

Il Faut Cultiver Notre Jardin

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The history of [*Candide's*] world-famous phrase, which serves as the book's conclusion—*il faut cultiver notre jardin*—is ... peculiar. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, it didn't come into written use in English until the early 1930s – in America through Oliver Wendell Holmes and in Britain thanks to Lytton Strachey. But a long, unrecorded history of its oral use and misuse can be deduced from Strachey's announced desire to cure the "degenerate descendants of *Candide*" who have taken the phrase in the sense of "Have an eye to the main chance." That a philosophical recommendation to horticultural quietism should be twisted into a justification for selfish greed would not necessarily have surprised Voltaire. (Barnes, 2011)

In Voltaire's *Candide*, the scathing critique of abstract, world-alienated, self-alienating, sanctimonious theoretical philosophy in general, and of professional academic philosophy in particular—specifically exemplified by 18th century Leibnizian/Wolffian rationalism and theodicy, or “theo-idiocy,” satirically represented by that iconic moralistic idiot of professional academic philosophy, Dr Pangloss—equally evocatively and provocatively concludes with the phrase “il faut cultiver notre jardin,” i.e., *we must cultivate our garden* (Voltaire, 1959: p. 120). What does Voltaire's world-famous phrase mean?

As per the above, the novelist Julian Barnes aptly noted that a popular, vulgar misuse and twisting of it means “have an eye to the main chance,” that is, a “justification for selfish greed,” and then proposed that, contrariwise, its real meaning is “a philosophical recommendation to horticultural quietism.” *That* reading of its real meaning seems wrong to me, however, an anachronistic interpretation over-influenced by the later Wittgenstein's idea that philosophy should only get clear on the confusions of classical philosophy as represented by mainstream professional academic philosophy, discharge all its conceptually-confused “bad pictures,” engage in liberating self-therapy, and then simply “leave the world alone” (Wittgenstein, 1953).

Contrariwise to Barnes's Wittgensteinian contrariwise, I think that “il faut cultiver notre jardin” is in fact Voltaire's radically enlightened 18th century philosophical recommendation to revolutionize philosophy, and transform it from abstract, world-alienated, self-alienating, sanctimonious theorizing into a concrete, world-encountering, self-realizing, emancipatory, rational humanistic enterprise: in a nutshell, Voltaire is describing the radically enlightened philosopher as *a rational rebel for humanity*. Therefore, what Voltaire is really saying, in the context of 18th century radical enlightenment, is essentially closer to what the early, humanistic Marx is saying in his 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* and his 1845 *Theses on Feuerbach*—

The resolution of *theoretical* considerations is possible only through *practical* means, only through the practical energy of humanity. Their resolution is by no means, therefore, the task only of understanding, but is a *real* task of life, a task which philosophy was unable to accomplish precisely because it saw there a *purely* theoretical problem. (Marx, 1844/1964)

The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in different ways; the point is to *change* it. (Marx, 1845/1964)

and to what Thoreau is saying in his 1854 *Walden*—

There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers.... To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically. (Thoreau, 1854/1960: p. 9)

—than it is to what Wittgenstein is saying in the *Philosophical Investigations*.

Ironically, then, partly by virtue of misleading, pedestrian English translations—for example, “we must go and work in the garden” (Voltaire, 1947: p. 144)—Voltaire’s famous phrase has been widely and indeed wildly misinterpreted as recommending the narrowly-focused, egoistic, and purely prudential pursuit of self-interest (Barnes, 2011; Hanna, 2021a). But on the contrary, for Voltaire *himself*, “il faut cultiver notre jardin” almost certainly meant radically re-shaping the classical theological vision of a prelapsarian Eden, in an 18th century humanist dignitarian radical Enlightenment context, as our “human, all-too-human” predicament in a world filled with natural and moral evil, and in which, therefore, God’s existence or non-existence should be regarded with *radical agnosticism*,¹ as being of no present or foreseeably future moral or sociopolitical use to us: therefore, if there is any moral and sociopolitical progress to be made by humankind, if there is any kind of new Eden to be created, then *we must do it for ourselves*. Correspondingly, updating Voltaire’s neo-Edenic exhortation to the 21st century, I believe that humankind’s only way forward from here is to undertake a cosmopolitan or worldwide *do-it-for-ourselves* project, in order to cultivate our *own* radically-enlightened, humanist dignitarian neo-Edenic garden.

That all being so, how do (i) the meaning of “il faut cultiver notre jardin,” (ii) Voltaire’s radically enlightened critique of professional academic philosophy as abstract, world-alienated, self-alienating, sanctimonious theorizing, and (iii) his corresponding radically enlightened 18th century recommendation about philosophy, jointly apply to contemporary philosophy?

First, I think it’s self-evidently clear that the popular, vulgar misuse and twisting of “il faut cultiver notre jardin” as “have an eye to the main chance” applies directly to the professionalization and neoliberalization of academic philosophy in late 20th and early

¹ André Maurois *almost* formulates this point correctly when he writes: “What is Voltaire’s positive philosophy? It is an agnosticism tempered by a deism” (Maurois, 1959: p. 5), and then goes on to argue that ‘the moral system of Voltaire is not actually based on his deism.... [i]t is a purely human morality... [a] deist in name, a humanist in fact—that is Voltaire’ (Maurois, 1959: p. 6, translation modified slightly). For an exposition and defense of radical agnosticism from a broadly and radically Kantian point of view, see (Hanna, 2018: part 1).

21st century liberal democratic States, whether in Europe, North America, or anywhere else in the world, especially including post-classical Analytic philosophy (Hanna, 2021b: esp. ch. XVII)

Second, I think it's also entirely clear that Voltaire's radically enlightened critique of professional academic philosophy as abstract, world-alienated, self-alienating, sanctimonious theorizing applies directly to what I've called "the Ivory Bunker" of professional academic philosophy (Z, 2016).

Third, 21st century philosophers ought to *eradicate the infamy!* (*écrasez l'infâme!*) that is the panglossian professionalization and neoliberalization of academic philosophy worldwide in The Age of Trump.

Fourth and finally, therefore, the most basic and profound elaboration of "il faut cultiver notre jardin" is "il faut cultiver notre jardin *mondial*": as rational rebels for humanity, we must cultivate our *global* garden (Hanna and Paans, 2022).

Early Marx's aphorism, '[t]he philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in different ways; the point is to *change* it' (Marx, 1845/1964: p. 69) is *half-right* and *half-wrong*. Yes, leaving aside Marx himself and a few other philosophical activists (Hanna, 2020), philosophers have only ever variously *interpreted* the world. But no, the point *isn't* that philosophers should act upon the world directly and unreflectively, as if their actions were shot out of a revolutionist's rifle, and as if radical change were always *very* simple and *very* straightforward. Indeed, as Paulo Freire has correctly pointed out, this attitude expresses a kind of shallow activism that generally accomplishes very little, that typically repeats the worst repressive tendencies in morality and sociopolitics, and that all too easily slips back in zealotry, coercive moralism, and coercive authoritarianism (Freire, 1996). Instead, the point is that philosophers should critically and reflectively *shape the world*, by means of *shaping human thinking about the world* (Hanna and Paans, 2021), in ways that liberate and prime the individual and collective imagination, so that people, not only individually but also collectively and social-institutionally, can *shape and change their own minds and their own lives* (Hanna, 2017; Maiese and Hanna, 2019; Maiese et al., 2023), for the *better*, and then finally *act* in order to change the world in ways that sustain them and the social institutions they belong to. And *that's* how and why we must cultivate our garden.

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