore the conjugal relationship as the fundamental connection between nature and society, using it to undermine patriarchy by shifting attention away from the paternal relationship. Since, for most Enlightenment thinkers, freedom is a precondition for genuine moral action, they suggest that gender relations must be egalitarian. They also consider, as central to moral discussion, the question of whether and under what circumstances human beings can be happy.

These are some of the fundamental issues signaled in the Myth of the Troglodytes that Montesquieu develops throughout his epistolary

Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction

novel, *The Persian Letters*. He and other Enlightenment thinkers use fiction set in fictional civilizations not only to circumvent censors but also to speculate more freely. Fiction, after all, presents philosophical issues to a much broader audience than is likely to read Leibniz or Kant and thus spurs public discussion and engagement with these issues. It allows the author to present an array of opinions and the reader to consider a variety of interpretations. These fictional texts allow the reader to become familiar with some essential elements of this intellectual movement, which is, at root, innovative, critical, open, public, and controversial.

The three works of the French Enlightenment fiction that I will discuss—Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, Voltaire's *Candide*, and Diderot's *Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage*—have moral issues at their core, use fiction as their method of presentation, and juxtapose European cultures to other cultures to gain a vantage point for critiquing their own. The questions I would like to raise are: What do these tales offer us? and What do they suggest about the larger contribution of the French Enlightenment to moral discussion?

The Vantage Point of the Enlightenment

Although I must confess that I find almost any text from this period significant and engaging, I also would like to suggest that the Enlightenment occupies a distinctive but unusual position in our intellectual landscape. The Enlightenment proclaimed itself as a new movement distinct from the past. From the mid-18th century on, men of letters, often called *philosophes*, attributed novelty and improvement to their own times and their ways of thinking and associating. The French Enlightenment, as its practitioners, proponents, and critics all acknowledge with equal vigor, was intent on remaking the world. As the old order—monarchy, hierarchy, Roman Catholicism—came under increasing attack, Enlightenment thinkers were critically aware of the challenges they faced in reforming the old or constructing a new basis for society, but they did not hesitate to call into question a traditional moral order. Moral discussions posed some of the greatest challenges to the Enlightenment and provoked some of the most interesting writing by the philosophes in response to those challenges.³ In their writings, the philosophes also confronted the problem

Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction

of the “other” largely because the New World had revealed civilizations with different social and moral practices. Initially the response of the West was simply confidence that they needed to educate these other civilizations into the right way to do things. But the philosophes were much less persuaded of the wisdom of the West. They did not hesitate to wonder loudly whether Christianity and Christian societies could make any claim to virtue. Without the authority of the Christian tradition, they took on difficult and perennial ethical questions—questions such as human nature and the foundations of morality, the relationship between nature and society, or the natural and the civil, and the problem of evil in the universe.

The audacity of the claims of Enlightenment thinkers inevitably produced criticisms from a number of perspectives from the time of the Enlightenment to our own. Critics took seriously the identification of the philosophes with the new. Conservative critics, like Edmund Burke, decried the demise of tradition. Nineteenth-century romantics deplored its emphasis on reason; such an emphasis, they claimed, denied the emotional and passionate as sources of human creativity.⁴ In the 20th century, the Enlightenment came to bear a particularly heavy ethical burden. After the cataclysmic events of the first half of the 20th century, intellectuals critically examined the past to uncover the roots of the horrors of the modern age, especially the vicious political atrocities of the fascism.⁵ When they sought the origin of the modern, they found it the Enlightenment. For some, like Peter Gay, a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany, the Enlightenment brought about the triumph of secular humanism and ushered in an era of freedom that defined the modern world.⁶ For others, like Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, the ideals of the Enlightenment, especially its hopes for science and technology and its emphasis on independent reason, incorporated the seeds of its own undoing.⁷ This connection between the Enlightenment and the ills of modern society has become a truism for some of its critics. Feminist critic Naomi Shor baldly states, “Following Horkheimer and Adorno, the Enlightenment leads to Auschwitz; after Auschwitz, the Enlightenment is a bankrupt discredited movement.”⁸

Interpreting the Enlightenment has become even more complex since the 1980s, when the French philosopher Michel Foucault “prob-

Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction

lematized” the Enlightenment by insisting that earlier interpreters like Gay had drawn much too naive a picture of the good intentions of the philosophes and the beneficial implications of their social reform. Foucault’s view of a problematic or even malign Enlightenment fueled an array of modern critical interpretations of the Enlightenment.⁹

Thus the end of the 20th century was marked by a turning away from the principles that most intellectuals and social critics identified as the foundations of the modern world, with the Enlightenment providing the philosophical underpinnings of modern ideology, society, and politics. Modernity, assert the critics, is nothing to be proud of. From colonialism and slavery to the oppression of women and people of color; from the Holocaust to economic globalization, global poverty, and environmental destruction, the modern world has been the triumph not of civilization over barbarism or reason over ignorance, but of those who have claimed reason and civilization in order to oppress and exploit those they deem barbarous and ignorant. Such ideals as liberty, equality, and human rights may sound sweet to certain Western ears, but they turn sour when revealed as a justification for Western superiority, patriarchy, and racism. And it all begins with the Enlightenment—or at least, that’s what its critics have claimed. The Enlightenment has served as a lightning rod for critics of all stripes, from political conservatives to feminists and multiculturalists, primarily because it has been integrally tied to the advent of the modern world.¹⁰

Historians respond to this assault by trying to deepen the understanding of both the content and historical context of the Enlightenment, to rescue it from the catchphrases, caricatures, and rigid identification of the Enlightenment with universalism or a monolithic discourse to which its critics have reduced it. In that vein, I would like to suggest that the moral tales of the Enlightenment complicate the picture and call into question many of the caricatured versions or simplistic truisms used to discount the Enlightenment.¹¹ These moral tales suggest, instead, a richer, more complex Enlightenment and offer perspectives on moral questions that continue to readily stimulate 21st-century discussions.

The Persian Letters

In 1721, Montesquieu published *The Persian Letters*, one of the earliest texts of the movement we now call the Enlightenment.¹² It purported to be a collection of letters left in his attic by houseguests visiting from Persia. These Persian visitors had, as was the custom at a time when letters were not only a means of communication but also entertainment, not only carefully preserved copies of the letters they wrote and received but also, most cooperatively, arranged them in a coherent order so that through the letters the plot of a novel unfolds.

The Persian Letters, then, is an epistolary novel of 161 letters, supposedly written and received by two Persians who leave Persia to travel to Paris—Usbek, who is older, wiser, master of a plentiful harem, and seeking both political asylum and the wisdom of the West, and Rica, who is young, unmarried, unencumbered by a harem, and eager to learn all manner of things from the West. The letters fall into two broad categories: the Persian and the Parisian, so the story is set both in a Persian harem and in the regency salons of Paris following the death of Louis XIV.

This collection not only capitalizes on the great interest in all things oriental, they also had the inherently titillating quality of being written from and to eunuchs and the many wives of the Persian, Usbek. Letters from the harem were both exotic and erotic, especially since they are filled with euphemistic language for concrete sexual acts.¹³ Just to give you a taste of what the 18th-century reader would have found very suggestive, Usbek writes to his most favored wife about their sexual encounter:

Do you remember that day . . . you took a dagger and threatened to immolate a husband who loved you if he continued to demand what you loved more than your husband? Two months were spent in this struggle between love and virtue. . . . you did not give up even after being conquered; to the end you defended your dying virginity; you considered me an enemy who had committed an outrage and not a husband who loved you.¹⁴

Perhaps not surprisingly, *The Persian Letters* became a runaway best-seller; with 10 editions published the first year it appeared and publishers begging authors to “write more Persian letters.”

Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction

Some modern critics object to Montesquieu's lack of scientific rigor or to the way he objectifies women in the harem¹⁵ and "orientalizes" Persians, to invoke Edward Said's term to describe the ethnocentric appropriation of the other.¹⁶ Montesquieu, according to these critics, was decidedly not politically correct. But Montesquieu is a crucial figure in the development of a tradition that advocates respect for cultures different from our own,¹⁷ and, because he believed that each nation has a distinct "general spirit," Montesquieu opposes imperialism.¹⁸

It is ironic that, although Montesquieu is deemed not modern enough or not sufficiently culturally sensitive, he has been greatly appreciated by modern commentators using Freudian or feminist analyses. Feminists appreciate the centrality of women to Montesquieu's vision of politics, and Freudians acknowledge his depictions of abnormal psychology and alienation in the eunuchs guarding the harem. If this text both engaged and titillated the 18th-century, it has been appropriated in our day as a fundamental text of sexual politics.¹⁹

As far as his Persians are concerned, Montesquieu was profoundly interested in other cultures and, although he surveyed as many sources as possible, he used both classical texts and standard 17th-century accounts of the Persian world.²⁰ Thus, he was not the disinterested observer we perhaps consider more desirable. He also had an explicit agenda of which *The Persian Letters* offers only a preface to his more systematic treatment in *The Spirit of the Laws*. He intended to determine when and under what circumstances people had lived in freedom. In the name of liberty and humanity, his Persian visitors question virtually every traditional value of the old regime. Despite his limitations as an observer and the westernized character of his "native informants," Montesquieu is central to the "great anthropological project of the Enlightenment: the interrogation of what we today call Eurocentrism."²¹ French writers were caught up in the seduction of the "exotic other," but, as critics, they brought self-consciousness to bear on what modern critics call the "gaze of cultural domination." In *The Persian Letters*, a Parisian famously asked, "But how can one be Persian?," raising such questions as: Who defines what otherness is? What does our imagination of another subjectivity

Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction

tell us about the limits of our own? And, most pointedly, what does it mean to be French?²²

To address that question, Montesquieu creatively recasts the convention of travel literature. This was not another case of a visitor going to a strange land, remarking on their strange practices. Instead, two Persians come to France to point out the absurdities of the French compared to what was normal and proper, that is to say, Persian. What begins as travel literature becomes probing questioning of the status quo. Only an outsider could offer such biting criticism of European culture, under the guise of ignorance. Rica proclaims that the pope is a magician because “he makes the people believe that three is really one, that the bread they eat is not bread, and the wine they drink is not wine, and a thousand other similar things.” The king is an even stronger magician “for he exercises dominion even over the minds of his subject and makes them think as he wishes. If he has only a million *écus* in his treasury, and has need of two million, he has only to persuade them that one *écus* is worth two and they believe it . . . so great is his power over their minds that he has even made them believe that he cures all kinds of disease simply by touching them.”²³ More seriously, Montesquieu can use the comments of Usbek, a devout Muslim, to question Christianity. He writes to a friend that he knows the Christians will not go to the home of the Prophets but wonders “do you think that they are condemned to everlasting damnation . . . for not having practiced a religion God did not reveal to them?”²⁴

This book is also a great success as a comedy of Parisian manners. Rica visits the theater and discovers that the real show is the audience. Usbek remarks about a café: “They prepare coffee in such a way that it gives wit to those who drink it: among those who are leaving, there is no one who does not think he has four times as much wit as when he entered.”²⁵ He encounters a host of Parisian types: a know-it-all, people who talk constantly, social butterflies, women vying to be taken for younger than their age, and two men who meet to script their witty remarks before attending a salon.²⁶ About three-quarters of the letters are Persian explorations of European culture commenting on customs and discussing the nature of government and religion.

The remaining quarter of the letters traces the growing dissatisfaction and disorder in Usbek’s harem and defines the plot of the novel.

Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction

Then, as now, the letters about the harem capture the readers' attention. Montesquieu, like many other philosophes, makes the relationship between men and women fundamental to any discussion of society and its relationship to politics. He develops a firm connection between the state of women and political freedom. About 40 percent of the letters directly deal with the behavior or treatment of women, what might be classed as "the woman question," a central debate in European writings from the early 17th century on.

Rica writes 16 letters on the women of Paris—their relative freedom, their influence on all aspects of French life, and their legal status. Ultimately, he compares Persian women to European women and, although he is intimidated by Parisian women and uneasy with their sexual freedom, he does see them as the movers of Parisian society. He recognized, as modern scholars like Erica Harth and Dena Goodman have only recently, that salon culture gave women a forum for political discussion and influence.²⁷ The crucial difference between Parisian and Persian women is that Parisian women are free and Persian women enslaved.

Usbek and his wives exchange 16 letters, and there are 17 letters between Usbek and the eunuchs who guard his wives. They tell the tale of sexual violence, jealousy, and intrigue. Usbek, despite his Islamic learning and exposure to European culture, is exposed as a despot. He sees himself as the center of the universe; his wives have value only because of their subservience to him. They are guarded by eunuchs, who are impotent and sexless, but rule through fear, making the women their slaves. The chief eunuch makes explicit the connection between sex and power in describing his relationship to the women:

I hate them . . . when I deprive them of everything . . . I always derive an indirect satisfaction from it. I find myself in the harem as in a small empire, and my ambition, the only passion I retain, can be somewhat satisfied.²⁸

Usbek's harem is an erotic nightmare. Its operation entails the rape of the women, the castration of the men, and the slavery of all but the absent master. Ultimately, it is a tale of sexual revolution and the destruction of the harem through murder and suicide.²⁹ It ends with

Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction

the adulterous betrayal of Usbek by Roxanne, his favorite wife and the only one he had never suspected of infidelity. After her lover is detected and killed, she kills the guards and then herself. She berates Usbek:

How could you have imagined me credulous enough to believe that I existed only to adore your caprices, that in permitting yourself every thing, you had the right to thwart my every desire? No! I have lived in slavery, but I have always been free. I reformed your laws by those of Nature, and my spirit has always held to its independence.³⁰

In light of this letter, the earlier letter, in which Usbek described his conquest of Roxanne, must be reappraised—what he described as courtship was rape. The despot, Usbek (or, by implication, Louis XIV), is deluded about the nature of his rule and presumed affection of his subjects—both the despot and his victims become cruel, duplicitous, and depraved. Montesquieu is concerned with both the psychological and the social effects of despotism, and his contemporaries recognized the harem as a devastating but thinly veiled image of the French court and church. Montesquieu's overarching purpose, as the critic Diane Schaub has put it "is to disorient—to dis-Orient Christianity, France, or the patriarchal family."³¹ This is a clever phrase with "dis-orient" in two senses. Montesquieu both means his reader to be disoriented by the ways in which the Persians reflect his world back to him and he means to connect the despotism of the Orient with the Christian church, the French state, and the European family.

Montesquieu's *The Persian Letters* define several positions for Enlightenment moral discussion. They assert that morality and social progress must be rooted in egalitarian relations between the sexes. Although Parisian women are not spared his satirical barbs (they are vain, gossiping, sometimes libertine), they are nonetheless free and therefore powerful, a potential force for subverting absolutist monarchy. Their freedom works to the benefit of morality and society, even as it undermines the authority of men. Montesquieu has a fundamental sense that morality requires freedom, and thus, he is intent on exploring freedom for the individual as a foundation of society and political culture. The entire work is an analogy comparing citizens

Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction

under despotism to women in the harem; a form of rule that causes citizens and women to become depraved and ultimately to revolt. Finally, these tales Montesquieu tells are not prescriptive but rather open-ended vehicles for interpretation and discussion. But if Montesquieu's work is subject to interpretation, perhaps no one sentence of Enlightenment fiction has provoked more discussion than Voltaire's enigmatic advice at the close of *Candide* "to cultivate your garden."

Candide

I chose to include *Candide* because, if one has read a single Enlightenment text, it is likely to be Voltaire's *Candide*, even if one might have to dredge up memories from high school. In some ways, this is a deeply rewarding text for an initial exposure to the Enlightenment and its ethical concerns, but it also can be an extremely frustrating text for the novice. Written in 1759 when Voltaire was 64 years old, it is the product of a maturing Enlightenment, solidified in the fires of the first controversies surrounding the *Encyclopédie*.³² Because Voltaire understood the Enlightenment as a proselytizing crusade, he helped to forge a party. And perhaps as a reflection of that partisan spirit, below its obvious level as a picaresque novel, *Candide* is riddled with insider jokes. It is thoroughly embedded in the context of the mid-18th century. Despite its light, even farcical tone, it treats the problem of evil, the value of absolute truth, the question of divine providence, and the absurdity of the human condition.

