

Secularisation and Empowerment. Four Poems on Theodicy

The Enlightenment Debate at the European Centre and the Swedish Periphery

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses four 18th-century poems on the issues of theodicy and a moral world order, which were central to Enlightenment discourse and to figureheads such as Bayle, Leibniz, Voltaire and Hume. Theodicy was discussed in the leading countries of culture, England and France, as well as in peripheral countries like Switzerland and Sweden. The main focus is on the Swedish poet Hedvig Charlotta Nordenflycht. A comparison of Nordenflycht's poems with those of Pope, von Haller and Voltaire makes clear that Nordenflycht actively engaged with the works of these leading figures, thus contributing to the worldview debate in the Enlightenment era.

Keywords

Hedvig Charlotta Nordenflycht, Leibniz, Secularisation, Problem of Theodicy, Enlightenment, Voltaire

A MORAL WORLD ORDER AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL – FOUR POEMS

The conception of an unshakeable moral world order under the Providence of the Almighty was the cornerstone of the 18th-century worldview. The major European churches, the pietistic movements and Enlightenment religiosity all agreed on this notion. In *De l'Esprit des lois* (1748), Montesquieu argues that all laws should be built on the inherent condition of existence, that is, the justice and righteousness of the world order. According to Montesquieu, it was impossible that God should violate this eternal norm of justice

(Livre I: 1–2, see also Cassirer 1968, 234–243). This optimistic belief in a moral world order, where rewards and punishments were logical, withered away at the middle of the century and particularly in the aftermath of the Lisbon earthquake of 1755. The problem of evil and suffering and the philosophical problem of theodicy emerged as issues of concern. Why did suffering afflict people unjustly and indiscriminately? If God had created everything, where did evil spring from? The topicality of such questions in the 18th century is also due to the fact that the Devil as the explanation of evil was rejected as superstition, and the conception of original sin as absurd (Kelly 2002, 125; Cassirer 1968, 129–160; Saine 1997, 34, 88 f.; Scribner 1993, 478–480).

The standard answer to the problem of suffering and evil provided by churches—as well as Enlightenment philosophers—was that human beings were too limited to understand how seemingly disparate things can still make sense. Comprehension would only come with the day of unveiling in heaven. Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz and his disciple, Christian Wolff, maintained that human beings simply had to have faith in God; since the good God wanted to create everything the way he did, we should not ask why what happens, happens (Saine, 105 f.).

This argument was also put forth in two of the century's greatest poems on the problem of evil and suffering, by Albrecht von Haller and Alexander Pope. Albrecht von Haller tried to explain the problem of evil and suffering in his extensive poem, "Über den Ursprung des Übels" (1734) ["On the Origin of Evil"] with reference to Calvinist theology, but finally had to admit that the essence of God and the world order would remain hidden to human beings: "Verborgen sind O Gott! die Wege Deiner Huld" ["O infinite Being! the ways of thy grace are hidden from us"] (von Haller 1758, 96).¹ At the end of the poem, however, he claims, in the spirit of Leibniz-Wolff, that injustice cannot possibly derive from the Almighty and that the will of God cannot be other than good. When our souls finally enter the light of perfection, the books of destiny will be open to us and we will at last grasp the nature of being and see that God's rulings, which seemed incomprehensible, in actual fact were only grace and wisdom, the poem states (1758, 99).

Alexander Pope's poem *An Essay on Man* (1733–34) was probably the most read and quoted poem in the 18th century; it is neo-classically elegant and mildly ironic in formulations such as:

All nature is but art, unknown to thee;
All chance, direction, which thou canst not see;
All discord, harmony not understood;
All partial evil, universal good.
And, spite of pride, in erring reason's spite,
One truth is clear, Whatever is, is RIGHT.²

The Prussian academy announced an essay competition which involved interpreting Pope's poem with a focus on phrases such as "Whatever is, is right", and comparing it with Leib-

