

Rousseau's Letter to Voltaire Regarding the Poem on the Lisbon Earthquake,

August 18, 1756

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Voltaire:

"Poem on the Lisbon Disaster,

or: An Examination of that Axiom

'All Is Well,"

Rousseau's Letter to Voltaire Regarding the Poem on the Lisbon Earthquake,

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All my complaints are . . . against your poem on the Lisbon disaster, because I expected from it evidence more worthy of the humanity which apparently inspired you to write it. You reproach Alexander Pope and Leibnitz with belittling our misfortunes by affirming that all is well, but you so burden the list of our miseries that you further disparage our condition. Instead of the consolations that I expected, you only vex me. It might be said that you fear that I don't feel my unhappiness enough, and that you are trying to soothe me by proving that all is bad.

Do not be mistaken, Monsieur, it happens that everything is contrary to what you propose. This optimism which you find so cruel consoles me still in the same woes that you force on me as unbearable. Pope's poem alleviates my difficulties and inclines me to patience; yours makes my afflictions worse, prompts me to grumble, and, leading me beyond a shattered hope, reduces me to despair....

"Have patience, man," Pope and Leibnitz tell me, "your woes are a necessary effect of your nature and of the constitution of the universe. The eternal and beneficent Being who governs the universe wished to protect you. Of all the possible plans, he chose that combining the minimum evil and the maximum good. If it is necessary to say the same thing more bluntly, God has done no better for mankind because (He) can do no better."

Now what does your poem tell me? "Suffer forever unfortunate one. If a God created you, He is doubtlessly all powerful and could have prevented all your woes. Don't ever hope that your woes will end, because you would never know why you exist, if it is not to suffer and die...."

I do not see how one can search for the source of moral evil anywhere but in man.... Moreover ... the majority of our physical misfortunes are also our work. Without leaving your Lisbon subject, concede, for example, that it was hardly nature that there brought together twenty-thousand houses of six or seven stories. If the residents of this large city had been more evenly dispersed and less densely housed, the losses would have been fewer or perhaps none at all. Everyone would have fled at the first shock. But many obstinately remained . . . to expose themselves to additional earth tremors because what they would have had to leave behind was worth more than what they could carry away. How many unfortunates perished in this disaster through the desire to fetch their clothing, papers, or money? . . .

There are often events that afflict us . . . that lose a lot of their horror when we examine them closely. I learned in *Zadig*, and nature daily confirms my lesson, that a rapid death is not always a true misfortune, and that it can sometimes be considered a relative blessing. Of the many persons crushed under Lisbon's ruins, some without doubt escaped greater misfortunes, and . . . it is not certain that a single one of these unfortunates suffered more than if, in the normal course of events, he had awaited [a more normal] death to overtake him after long agonies. Was death [in the ruins] a sadder end than that of a dying person overburdened with useless treatments, whose notary and heirs do not allow him a respite, whom the doctors kill in his own bed at their leisure, and whom the barbarous priests artfully try to make relish death? For me, I see everywhere that the misfortunes nature imposes upon us are less cruel than those which we add to them....

I cannot prevent myself, Monsieur, from noting . . . a strange contrast between you and me as regards the subject of this letter. Satiated with glory . . . you live free in the midst of affluence. Certain of your immortality, you peacefully philosophize on the nature of the soul, and, if your body or heart suffer, you have Tronchin as doctor and friend. You however find only evil on earth. And I, an obscure and poor man tormented with an incurable illness, meditate with pleasure in my seclusion and find that all is well. What is the source of this apparent contradiction? You explained it yourself: you revel but I hope, and hope beautifies everything.

. . . I have suffered too much in this life not to look forward to another. No metaphysical subtleties cause me to doubt a time of immortality for the soul and a beneficent providence. I sense it, I believe it, I wish it, I hope for it, I will uphold it until my last gasp....

I am, with respect, Monsieur,

Jean-Jacques Rousseau