It is perhaps surprising that *Candide* should have had a prominent place in the high school curriculum in the past. It is rife with sexual innuendo and asserts a jaundiced view of human nature and possibilities, a view surely better befitting middle age than youth. It can, of course, simply be read as a perhaps overwrought but amusing account of the young man, Candide. Voltaire introduces him this way:

In the land of Westphalia . . . lived a youth endowed by nature with the gentlest of characters. His face was the mirror of his soul. His judgment was quite sound, his mind simple as could be.³³

Candide is enlightened on his journey by his tutor, Dr. Pangloss. Voltaire introduces him this way:

Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction

Pangloss taught metaphysico-theologico-cosmology-boobology. He proved admirably that there is no effect without cause and that, in this best of all possible worlds, the Baron's castle was the finest of all castles.³⁴

The previous quote is part of what is a constant theme of the novel, the repudiation of the philosophy of Gottfried Leibniz. *Candide* is Voltaire's contribution to the ongoing philosophical discussion of the nature of evil and its relationship to the universe. In the late 17th century, Pierre Bayle, compiling arguments from other sources to avoid incriminating himself, argued that there was more evil than good in the world, more misery than happiness, and that painful experiences were more intense than pleasurable ones. No one, Bayle insists, would choose to live his life over again if given a choice.³⁵

Leibniz responded in his *Theodicee*, translated into French in 1710, that the idea of God entailed his existence and that, being God, he would create a universe as diverse as possible but governed by as few principles as possible. And that it would be the best of all the possible universes God could have created, and that, as such, it would be good for human beings. There is, he conceded, pain and evil in the universe, but it ultimately serves a greater good. This philosophy was an anathema to Voltaire, and he used satire to create a crude and caricatured rendition of Leibniz's teaching in the absurd character Pangloss.³⁶ No matter how tragic the situation, Pangloss pops up, like a metaphysics-spouting energizer bunny, to recast each tragic event as part of the best of all possible worlds. He attempts to console a mourner who lost relatives in the Lisbon earthquake by saying, "This is for the best, for if there is an earthquake in Lisbon, it could not be anywhere else." In light of every tragic event, Pangloss insists: "all [misfortune] is indispensable. Private misfortunes work for the general good. So the more private misfortunes there are, the more all is well." The irrelevance of philosophical speculation to life is a constant theme of the novel, as demonstrated, for example, when Pangloss and the other galley slaves debate "cause and effect, moral and physical evil, free will and determinism, and the consolations available to a galley ship in Turkey." Pangloss maintains, "Leibniz is never mistaken. Moreover, preestablished harmony is the finest aspect of the universe."³⁷ (I wonder how

Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction

much effort on the part of serious scholars has been expended to undo this devastating satire of Leibniz!)

The tale is a picaresque journey that unfolds after Candide has been expelled from a Prussian version of the Garden of Paradise for lusting after Mlle. Cunegonde, the love of his young life and the daughter of the Baron Thunder-ten-thronckh. This version of Paradise, otherwise known as the Baron's castle, is described this way:

The Baron was one of the most powerful lords in Westphalia because his castle had a gate and windows. His reception hall was even decorated with a piece of tapestry. The barnyard dogs formed a hunting pack when the need arose. . . . The Baroness, who weighed three hundred points, was widely admired for that reason.³⁸

This paragraph alone introduces a number of Voltaire's satiric techniques: No Parisian would ever confuse Prussia for Paradise. He is making fun of German pretensions to high culture, explicitly those of the court of Frederick the Great. He will use "gardens" throughout the story to suggest the limits of any vision of Paradise.

As Candide journeys though the world in search of his true love, Mlle. Cunegonde, "aged seventeen . . . rosy-cheeked, fresh, plump, and appetizing," he experiences disaster after improbable disaster. He is impressed into the army by a Prussian press gang, beaten for deserting or, as Voltaire described it, "One fine spring day, he went for a walk . . . believing that humans, just like animals, had the right to use their legs as they wished." He experiences war, storm, shipwreck (every ship that sets sail seems to sink), and is arrested by the Inquisition which is holding an *auto-da-fé* (the ceremony in which heretics are burned) because, as Voltaire puts it, "The faculty of the University of Coimbra had concluded that the spectacle of roasting several persons over a slow fire in a ceremonious fashion is an infallible secret for preventing the early from quaking."³⁹ (And all this in the first 12 pages.)

The novel shares the defiance of probability of a modern soap opera. Characters crisscross the globe, always encountering each other, whether the setting is Spain, Paraguay, Venice, or Turkey. They are repeatedly hanged, burned, and run through with swords, only to reemerge to amplify their tales of woe, but they go on. To what end?

Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction

The most telling response to that question is given by the Old Woman, one of the many characters who appear, tell their stories, and rescue Candide, usually by offering him practical advice to counter his exposure to Leibnizian philosophy.⁴⁰ But the tale of the Old Woman is unforgettable largely because, at the end of her story, she has only one buttock! She began life as a beautiful princess, the daughter of Pope Urban X and the Princess Palestrina, but experiences countless rapes, abductions, sales into one harem after another across the Mediterranean until she winds up in the harem of a general, commanding a corps of Janissaries fighting the Russians. When they were besieged, their imam persuades them that, instead of eating the women, they should just eat one buttock from each, for, if things went badly, they could look forward to a similar feast!⁴¹ The Old Woman enters the novel as the servant of Mlle. Cunegonde, and her story plays several roles. This account considers seriously the range and overpowering character of human suffering but, rather improbably, does so in a way that is very funny. It allows Voltaire to juxtapose the horrible and the sensual for humorous effect. At the end of her tale of woe, the Old Woman says, "I considered suicide a hundred times, but I still loved life." But she also challenges Candide to poll his fellow passengers on the voyage to the New World. She says:

I have some experience; I know the world. I propose that you amuse yourselves by asking each passenger to tell you his story, and if you find a single one who has not frequently cursed his own life, who has not often told himself that he was the unhappiest of men, then throw me into the sea headfirst.⁴²

Jean Sarrailh contends that Voltaire wrote *Candide* when he accepted the double contradiction—that the world is both evil and livable, and that human beings are determined but responsible for their actions.⁴³ The Old Woman is the character who best embodies this contradictory sense of human possibility. Her tale epitomizes the social and moral value of the stories told. Characters present their lives through their stories and compete to tell the most horrifying tale. But the stories also build community, provoke discussion, and work to cultivate a consensus of opinion—the tales told in *Candide*, then, are a microcosm of the macrocosm of Enlightenment fiction.

Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction

After killing both the Jew and the Inquisitor who were sharing Cunegonde's favors, Candide, the Old Woman, and Cunegonde flee to the New World. Candide expresses a hope: "We are heading for a different world. I am sure that over there all is well, because I have to admit that where we come from, there are grounds for complaining about how things are both morally and physically."⁴⁴ This hope, like any expressed in *Candide*, is destined to be completely thwarted. As Jean Starobinski notes, Voltaire was the first to present a global vision of human suffering.⁴⁵ Although the New World offers no fewer opportunities for pain and suffering, for Voltaire as for Montesquieu, it does jar our expectations. For example, Candide rescues two yelling girls who are being chased by monkeys yipping at their buttocks, only to discover that the monkeys were the girls' lovers, leading Candide to wonder in bemusement, "What would Dr. Pangloss say, if he knew what the pure state of nature is really like?"⁴⁶

Voltaire also uses the New World to skewer his enemies, the Jesuits. Cacambo, his native guide, advises Candide to use his Prussian skills fighting for the Padres, about whom he says,

Their rule is certainly remarkable. . . . Los Padres own everything in it, and the inhabitants nothing. . . . It's a masterpiece of logic and justice. In my view, there's nobody cleverer than Los Padres, for here that are at war with the king of Spain and with the king of Portugal, what in Europe they are the confessors of these kings; here they kill Spaniards, and in Madrid they unlock the gates of heaven for them.⁴⁷

Voltaire also uses the New World to consider more serious question: What, given what history shows us of human nature, would we consider an ideal society? Candide and Cacambo stumble into the utopian society of Eldorado. Playing on utopian visions of Thomas More, Francis Bacon, and others, Voltaire's Eldorado is a delight for the senses; all material needs are met. Because there are no conflicts, there are no law courts and no prisons. All live in comfort and, especially intriguing to Candide, the mud is gold and jewels are used as paving stones, toys, and plumbing fixtures. Even presented with a New World "utopia," Candide decides to leave, supposedly to reunite with Mlle. Cunegonde, but actually because Eldorado cannot satisfy his human restlessness and his desire to use the wealth he picked up

Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction

in the streets to distinguish himself. Vanity, discontent, and rapacity explain Candide's departure from Eldorado. As Voltaire remarks, "people so much like to roam around, and then show off at home and brag about what they have seen in their travels."⁴⁸

And what of the enigmatic ending?⁴⁹ After traveling through Europe, with eyes less inclined to see the world as the best of all possible worlds, Candide, Cacambo, the Old Woman, Martin the Manichean, Pangloss, and Cunegonde are finally reunited in Transylvania. Candide finally marries Cunegonde, who now has "a swarthy complexion, bloodshot eyes, a withered bosom, wrinkled cheeks and peeling red skin," out of a sense of obligation. This is the situation the characters confront:

[Cunegonde] growing uglier every day, became shrewish and intolerable. The old woman was infirm and even nastier than Cunegonde. Cacambo, who labored in the garden and traveled to Constantinople to sell vegetables, was worn out with toil and cursed his fate. Pangloss was in despair because he was not a star in a German university. Martin, fully persuaded that people are equally wretched everywhere, bore life with patience.⁵⁰

This small community knows little of the world around them. After a change in regime in Turkey, they ask a farmer what had happened, he responds that he never thinks about what people are doing in Constantinople, but is content to sell them the fruits of his garden. He adds that "work keeps away three great evils: boredom, vice, and indigence." When the characters begin to debate this point, Martin insists that they work without theorizing, . . . [for] "that is the only way to make life bearable."⁵¹ In response, Pangloss philosophizes, but Candide insists that they cultivate the garden.