1. Dorothy Roller Wiswall states that Haller's ultimate "answer" is that there is no answer to the problem of theodicy, except trusting in God's infinite goodness (1981, 201). The English translation of von Haller's poem was made by Mrs Howorth in 1794.
2. Pope, Alexander. *An Essay on Man*. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2428/2428-h/2428-h.htm>. For an analysis of Pope's poem, see e.g. Kelly, 2002, 123 f. Kelly calls Pope "one of optimism's most fervent supporters". See also Besterman 1962, 29 f.; Srigley 1994; Neiman 2002, 31–36.

niz's optimistic system and providing arguments for and against Pope's worldview (Neiman 2002, 31–33; Fonnesu 2006, 757). Voltaire expressed admiration for Pope's poem when it was first published, although he found the worldview obscure and difficult to understand (Besterman 1962, 33; Neiman 2002, 135). In the preface to *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne* (1756) [*Poem on the Lisbon Disaster*], on the other hand, Voltaire articulated strong criticism of Pope's worldview in *Essay on Man*, in the name of empathy. Saying to earthquake victims that existence was good and that their suffering was part of a plan was tantamount to adding weight to the burden and scorn to the affliction, as Voltaire suggested (see for this also Neiman 2002, 135 f.).

Voltaire's earthquake poem was written immediately in the wake of the disaster that destroyed the major European city, and it was soon circulated in manuscript copies in drawing rooms and literary societies in Paris, quickly spreading throughout Europe. Theodore Besterman claims that the earthquake was the last drop in an overfilled goblet for Voltaire. He had been critical of Leibniz's doctrine for a long time, and even more of Christian Wolff's systematisation of it. Besterman maintains that it was not the earthquake as such that gave rise to a crisis in Western European worldview and paradigmatic shift away from the optimism of the early Enlightenment. What was decisive was Voltaire's poem. In the subsequent years, Voltaire's earthquake poem gave rise to a great deal of comments in newspapers and journals and in pamphlets and theological, philosophical and scientific works (Besterman 1962, 33–38). Voltaire says in the poem that it is absurd to claim that all is well with the world. We must acknowledge the existence of evil, and refrain from increasing suffering by denying it (e.g. l. 218 f., see also Cassirer 1968, 146). The poem does not provide any solution to the problem of theodicy, but tests all proposed solutions, only to reject them. Voltaire's wish was to be truthful, sincere and nuanced—not to deliver answers where there were none (Cassirer 1968, 145–147). His inclination to favour a faith in God, however, was clear, as it was among most Enlightenment philosophers and scientists (Saine 1997, 41).³ As we have seen, von Haller at the end of his poem looks forward to being enlightened about the state of things in a transcendent world, and in *Essay on Man*, Epistle I, Pope states: "Heav'n from all creatures hides the book of fate, / All but the page prescrib'd, their present state".⁴ Voltaire, as well as the Swedish Enlightenment pioneer, Hedvig Charlotta Nordenflycht, protested against this. God, they both claimed, should enlighten people here and now—Voltaire in the earthquake poem, and Nordenflycht in the fifteen-stanza poem "Ode i anledning av Exodus XXXIII: kap. v.18, 20 och XXXIV kap. v. 5, 6" ["Ode on the occasion of Exodus Ch. XXXIII: v.18, 20 and Ch. XXXIV: v. 5, 6"] (1759, in Nordenflycht vol III, 23–28, hereafter referred to as the Exodus ode). I aim to show in this article that Nordenflycht's poem relates to the other three and that she thus—as a Swedish pioneer—enters the lively European worldview discussion.⁵

3. In this article, I do not engage myself in the question about the essence of the Enlightenment movement. For a discussion on this, see Frängsmyr (2006, 17–46).

4. Pope (1733–34), Epistle I.

5. This poem has been discussed before, but never analysed in detail and in its relation to the poems of von Haller, Pope and Voltaire. Several scholars have sought the ideological influences of Nordenflycht's poetry, but none have examined the way the Exodus ode enters into dialogue with these poems. See e.g. Kruse (1895), Nilsson (1918), Borelius (1921), Lamm (1918), Stålmärck (1967, 1986, 1997).