The small community, left cultivating their garden, has been stripped of some illusions, but they have come together in a community, not based in utopian altruism, but based on the recognition that they must make an effort to live in harmony. While Voltaire has discredited optimism, his stance is meliorist. In the face of chance and determinism, he suggests that, while life can be dreadful, we can work to make it less so. As he suggested, in the *Philosophical Letters*, English society was better because it was freer and more tolerant, but

France could become better. Voltaire offers, then, hard work and limited hope.

This text is certainly full of ambiguous moral messages. Human nature is puzzling; many human beings are evil, some are kind. (There is no correlation between religion and goodness, or, he suggests, perhaps an inverse correlation.) Evil exists in the universe. Philosophers have failed to explain it, but novelists must expose it. The delusions of received opinions—religious, political, or philosophical—do not equip one for life. But what hope does Voltaire hold out against “bad things happen to good people,” as it is put in the self-help sections of our bookstores? He offers as a final injunction, “Cultivate your garden.” For Voltaire, his garden is literal (his correspondence reveals a great preoccupation with putting in an actual garden) and figurative—he is fighting for justice—exposing the evils of warfare, colonialism, slavery, and the many evils perpetrated in the name of “international law” in *Candide* as well as fighting against actual miscarriages of justice, like the Jean Calas case, in France. Voltaire’s garden might well be much bigger than our own, but he would have us act where we can to good effect. Works must be productive. Once again, a strange book to give to high school students. Its message is not that of commencement speeches—that the world awaits us and is open before us—but rather, *Candide* suggests, our efforts face dire limitations. It is the advice of a battle-scared warrior in the daunting and often seemingly futile battle for Enlightenment, encouraging the husbanding of resources for deployment where they can be effective.

The Supplement to Bougainville’s Voyage

With Diderot’s writings from the 1770s, we enter into a more radical phase of the Enlightenment. Diderot is one of the great speculative minds of the 18th century, and he was especially intrigued by what we might learn through the study of living creatures. (His work, *D’Alembert’s Dream*, raises the possibility of cloning, genetic engineering, etc., at a time when even the basic information about the mechanisms of human reproduction was less than clear, with opinion divided between ovists and spermists.) Diderot’s texts also use science to explore the bases of morality. As a materialist (one who takes a philosophical position that claims that there is nothing but matter

Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction

and motion in the universe), Diderot considers the question of human evolution, the development of a moral conscience, and the character of evil (especially if it is rooted in human physiology). With little biological information available to him, Diderot presents these issues through fictionalized dialogues. The questions he raises are especially intriguing to modern students because they correspond to contemporary discussions about the genetic nature of human character and its implications for morality. Diderot has been slow to find his place in the canon, in part, because he did not publish these later works; they were radical enough to be dangerous, and he circulated them only among his friends.

The *Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage* built on the travel narrative of Louis-Antoine de Bougainville's account of his voyage around the world in 1766-1769. This work was awaited with great interest because it touched on two very topical subjects: 1) the authoritarian, communistic Jesuit community in Paraguay and 2) the question of whether the Patagonia natives of Tierra del Fuego were really giants. Even though Bougainville had witnessed the expulsion of the Jesuits from Paraguay, he didn't have much to say about them. He did categorically deny that the Patagonians were giants. Diderot took his notion of the idyllic quality of Tahitian life from Bougainville's account. He categorically refused to believe that the Tahitians were primitive or any less able to evaluate their own interests than any European.⁵²

We have this text only because d'Alembert's friend, Abbé Bourlet de Vauxcelles, saved a copy and published it in 1796 after the fall of Robespierre. He used it to indict Diderot for having taught the revolutionaries to "declaim against the three masters of the human race: the Great Workman (the name for God in the *Supplement*), the magistrate, and the priest." Strange to blame this text, not published until after the Revolution, for teaching revolutionaries!

Diderot explores sexual morality in his *Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage* where travelers to Tahiti compare "natural" Tahitian practices with "social" Western morality. The notion of a sexual morality rooted in biological nature provides a useful background for discussing sexual practices and their relationship to social issues—a staple of modern, moral discussion. Unlike Rousseau,

whose *Discourse on Inequality* imagines that a child in the state of nature needs no family, Diderot proposes a society that exists for the child. His Tahitians consider their children, not their possessions, their wealth. Conception was a blessing of nature. A nubile female was allowed to bestow her favors on anyone she chooses, and her children were her dowry. As a result, the sexes were more equal, and their relations were not tainted with European artifice.

The text begins with a dialogue between two characters no better distinguished than by their names, A and B, on “the undesirability of attaching moral values to physical acts which carry no such implications.” They discuss what purports to be an unpublished section of the *Voyage*, which begins with an eloquent speech by an old man who denounces the evils colonial expansion brought to Tahiti. He warns that the Europeans will return with sword and cross “to enslave you, slaughter you, or make you captive to their follies and vices. One day you will be subject to them and as corrupt, vile, and miserable.” The old man, distinguishing between Tahitian and European ways, begs:

Leave us our ways; they are wiser and more decent than yours. We have no wish to exchange what you call our ignorance for your useless knowledge. Everything we need, and it good for us, we already possess. Do we merit contempt because we have not learned how to acquire superfluous needs?⁵³

He uses Tahiti’s values to indict those of Europe: Tahitians are innocent, content; they follow what he calls “the pure instincts of nature.” They hold all goods in common; their daughters and sons are free to seek out sexual partners at their discretion (subject to a few Tahitian strictures). They are free. But the Europeans have claimed their land and have attempted to enslave them. (What, he wonders, would happen if a Tahitian goes to Paris and claims France.) The Europeans have tainted the former innocence of Tahitian sexual relations with remorse and fear (under the guise of the unnatural morality of religion.) And although the Tahitians have been strong and healthy (the only disease they suffered from was old age), now their blood is infected with syphilis.

There is another lengthy conversation reported in the *Supplement* between Orou, a 36-year-old Tahitian father of three daughters, and his guest, a European man of the same age, the Catholic chaplain trav-

Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction

eling with Bougainville. (As you must suspect by now, the chaplain will not get the good lines in this dialogue.) As a feature of Tahitian hospitality, Orou offers his guest the sexual favors of his willing wife or one of his daughters. The chaplain demurs because of his vows. Orou is puzzled by this appeal to religion against what he calls “the pleasure to which Nature invites everyone,” and he says to the chaplain, “I don’t know what you mean by ‘holy orders,’ but your first duty is to be a man and to show gratitude.”⁵⁴ Religion, as the chaplain represents it, violates both nature and hospitality.

As Orou and the chaplain explore differences between European and Tahitian moral ideas, they focus explicitly on their different prescriptions regarding sexual behavior. Orou asks whether Tahiti or Europe is better able to feed its population, whether all of its citizens are flourishing, whether it prizes children, or whether they languish in favor of the pursuit of what he calls “superfluous needs.” (Orou then, rather incongruously, has become the spokesman for the 18th-century French position on the demographic and economic markers of a healthy society, which we saw in Montesquieu as well.) Thus, religion also undermines a utilitarian morality.