DEMAND FOR ENLIGHTENMENT

Hedvig Charlotta Nordenflycht was the leading cultural figure and poet in Stockholm for a number of years in the mid-18th century, at a time when women were not deemed fit to enter Parnassos at all. She was a strong and brave woman, who wrote sharp female emancipatory as well as anti-religious poems. Before anyone else in Sweden, she publicly engaged in enlightenment debate and dared to say what no one else did.⁶

Nordenflycht's Exodus ode explicitly refers to passages in Exodus where Moses formulates a request to understand God and his ways:

Exod. 33: 18. And he [Moses] said, I beseech thee, shew me thy glory.

Exod. 33: 20. And he [the LORD] said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live.

Exod. 34: 5–6. And the LORD descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth (Nordenflycht 1925-38, 23)

Moses, in short, asks to see the glory of God, but is told that no one can see God and live. Instead, God appears to him in a cloud and lets Moses see only his back.⁷ This is the Biblical context and the Biblical theme to which Nordenflycht's poem relates. The Exodus ode is introduced with an extended apostrophe to God, as the almighty creator. The first stanza ends with the request: "Let me thy glory see!" The second stanza elaborates and develops this request:

Låt denna del af kraft och tanka,
Som Du til mennskia har beredt,
Ej blind, ej mörk, ej oviss vanka
Om Dig, när hon Naturen sedt.
[This one of force and thought that You
did mould to man, oh God, let not
walk blind in dark uncertainty
of thee, when Nature she has seen.]⁸

Blindness, darkness and uncertainty are more or less synonymous here. The uncertainty that is due to the fact that the doctrines of God and the worldview are not compatible with human reality, and the feelings of dissatisfaction that are the result of this uncertainty are expressed in this poem in terms of "darkness", "mist", "cloud" and "blindness" (stanzas 2, 4, 5, 6, 14, 15). The whole poem is built on the antithesis of light and darkness, overt and covert, infinite and finite, *Deus revelatus* [the God revealed] and *Deus absconditus* [the God concealed]. The argument of the poem is that the antithesis should be abolished, darkness turned into light, the hidden revealed and the concealed God appear: "Let me thy glory

6. Protestant orthodoxy was predominant in Swedish universities and schools until mid-century, when it was succeeded by the Leibniz-Wolff teachings. In shorter periods, there was an academic philosophical discussion, in Latin, on questions of worldview, but to publish anything religiously controversial was very risky at this time. See for this Frängsmyr (1972), Hellerstedt (2009), Lenhammar (2000), Hessler (1956). See also Blomqvist (2011 and 2016).

7. See the whole context in *Exod.* Ch. 33–34.

8. Translations of the Exodus ode into English are by Elisabeth Wennö.

see!'. Because the ignorance of God's essence, plans, and the logic of the world order are consistently referred to in terms of negatively charged concepts, the choice of diction supports the argument for enlightenment. The poetic persona wants to understand God.

The perception of God that the poem is based on is the abstract, elevated and almighty Providence of Enlightenment theology. When God is characterised as he who "preserves, generates, carries" in stanza 2, the three key aspects of divine acts, according to Christian theology throughout time, are singled out—*creatio, conservatio, gubernatio* [creating, preserving, governing] (Hägglund 2003, 50 f.; Aulén 1917, 311 f.). But this perception of God does not match the reality that the poetic persona observes. Human beings are apparently too small and limited to understand God and the world order that he has created and maintains: "En ändlig kraft hur skal den hinna, / At Lius om en oändlig ge?" ["How can a finite force have time, / to enlighten the infinite?"] (stanza 4). The poem says that the world order is incomprehensible because of the problem of suffering and evil. This is the reason for requesting enlightenment.

In the preface to the earthquake poem, Voltaire says that we cannot turn a blind eye to the evil in the world and that no philosopher, as yet, has managed to solve the problem of how the good order of Providence can harbour so much moral and physical evil.⁹ In his poem, Voltaire, like Nordenflycht after him, thinks that it is reasonable to ask that God himself should enlighten humankind about his essence and about how the world order is created and preserved, instead of leaving humankind to guess the truth:

Il le faut avouer, le mal est sur la terre;
Son principe secret ne nous est point connu. [...]
On a besoin d'un Dieu qui parle au genre humain.
Il n'appartient qu'à lui d'expliquer son ouvrage,
De consoler le faible, et d'éclairer le sage.
["Confess it freely – evil stalks the land
Its secret principle unknown to us.[...]
the human race demands a word of God.
'Tis his alone to illustrate his work,
Console the weary and illumine the wise.] (Voltaire 1911 [1756] ls. 126–127, 164–166)¹⁰

Guesswork is also the only thing the poetic persona in von Haller's poem has recourse to, asking how the mercy and goodness of God is compatible with the sufferings of humankind, and particularly the agonies of the eternally damned (1758, 96).¹¹ The questi-

9. As Paul Ricoeur establishes in his study on the problem of evil, in the Biblical book of Job the debate between Job and his friends is triggered by the discrepancy between the physical and the moral evil—to do ill is not to fare ill and to do good not to be rewarded with a good life (1986, 20–22). In the 18th century, the debate about the moral and physical evil took on a new direction, when Jean-Jacques Rousseau introduced a new responsible subject: society. See for this Cassirer (1968, 157). For the history of the problem of theodicy from the book of Job and onwards, see Kelly (2002), Fonnesu (2006), Neiman (2002).

10. Voltaire, François. 1756. *Poème sur le Désastre de Lisbonne*. http://athena.unige.ch/athena/voltaire/voltaire_de-sastre_lisbonne.html; «Poem on the Lisbon Disaster». 1911. In *Selected Works of Voltaire*. Edited and translated by Joseph McCabe. London: Watts and co. http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Toleration_and_other_essays/Poem_on_the_Lisbon_Disaster. The translation of Voltaire's poem was made by Joseph McCabe, and published in 1911.

11. For an analysis of von Haller's poem, see Saine (1997, 110–112). When Martin Luther in *De Servo Arbitrio: The Bondage of the Will* (1525) attempts to answer the questions on perceptions of God and human suffering, the focus is on the eternally condemned.

ons lead to a number of “maybes” (“vielleicht”), where the poetic persona makes guesses on how it can all be connected and comprehended.

When the Exodus ode—like Voltaire’s earthquake poem—argues for enlightenment, it does so by refuting the two most important 18th century explanations, both advocated in Pope’s *Essay* and scrutinized in von Haller’s poem on evil.¹² On the one hand, there was the natural theology, or physico-theology, based on Newton, asserting that God reveals himself in his amazing creation—Nature; and on the other hand, the Leibniz-Wolff’s theory that everything in existence is part of a harmonious whole, where suffering is needed to complete the picture. I will now address how the Exodus ode in dialogue with the other three poems argues against the standard explanations of the world, and for enlightenment.

THE INADEQUACY OF NATURAL THEOLOGY

A common argument in the 18th century against the notion that God was incomprehensible was that he was visible and graspable in *nature*, and that awareness of his glory and power could be obtained through studying and meditating on different natural phenomena (Saine 1997, 20; Frängsmyr 1972, 32 f., 147–156). In fact, the concept *nature* was often used synonymously with *God*, which was connected with an effort to avoid superstitious faith in a God that indulged in the supernatural, in favour of the God that controls the course of the world through the natural laws (Saine 1997, 50). The physico-theological dogma saying that nature bears witness to God’s wisdom, care and goodness is also one of the tenets of Pope’s *Essay*. Voltaire opposes this idea in his earthquake poem. The only law we can see in nature, the poem says, is corruption; everything is disorder and chaos—“Un désordre éternel, un chaos de malheurs” [“Endless disorder, chaos of distress”]. Asking nature is fruitless since nature does not answer. Answering should be God’s duty (Voltaire ls. 170, 181, 162–165). Von Haller introduces “Über den Ursprung des Übels” with a long reflection on the fantastic beauty of nature and says that all this is God’s gift.¹³ Shortly after, however, the poetic persona declares that he is confused and in disagreement with himself, and then paints a picture of all in the world that makes it resemble hell, asking: Is this really the world of God (von Haller, 71–74)? Von Haller’s poem was published around the same time as Pope’s *Essay* and consequently does not relate to it, but deals with the same questions—without delivering any answers. Unlike Pope, who has the Leibnizean idea as a basis, von Haller struggles with Leibniz’s notion of predestined and pre-established harmony, according to which everything in the universe is connected in one harmonious system (Saine 1997, 73–75). Pope’s argument also had as its starting point Bishop William King’s *De Origine Mali* (1702), which was published in English in 1731. King, like Leibniz, thinks that imperfection derives from God’s bountiful goodness, which must ensure that everything possible is also realised and that this realisation is performed in Creation in the form of a never-ending hierarchical chain, ranging from the highest and most perfect to the lowest and most imperfect (Lovejoy 2009, 212–222; Saine 1997, 77–84).