The chaplain argues for the legitimacy of European morals by invoking the authority of the Christian God. Orou finds the notion of a “great craftsman,” who has made everything, who lives everywhere but can never be seen, and who has forbidden sex to his chosen disciples, not simply puzzling but pernicious. He finds these precepts, as he puts it, “contrary to Nature, an offense against reason, and certain to breed crime.” The European practices are clearly against nature because they are predicated on treating “thinking, feeling creatures,” that is to say women, as inanimate objects, as property. Furthermore, Christian constraints on sexuality are based on a precept forbidding one to change his or her affections, a prohibition Orou finds completely contrary to human nature. The chaplain admits these prohibitions are more honored in the breach in European society. Orou then asks whether the laws of the “great craftsman” are consistent with the laws and practices of magistrates and priests. When the chaplain once again concedes that they are frequently in conflict, Orou insists that, under such contradictory precepts, “you’ll be neither a man, nor a citizen, nor a true believer.”⁵⁵ The following dialogue underscores the inconsistencies:

Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction

- Orou: Does the woman who has sworn to belong only to her husband never give herself to another man?
- Chaplain: Nothing is more common.
- Orou: Your lawgivers either punish her or not: if they punish her, they are ferocious animals attacking nature; if not, they are weaklings who have held their authority up to scorn by a useless prohibition.
- Chaplain: The guilty women are punished by general disapproval.
- Orou: In other words, justice is exercised by the lack of common sense of the entire nation, and the folly of public opinion comes to the aid of the laws.⁵⁶

Orou offers Tahiti as an example of a country where the laws are few, in conformity with nature, and therefore generally obeyed. He also suggests as a standard for morality “general welfare and individual utility.”⁵⁷ The Tahitians, in Diderot’s account, are no less able than Europeans to assess where their interests lie.

A and B then discuss the *Supplement* they have just read. This dialogue allows the case of the Tahitians to be expanded upon into principles for morals and society. In general, the claim is made that there must be good laws, and that the less laws impede human freedom, the better they are and the closer to nature. Both A and B consider Tahitian laws closer to nature. How, B asks, has “it come to pass that an act of such solemn purpose, and to which Nature beckons us by such a powerful attraction—that the deepest, sweetest and most innocent of pleasures—has become the most potent source of our evils and depravity?”⁵⁸ B expresses astonishment that A missed Orou’s points and reiterates them in such a way that their political application is unmistakable:

It is the tyranny of man which converted the possession of woman into property.
 It is the morals and customs which have encumbered the union of man and wife with too many conditions. . . .
 It is the nature of our society and the disparity of

Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction

wealth and rank which have given rise to our proprieties and improprieties. . . .
 It is on account of the political views of sovereigns, who regard everything only in light of their own interest and security.
 It is on account of religious institutions, which have attached the names of vice and virtue to actions which were not susceptible of moral judgment.⁵⁹

This work is obviously the most polemical of the three we have discussed, largely because Diderot is writing for those who already espouse Enlightenment. He would like to convert them to his more radical ideas, but he knows that these ideas are too radical to be safe or more generally disseminated. Tahiti offers a counter example to European society, exposing the arbitrariness of religious and civil prescriptions and the social and individual misery they produce. But as the final dialogue between A and B reveals, this work undermines the status quo, but there is no easy way to determine how an advanced society could adopt a more natural code of sexual morality.

Conclusion

In light of this brief discussion of this rich Enlightenment fare, I would like to return to the question of what these fictional pieces reveal about the moral compass of the French Enlightenment. All of these stories function as a kind of “thought experiment,” asking the reader to consider questions such as: What is the relationship between religious law and natural law, or between natural and civil law, or between Christian morality and natural morality? All of these texts use the vantage point of other cultures to hold up a mirror to European society, to expose its inconsistencies and suggest the relativity that underlies culturally constructed notions of morality. Exposure to other cultures encourages readers to envisage a different social and political reality; they present a provocative “free play of imagination,” encouraging the reader to imagine a different future. Granted that they offer no definitive answers to the fundamental questions they raise, what perspectives or approaches do they suggest?

These three texts are concerned with a number of similar issues, but they diverge in tone and approach. The three authors move from early to late Enlightenment and reflect the radicalization of the movement. Religiously, Montesquieu is a critical but orthodox Catholic,

Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction

Voltaire a deist, and Diderot evolves from a deist to an agnostic. Politically, too, they have preferences for different forms of government; Montesquieu endorses republics, Voltaire hopes to enlighten monarchs or finally to get a Platonic philosopher king, and Diderot ultimately espouses democracy. But they all recognize the fragility of good government and society, depending as it does on the virtue and commitment of its citizens and leaders; ideal forms can only be maintained for a short time.

These texts agree on some of the principle targets for criticism. They all call into question Christian morality and suggest alternative constructions of moral life and political society. These other, more “natural,” forms of human society take as a given the failure of Christianity as a moral and social system. Montesquieu criticizes Christianity through the words of a devout Muslim offended by lascivious Christian practices. Voltaire offers comparison upon comparison of the behavior of Christians to that of heathens; the Christian inevitably behaves badly (the higher his rank, the more reprehensible his behavior). And Diderot forces a repressed Jesuit priest to confront the free-love ethos and sexual hospitality of the Tahitians. Their critiques of Catholicism led them to envision a more “natural” religion. The Troglodytes have feasts to honor the gods, and these feasts yield the positive social benefit of “softening their manners.”⁶⁰ Eldoradoans thank God for all he has given them and are all priests. Other moral systems are praised as more natural if they contribute to an increase in population and productivity—economic and demographic considerations that all these philosophes considered indicative of healthy, flourishing families and societies.

These values are clearly at odds with those of the Catholic hierarchy. “Poverty, chastity, and obedience,” religious vows taken by those Catholics living the highest form of Christian life—that is to say, the clergy—were not values dear to the philosophes. Poverty was a social problem they hoped to ameliorate. Chastity was not only undesirable for society but also a pernicious devaluation of the human and the natural.⁶¹ (The chaste do not contribute to society through their offspring, and, the philosophes wonder, whose burden will the chaste who do not reproduce become?) Obedience, too, they suggest, especially the kind of blind, uncritical obedience to hierarchical institutions like the

Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction

church and the state, stymied the quintessentially human use of reason and made progress dubious.

Their explorations of alternative models in the New World or the East cause all of these authors to single out for devastating criticism both the church, especially the Jesuits, and the Spanish. While they criticize France, they denounce Spain. Montesquieu sees the “spirit” of Spain decisively corrupted by the practices of colonial economy, and Voltaire’s *Candide* sets the Inquisition and the most corrupt political and religious leaders in Spain. The Catholic church is an easy target—Montesquieu makes the church hierarchy analogous to despotic government; the Jesuits are literally served up with relish by cannibals in the New World, and *Candide* makes “let’s eat Jesuit” a popular saying in Paris. Diderot’s priest crying, “my religion, my religion” as he succumbs to the attractions of young Tahitian women is an unforgettable image of the hypocrisy of the clergy, and, Diderot suggests, the unnaturalness of religious prohibitions on sex.

All of these works are overtly hostile to colonialism and present foreign characters who defend their own cultures against the supposed superiority of European culture. Diderot, using one of his Tahitians as a mouthpiece, asks whether the European sense of superiority doesn’t simply reside in their cultivation of “superfluous needs.” *Candide* finally loses faith in Pangloss’s worldview when confronted with a black slave in Surinam who explains: “When we work in the sugar refineries and catch our fingers in the mechanism, they cut the hand off. When we try to escape, they cut the leg off. Both have happened to me. This is the price that has to be paid so that you can eat sugar in Europe.”⁶² They all indict slavery as a poison in the body politic. Montesquieu ironically remarked, “It is impossible for us to assume that these people are men, because, if we assumed they were men, one would begin to believe that we ourselves were not Christians.”⁶³ Contact with Europe has corrupted other civilizations. Other comparisons suggest the kind of degeneracy of Europe that Rousseau will develop so effectively in his *Discourse on Inequality* or Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents*.⁶⁴

What do these texts suggest as an appropriate response to post-modern criticisms? At the very least, they call into question the notion of a monolithic, universalist, uncritically rationalist Enlightenment.

Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction

Critics sometimes disparage the Enlightenment as the terrain of intellectuals whose optimism and naïveté border on that of *Candide*. Roland Barthes dismissed the Enlightenment when he described Voltaire as “the last happy man”⁶⁵—by which he meant not to praise his disposition, but to suggest that Voltaire was not sufficiently aware of the problems inherent to the human condition. As I hope the previous discussion has suggested, the philosophes were not naïve and the text of *Candide* is more jaundiced than happy. Voltaire himself did not have a sanguine disposition. Expecting to die at any time, much of his correspondence strikes the following cheery note, “I am rising a little from my grave to tell you,” or “I forgot to have myself buried.”⁶⁶ But, more generally, the philosophes understood the difficulties of the battles they fought, and believed that the fight was worthwhile even if it could not be decisively won. They believed that human beings could do better towards each other than they had, but they did not underestimate the obstacles in the way. In other words, they bore no resemblance to *Candide*.

These texts are not examples of the uncritical, caricatured belief in reason commonly invoked by critics. The philosophes did not see reason as a panacea, but reason had to prevail, especially against conventional appeals to tradition, so many of which, the philosophes insisted, were based on prejudice or superstition. However, these texts demonstrate explicitly the centrality of the passions. The philosophes’ notion of virtue includes physical pleasure, and, especially for Montesquieu and Diderot, the passion for life is positive and linked to sexuality. Thus, to the degree that they put their faith in reason, it is reason reconceptualized to include the passions. Their own works appeal not only to reason but also to the passions; they are intended to divert, both in the sense of entertaining and of changing the previous direction of thought.

Even if, as their post-colonial critics contend, they were not scrupulously sensitive in their approach to other cultures, nonetheless, Enlightenment thinkers, when confronted by different peoples, cultures, sexual orientations, and standards of behavior, adopt tolerance as a characteristic moral stance. They are willing to push the issue of tolerance beyond the point at which the most jaded or most sophisticated member of the 18th or even 21st-century society might be com-

Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction

fortable. In *Candide*, native girls mourn their monkey lovers.⁶⁷ Both *The Persian Letters* and the *Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage* test the incest taboo: Montesquieu by telling the tale of the true love of a Zoroastrian brother and sister that was stigmatized only when they left their own culture; Diderot by having a Tahitian explain that incest was not common but neither was it taboo.⁶⁸ What makes us uncomfortable, they seem to assert, can make us think.

That tolerance derives in part from their acceptance of the ambiguous or inconclusive solutions they offered to the problems they raised. They were willing to explore difficult topics even if they could propose no clear solutions. Ultimately, they were more comfortable with ambiguity than with authority. They acted without certainty, carving out a path between actions based on certain convictions (which they saw as often producing fanaticism) and the passivity that skepticism might produce. They took a distinct approach; they were activists, reformers tempered by doubt—constructive skeptics.

These perspectives, I would argue, in conjunction with their serious doubts about all forms of political authority, make the connection between the Enlightenment and the authoritarian states of fascism and totalitarianism difficult to maintain. All of these texts attempt to discredit any ideology (we might call them “isms”) that crushes individuals, negates their importance, or discounts their suffering in the name of abstractions. They have a strong preference for laws that lay lightly. (As B put it in Diderot's text, If you would rather man be happy and free, “then don't meddle in his affairs.”⁶⁹) Montesquieu likened good laws to nets in which the fish are caught but believe themselves free. Under bad laws, the fish are acutely aware that they are caught.⁷⁰ And, perhaps most decisively, they are advocates for liberty and happiness.

Why are the moral discussions of the Enlightenment texts of interest to us? Even if, as I have suggested, some post-modern critiques have distorted the Enlightenment, nonetheless, their very engagement with the Enlightenment makes it and its legacy more central to our own consideration of where we are in the world. The Enlightenment continues to be an especially significant intellectual period, a site of contestation on two levels: First, in the realm of modern scholarship, it remains a controversial site about the origins of modernity and its

Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction

impact on the world in which we live. The criticisms, rooted as they are in contemporary concerns, bring the Enlightenment alive by showing what is at stake in our interpretations of this 18th-century movement.

Second, the Enlightenment itself was a contentious site, fostering debate about its own practices and about the world in which it operated. As their moral tales suggest, Enlightenment texts continue to engage us because of the debates they open. They also start from some of the same suppositions and concerns that shape our public moral discourse. (Some of their suppositions are as contradictory as those that inform our public discussion of controversial topics.) They presuppose that the foundations of moral discussion must be secular. Religion has proven divisive and corrupt and cannot be a force for consensus across cultures. They focused their moral discussion on gender relations and the family as the foundation of the state, and emphasized sex and sensuality, not as sources of sin, but as fundamental to human relations. Virtue, they assumed, can flourish only in freedom and reciprocity, and they believed that gender equality and commercial development were preconditions for freedom. They, as members of an expansionist, war-making, economically exploitive superpower, were profoundly uneasy about the role Europe was playing in the world.

As a vibrant community of inquiry composed of men and women trying to make sense of their world and hoping to change it, the Enlightenment offers a compelling model of intellectual engagement. Their commitment to knowledge brought them into the world rather than removing them from it. Not sequestered in scholarly pursuits, they were instead intellectuals, who shared a fundamental commitment to the cause of improving the human condition. They used their considerable literary talent to espouse causes, to mobilize the conscience of an age (whether or not they believed in the existence of a conscience). And they did not blanch before the risks such actions entailed; those philosophes who were not members of the nobility, among them Voltaire and Diderot, spent time in exile or prison. Nonetheless, they continued to attempt to engage the literate population. They intended to foster sociability, conversation, and civility in the public sphere; they intended to produce what Loraine Daston has

Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction

called a “great echo chamber of ideas.”⁷¹ Committed, critical, open, tolerant, humanitarian—seeking greater liberty and happiness for human beings, the writers of the Enlightenment still engage us and challenge us to do as well, to be as effective.

*Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction***Endnotes**

- 1 Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, translated with an introduction by George R. Healy (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 22.
- 2 Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, Letters X-XIV, 22-30.
- 3 Doubts that there is a beneficent God, who guides human destiny, and the fear that evil might befall man without rhyme or reason set the foundation for Enlightenment discussion of ethical problems. Even though the Enlightenment is certainly a movement, which focuses its considerable intellectual energies on an attempt to understand man, what that means had evolved quite considerably from earlier perspectives, which also emphasized the centrality of man. Crucial similarities between the high Middle Ages and the Enlightenment exist, particularly the emphasis on the power of human reason, as Carl Becker long ago maintained in *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932). The Renaissance, too, placed man at the center of its investigations; it focused on man in his psychological complexity by studying the classics as models of human endeavors. But unfettered by religious certitudes or classical notions of virtue, the Enlightenment could speculate more freely, calling into question all existing institutions.
- 4 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). For discussions of the reaction against the Enlightenment by the Romantics, see Henri Brunschwig, *Enlightenment and Romanticism in Eighteenth-Century Prussia*, translated by Frank Jellinek (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974); Darrin M. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Peter Hulme and Ludmilla Jordanova, eds., *The Enlightenment and its Shadows* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988).
- 5 See, for example, Jacob Leib Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (New York: Praeger, 1960); Lawrence Birken, *Hitler as Philosopher: Remnants of the Enlightenment in National Socialism* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995).
- 6 Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, 2 vols. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969).
- 7 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).
- 8 Naomi Shor, "French Feminism Is a Universalism," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* (1995): 15.
- 9 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archeology of Medical Perception*, translated by A.M. Sheridan-Smith (New York: Vintage Books 1975); *The Order of Things: The Archeology of the Human Sciences*, translated by A.M. Sheridan-Smith (New York: Vintage Books 1975); *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977). All of

Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction

these studies suggest that the Enlightenment, by identifying social problems and constructing new, "scientific" ways to deal with them, had the consequence of constraining those human beings.

- 10 To cite just a few of the modern critiques, James Schmidt, ed., *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Jane Flax, "Is Enlightenment Emancipatory? A Feminist Reading of 'What is Enlightenment?'" in Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iversen, eds., *Postmodernism and the Re-Reading of Modernity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 232-48; Peter Hulme, "The Spontaneous Hand of Nature: Savagery, Colonialism, and the Enlightenment," in Peter Hulme and Ludmilla Jordanova, eds., *The Enlightenment and its Shadows* (London: Routledge, 1990), 18-34; Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader* (London: Blackwell, 1997); Sven-Eric Liedman, ed., *The Postmodern Critique of the Project of Enlightenment* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1997); David A. Hollinger, "The Enlightenment and the Genealogy of Cultural Conflict in the United States," in Keith Michael Baker and Peter Hans Reill, eds., *What's Left of Enlightenment?* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 7-18.
- 11 While I would concur that the Enlightenment is indeed the source of many modern attitudes. I would like to propose here a reconsideration of Enlightenment ethics. More than 50 years after the end of World War II, there is perhaps now less passion to use history to assign blame. While some might quarrel with some of the legacies of modernism, there is no returning to the pre-modern and, if we had wanted to challenge the legacy of a movement 250 years old, we have had the time to do so. After post-modern analyses, it might even be reassuring to return to the Enlightenment as a positive source of the modern and, more particularly, a foundation of modern ethical assumptions and guide to ethical actions in the modern world.
- 12 Although Montesquieu's style might seem rather unusual to us, his readers would have readily identified the traditions it grew out of, including the French satirical traditions of Jean de La Bruyère and Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, called Molière.
- 13 Peter V. Conroy, Jr., *Montesquieu Revisited* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 13-14.
- 14 Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, Letter XXVI, 46-47.
- 15 There are a number of studies that point to Montesquieu as a misogynist for his treatment of women in *The Persian Letters*. See, for example, Robert F. O'Reilly, "Montesquieu: Anti-Feminist," *Studies on Voltaire and the 18th Century* 102 (1973), 143-56; Claude Dauphiné, "Pourquoi un Roman de Séraïl?" *Europe* 55 (Fevrier 1977), 89-96; M. J. Pollock, "Montesquieu on the Patriarchal Family: A Discussion and Critique," *Nottingham French Studies* 18 (1979), 9-21. Many more recent studies see Montesquieu as sympathetic to women and their liberation. See, for example, Pauline Kra, "Montesquieu and Women," in *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment*, ed. Samia I. Spencer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 272-84.

Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction

- 16 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978). See Suzanne L. Pucci, "Orientalism and Representations of Exteriority in Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*," *The Eighteenth Century* 26 (1985).
- 17 Montesquieu advocates toleration up to a point. He finds some social and political practices anathema, especially those characteristic of despotism.
- 18 See Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* for the most consistent development of this notion of a spirit. *The Spirit of the Laws*, translated by Thomas Nugent (New York: Hafner Press, 1949).
- 19 Diana Schaub, *Erotic Liberalism: Women and Revolution in Montesquieu's Persian Letters* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 6.
- 20 Montesquieu also relied on 17th-century accounts of the Persian world, particularly Jean Chardin, *Voyages en Perse et autres lieux de l'Orient* (Amsterdam, 1711) and Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Les six Voyages en Turquie, en Perse et aux Indes* (Amsterdam, 1676).
- 21 Nancy Miller makes this point about both Montesquieu and Françoise de Graffigny, in her introduction to Françoise de Graffigny, *Letters from a Peruvian Woman* (New York: The Modern Language Association, 1993), xvii.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, Letter XIV, 42-45.
- 24 Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, Letter XXXV, 60-61.
- 25 Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, Letter XXXVI, 61-62.
- 26 For his discussion of some of these Parisian types see, Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, Letter XXVII, 49-52, Letter XXXIV, 58-60, Letter XLV, 73-75, Letter XLVII, 78-82, LII, 88-90, Letter LIV, 91-92.
- 27 Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Erica Harth, *Cartesian Women* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992). See also Elizabeth Goldsmith, *Exclusive Conversations: The Art of Interaction in Seventeenth-Century France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988).
- 28 Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, 19-20.
- 29 Schaub, *Erotic Liberalism*, 14-15.
- 30 Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, Letter CLXI, 238-44.
- 31 Schaub, *Erotic Liberalism*, 17.
- 32 For Voltaire's life and career see Haydn Mason, *Voltaire: A Biography* (London: Granada, 1981); Theodore Besterman, *Voltaire* (3rd ed., Blackwell, 1976). For his political involvement, see especially, Peter Gay, *Voltaire's Politics: The Poet as Realist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959).
- 33 *Candide*, Gordon, ed., 41.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 See David Wootton's discussion of the relationship between Voltaire and Leibniz in his introduction to *Candide* in Francois Marie Arouet de Voltaire, *Candide and Other Related Texts*, edited and introduced by David Wootton, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), x-xvii.
- 36 Some, like William H. Barber, maintain that Voltaire was not really familiar with Leibniz's philosophy and, therefore, his caricature is an apt reflection of

Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction

his level of understanding. See William H. Barber, *Leibniz in France from Arnault to Voltaire: A Study in the French Reactions to Leibnizianism, 1670-1770* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1955). Whereas others, like Carolyn Korsmeyer and Peter Kivy, assert Voltaire's ability to grapple seriously with Leibniz's philosophy. See Carolyn Korsmeyer, "Is Pangloss Leibniz?," *Philosophy and Literature* 1 (1977) 201-208; Peter Kivy, "Voltaire, Hume and the Problem of Evil," *Philosophy and Literature* 1 (1979) 211-24.

37 *Candide*, Gordon ed. 52, 49, 115. *Candide*, 115.

38 Voltaire, *Candide*, Gordon ed., 41.

39 Voltaire, *Candide*, Gordon ed., 41, 42, 44-45, 52.

40 *Candide's* rescuers are also invariably those who have unorthodox or jaundiced views of religion. The most charitable character, indeed, is Jacques the Anabaptist, and the character most able to cope, and with the highest degree of happiness, is Martin the Mannichean, the character who most acknowledges the existence of evil. On the other side of this equation, those who are the most religious are exposed as the most evil, corrupt, and (if they are celibate) sexually active characters in the novel.

41 Voltaire, *Candide*, "The Old Woman's Story," Gordon ed., Chapters 11 and 12, 60-66.

42 *Ibid.*, 60.

43 Jean Sareil, "De Zadig à *Candide*: Ou Permanence de la pensée de Voltaire," *Romantic Review* 72 (1961): 271-78.

44 Voltaire, *Candide*, Gordon ed., 52.

45 Jean Starobinski, "Voltaire's Double-Barreled Musket," in *Blessings in Disguise: The Morality of Evil* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) 85.

46 Voltaire, *Candide*, Gordon ed., 74.

47 Voltaire, *Candide*, Wootton, 29.

48 *Ibid.*

49 The ending of this tale has been the focus of much fruitful analysis. See, for example, David Langdon, "On the Meanings of the Conclusion of *Candide*," *Studies on Voltaire and the 18th Century* 238 (1985), 397-432; Jerry L. Curtis, "*Candide* et le principe d'action: Développement d'un Méliorisme chez Voltaire," *Romanische Forschungen* 86 (1974) 57-41; Giovanni Gullace, "Voltaire's Idea of Progress and *Candide's* Conclusion," *Personalist* 48 (1967) 167-86; John Pappas, "*Candide*: Rétrécissement ou Expansion?" *Diderot Studies* 10 (1968) 241-63; Christopher Thacker, "The Misplaced Garden? Voltaire, Julian and *Candide*," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 41 (1966), 189-217; Dennis Fletcher, "*Candide* and the Philosophy of the Garden," *Trivium* 13 (May 1978): 18-30.

50 Voltaire, *Candide*, Gordon ed., 116.

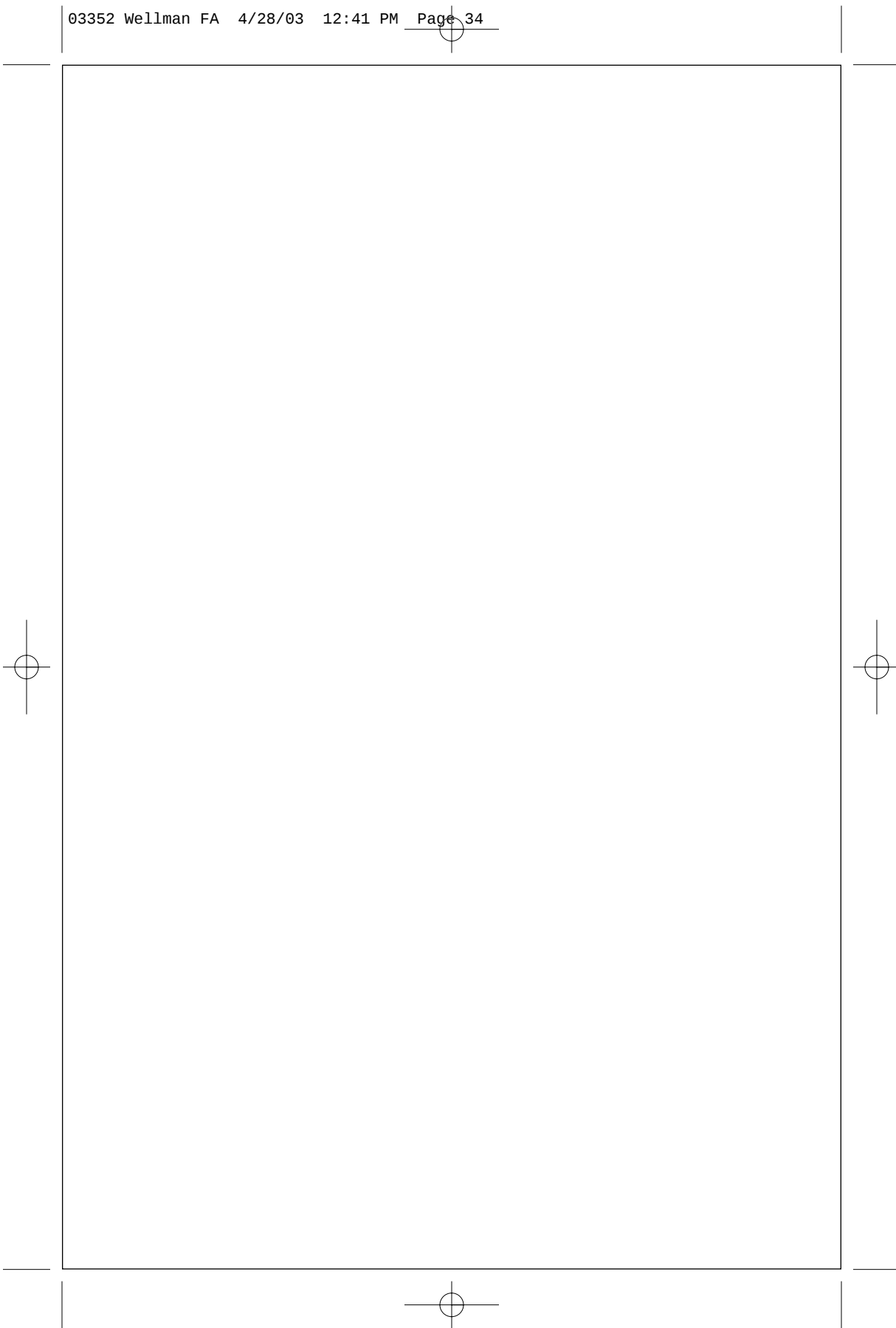
51 Voltaire, *Candide*, Wootton, 79.