12. As Tryggve Byström shows, Nordenflycht learned English in the 1740s, and the main reason for this was that she wanted to read Pope. She also listed several volumes of Pope’s poetry as lost in the fire that destroyed her home a few years later (Byström 1980, 81–89, see also Castrén 1917, 85–87).

13. Wiswall claims that he here delineates the Leibnizean best-of-all-possible-worlds (Wiswall 1981, 206).

Several of the Exodus ode stanzas also examine the basic tenet of physico-theology. In the first stanza it is stated that God has left his mark in the large—the celestial bodies—as well as the small things—the blades of grass. In the second stanza, in accordance with physico-theology, we read that nature preaches and its message is that God is great and almighty; everything observable in nature speaks of an “Evig allmagt” [“Eternal Almighty”]. However, that said, one of the many *buts* repeatedly arguing against the standard dogmas occurs in the last two lines: “Men ho är den Dig rätt kan skåda / och säja, Herre hvad Du är!” [“But who can thee aright behold / and say, oh Lord what thou truly art!”] All nature thus bears witness to the omnipotence of God, but still no human being can understand him.

In stanza 7 a new “but” has to be presented: Even if nature testifies to God’s greatness, no *comfort* is provided, only wonder and amazement. What nature is said to preach is that God is omnipotent, but not that God is good. The Enlightenment view of God is characterised precisely by greatness, distance and impersonality, which makes it difficult to see God as a person with personal care for the individual human being. The omnipotence dogma threatens to engulf the goodness dogma.

The prevalent nature argument is further scrutinised in stanzas 8 to 13, and here clearly in relation to the contradictory nature images in von Haller’s poem.¹⁴ At the beginning of the eighth stanza, it is stated, with a turn of phrase from the Book of Psalms Ch. 19, that “Himlarna förtäljer Guds lov” [“the heavens declare the glory of God”], and then, in a highly appropriate way for a Biblical ode, praise is given to the Almighty for this. Nevertheless, in the third line the objections are introduced through the poem’s most central use of “but” and “however”, namely: “Men jorden dock med grymhet sväljer / De barn hon i sitt skiöte haft.” [“But Earth, however, with cruelty swallows / The children carried in her womb”]. Nature is a good *and* evil mother. Viewing nature entails not only seeing the traces of a mighty creator, the poem suggests, but also inconceivable cruelty, misery and endless suffering—an incomprehensible mixture of evil and good (stanza 11). Voltaire also objects to the mixture of good and evil in life in the Lisbon poem: “O mélange étonnant de contrariétés!” [“O wondrous mingling of diversities!”] (l. 140). The nature studies decreed by physico-theology seem to censure half the picture.

The question posed by the Exodus ode, then, is whether it is really possible to find the certainty and comfort we need by observing nature. The eighth stanza starts with a hymn to the Creator, but ends in sighs and laments, and with the two virtually scandalous questions: “Är ingen hielp i nöd förordnad? / Är mennskio lif ej i Din vårdnad?” [“Is no help in despair decreed? / Is human life not in your care?”]. These questions have a model in Voltaire’s earthquake poem: “Un sophiste arrogant nous dit qu’il ne l’a pu; / Il le pouvait, dit l’autre, et ne l’a point voulu” [“One sophist says he had not power to change; ‘He had’, another cries, ‘but willed it not’”] (ls. 143 f.). Similar questions are posed in von Haller’s poem: “War Deine Lieb’ erschöpft? war Deine Allmacht schwach?” [“Was thy love exhausted? Was thy power insufficient?”] (p. 107). If the answer is “no”, then God is not good but evil, or at least indifferent or impotent. God does not help anyone in need; he is not concerned with

14. Von Haller corresponded with scientists and authors all over the western world, of which Nordenflycht was one. She owned a copy of his collected poems, which was lost in a fire, so she asked him to send her a new copy. See for this Stålmarck (1997, 143 f.), Stålmarck (1960, 106–121).

human beings. According to the logic of all three poems, this is the natural conclusion of nature observations, and not that a good and powerful Providence cherishes his whole creation.