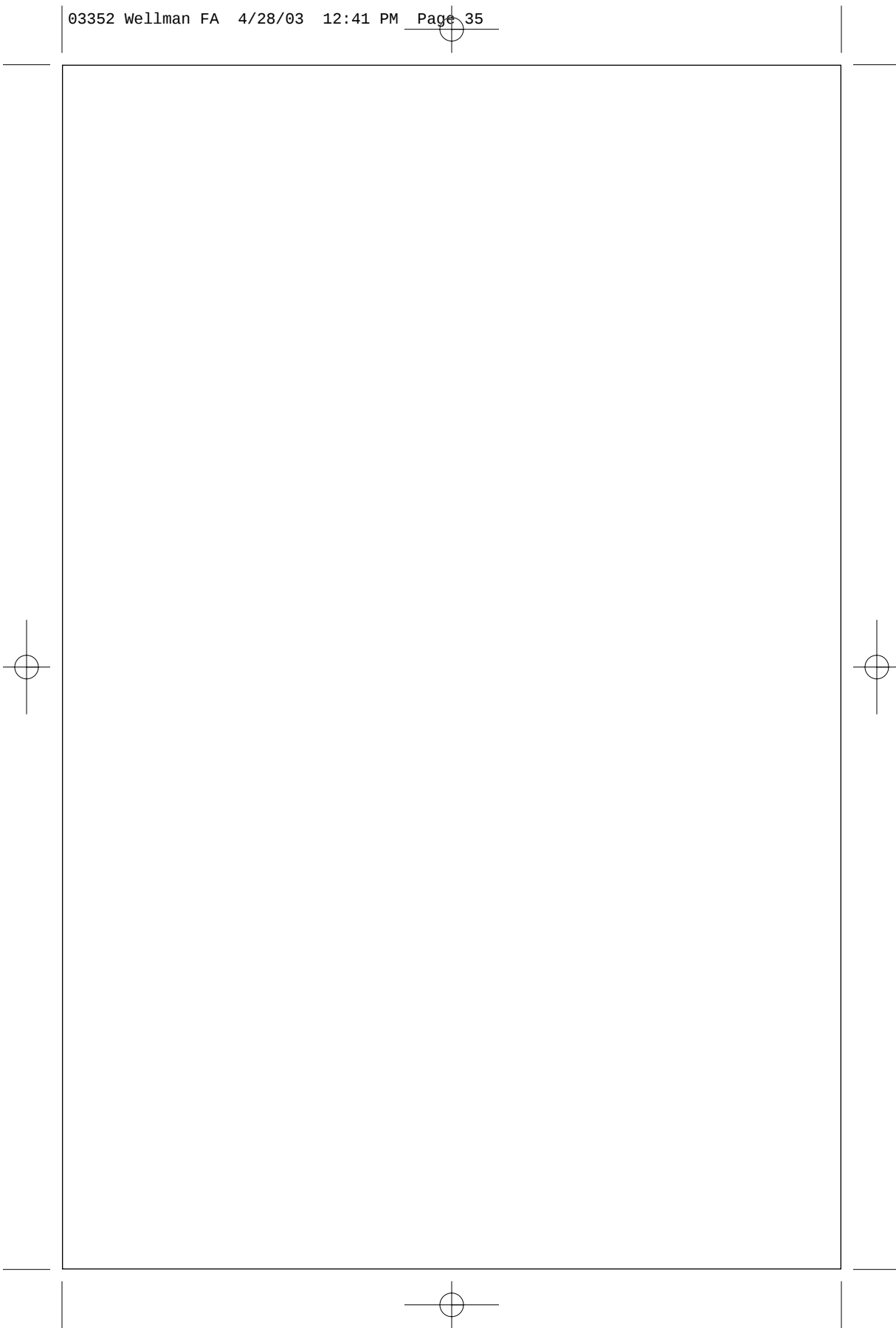
52 These perspectives suggest that it is a mistake to consider this text primitivistic.

53 Denis Diderot, "Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage," *Political Writings*, translated and edited by John Hope Mason and Robert Wokler (Cambridge:

Moral Tales: Ethics and Enlightenment Fiction

- Cambridge University Press, 1992) 43. This speech by the Old Man is a stirring indictment of the effects of European colonialism on the New World.
- 54 Ibid., 47-48.
- 55 Ibid., 51.
- 56 Ibid., 52.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Ibid., 70.
- 59 Ibid., 70-71.
- 60 Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, 26.
- 61 Obviously, these authors do not have Freud to rely on, but they, especially Diderot, should be recognized as perceptive pre-Freudians.
- 62 Francois Marie Arouet de Voltaire, *Candide and Other Related Texts*, edited and introduced by David Wootton, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001) 43.
- 63 Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, Book 1, Chapter XV.5 "On the Slavery of Negroes," 238-39.
- 64 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, translated and edited by James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1962) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, edited by Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly, translated by Judith R. Bush (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1992).
- 65 See Roland Barthes, "The Last Happy Writer," in *A Barthes Reader*, edited by Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982) 150-58.
- 66 This quality of Voltaire's correspondence is discussed by Daniel Gordon in his introduction to *Candide* (New York: Bedford) 16-17. See also the following study of Voltaire's correspondence during the period in which he was writing *Candide*: Geoffrey Murray, "Voltaire's" *Candide*: The Protean Gardener, 1755-1762," *Studies on Voltaire and the 18th Century* 69 (1970).
- 67 Voltaire, *Candide*, Wootton, ed., Chapter 16, 32-35.
- 68 Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, Letter LXVII, 111-19. Diderot, *Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage*, 60-61. Judith Sklar has explored the import of Montesquieu's presentation of an incestuous brother and sister as a happy couple as challenging the relationship between happiness and the rule of society. Judith Sklar, *Montesquieu* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) 37.
- 69 Diderot, "Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage," 72.
- 70 Montesquieu, *Pensées*, no. 1798, cf. Schaub, *Erotic Liberalism*, 20.
- 71 Lorraine Daston, "Afterword: The Ethos of Enlightenment," in *Sciences in the Enlightenment*, ed. Jan Golinski and Simon Schaffer, 495-504 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 496.





THE CARY M. MAGUIRE CENTER FOR ETHICS AND PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY

The leaders of Southern Methodist University believe that a university does not fully discharge its responsibility to its students and to the community at large if it hands out knowledge (and the power which that knowledge eventually yields) without posing questions about its responsible uses. Through the Cary M. Maguire Center for Ethics and Public Responsibility, SMU strives to foster the moral education and public responsibilities of those whom it empowers by:

- Supporting faculty research, teaching, and writing in ethics that cross disciplinary, professional, racial/cultural, and gender lines;
- Strengthening the ethics component in SMU's undergraduate and professional curriculum;
- Awarding grants to SMU students who wish to study issues in ethics or engage in community service.

SMU also believes that a university and the professions cannot ignore the urban habitat they helped to create and on which they depend. Thus, while not an advocacy group, the Maguire Center seeks to be integrally a part of the Metroplex, attending to the moral quandaries and controversies that beset our common life. To that end, the Center:

- Has created an Ethics Center Advisory Board of professional and community leaders;
- Organizes local seminars, colloquia, and workshops featuring SMU and visiting scholars;
- Publishes occasional papers and books based on the Center's endeavors that will be of interest to both academics and the general public.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Cary M. Maguire Center for Ethics and Public Responsibility
Southern Methodist University
PO Box 750316
Dallas TX 75275-0316
214-768-4255
www.smu.edu/~ethics_center