The ninth and tenth stanzas of the Exodus ode clearly go together. The ninth depicts a scene in which an innocent lamb serves as the example of what the tenth stanza then turns into a universal application. In the ninth stanza, as in the eighth, there is a shift in the third line introduced through a “but”. The first two lines portray an idyllic pastoral, with a lamb eating grass and flowers, thus tasting “Skaparns nåd” [“the grace of the Creator”]. The idyll does not last, however, as grace is transformed into fear, suffering and death. The stanza is concluded with yet another question addressed to God: “Hvi har det [lammet] lif och känsla fått?” [“Why has the lamb been endowed with life and feelings?”] Why has God created living creatures with feelings, if this means fear, pain and premature death? Similar questions are raised in von Haller’s “Über den Ursprung des Übels”. Could you not have conceived a more perfect world, without all the suffering and misery? asks the poetic persona in the first song and in the third and last, he wonders if no world at all would not have been better than this one (1758, 77, 96).¹⁵ The tenth stanza of the Exodus ode elaborates on the question of why the lamb has been given life, only to suffer: God has created all living creatures with the will to live and with survival instincts, while all are simultaneously exposed to danger and death, and no one is allowed to be happy. Here too, the reasoning of the poem is close to Voltaire’s earthquake poem:

Oui: mais les animaux condamnés à la vie;
Tous les êtres sentants, nés sous la même loi,
Vivent dans la douleur, et meurent comme moi.
[Yes; but all animals condemned to live,
All sentient things, born by the same stern law,
Suffer like me, and like me also die.] (Voltaire 1911 [1756] ls. 105–108)

The Nordenflycht scene with the initially carefree and subsequently threatened lamb is also reminiscent of a similar scene in Pope’s *Essay on Man*, Epistle I, but the conclusion drawn is different. Pope’s poem suggests that it is good for the lamb to be unaware, as it can then graze happily among the flowers, without understanding that the hand it is licking is the hand that will spill its blood. In the same way, it is beneficial for human beings not to know what the spirits and angels know. In contrast, Voltaire’s and Nordenflycht’s poems both ask why the innocent animals have been given feelings only to be exposed to fright, fear and pain.

In stanzas 11–13 of the Exodus ode, human life is the object of consideration and reflection. Human life is viewed in the spirit of Leibniz-Wolff, as part of nature’s great system, so the contemplation of human life is a continuation of and a parallel to the reflections on natural phenomena and animal life of the previous stanzas. Here the argument continues to oppose what is repeated in Pope’s *Essay on Man*, that everything is part of a great and harmonious whole. Human life is sooner marked by misery, says the Exodus ode:

15. The same questions are posed in William King’s *De Origine Mali* (1702), which is considered the first theodicy of the 18th century, and which influenced to a great extent the English discussion of the problem of evil. See King 1758, e.g. 92–102, 131 f., 137, 194–202. It is possible that von Haller was familiar with King’s text (Saine 1997, 89).

Ho kan den jämmers mängd beskrifva
 Som följer mennskio-ödet åt?
 På mennskian sielf en målning gifva
 Och hennes svåra lefnads stråt?
 De stämma hop at oro föda,
 Alt under Solen är ju möda:
 Alt skapat henne plåga bär;
 Med nöd och faror henne hotar.
 Och at hon sielf sin sällhet motar,
 Den största olycks råga är.
 [Who can describe the range of gloom
 That seems to be the human lot?
 Portray the mortal and the doom
 Of trials in the human plot?
 In unison the anguish grows,
 For under the sun all is woes:
 All things created a burden is;
 Dearth and dangers pose a threat
 And greatest of them all is yet
 the ways we counteract our bliss.] (Nordenflycht 1925-38, 27 stanza 12)

The two initial rhetorical questions of the stanza claim that there is no way in which the gloom and doom characterising human life can be conveyed. The stanza then resorts to the words of Ecclesiastes and sums up human life by saying that all is toil and woe under the sun.¹⁶ Everything created by God seems designed to plague the human beings, who contribute to the misery through their own evil, which affects everyone: “En endas yra ofta våller, / At jorden simma får i blod” [“A single person’s frenzy often / Makes the earth swim in blood”] (stanza 13). There are parallels in von Haller’s poem, which (in the third song) depicts the Fall and its consequences in the form of violence and physical and psychological suffering. The poem asks why God created man with the risk of falling into sin (1758, 88–90).

Stanzas 11–13 (ibid. 23–28) in the Exodus ode are full of questions to the God who has created such an inscrutably contradictory world:

“Why are its inhabitants not happy?” (stanza 11)
 “Why should human life be a mixture of evil and good” (stanza 11)
 “Why should desires compel?”, “Why do we have power to sin?” (stanza 13)
 “Why are we made to suffer for our wrongs?” (stanza 13)
 “Why has it [the lamb, the animal, and all living creatures] been given life and feelings?” (stanza 9)

According to the logic of the poem, these questions arise as a result of the prescribed nature contemplations, or should arise unless we are blinded by dogma and consensus. The Exodus ode shows—in a way that clearly recalls Voltaire’s and von Haller’s poems—that the system of nature is not at all beautiful, good and harmonious. If this terrible mixture and all

16. See for example Ecclesiastes 1: 2–3, 8: “Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun? [...] All things *are* full of labour; man cannot utter *it*.”

these unhappy creatures were created by an omnipotent God, the poem asks, then can he really be good? To this question an answer is demanded.

THE FRAILTY OF THE UNIVERSAL HARMONY ARGUMENT

Leibniz-Wolff's doctrine, like Pope's *Essay on Man*, describes an image of the world as a perfect and beautiful system, in which everything hangs together in a logically mathematical order and cooperates in creating a harmonious whole. Epistle II in *Essay on Man*—like the whole poem—claims that God, who always sees the whole picture, has apportioned light and shadows—“[l]ove, hope, and joy”, “[h]ate, fear, and grief”—in an artful and harmonious way.¹⁷ Nordenflycht's Exodus ode questions this combination and does not see that it is compatible with faith in a good and almighty God. Stanzas 9 and 10 in the Exodus ode most clearly relate to Pope's *Essay on Man* and to Voltaire's polemics against it in the Lisbon poem.¹⁸ In the Exodus ode Nordenflycht chooses the same side as Voltaire, in claiming that *individual* suffering—represented by the lamb in stanza 9—is important, making the incomprehensibility of individual suffering into an argument for enlightenment. The aim of *Essay on Man* is to “vindicate the ways of God to man” by showing that everything is good, right and on the whole comprehensible, while the aim of the Exodus ode is to *demand* intelligibility from God. *Essay on Man*, which in this respect is strongly influenced by Leibniz, recurrently mocks persons who, placing themselves at the centre, claim that God should care about them as individuals:

While man exclaims, “See all things for my use!”
 “See man for mine!” replies a pamper'd goose:
 And just as short of reason he must fall,
 Who thinks all made for one, not one for all. (Pope 1733-34 Epistle III)

At the end of the first epistle, Pope's *Essay* employs St. Paul's image of the Christian congregation as a body, in which each member has a specific function (1 Corinthians 12: 12–31). Pope makes the image cover all humanity. The poem claims that it is absurd to complain about the duties of life and the suffering that “the great directing Mind” assigns to the individual: “All are but parts of one stupendous whole”. Everything is for the good of all, the third epistle asserts, exemplified with the argument that everything perishing turns into nourishment for the new, sprouting life. In the fourth and last epistle, this argument is repeated in, for example, the following lines:

[...] the universal cause
 Acts not by partial, but by gen'ral laws;
 And makes what happiness we justly call
 Subsist not in the good of one, but all.

17. Saine shows that Pope here adheres to Leibniz's version of the Neo-Platonic teaching on “the great chain of being” (1997, 81–83). As Lovejoy demonstrates, Pope has also found inspiration in this from King's *De Origine Mali*. King expresses, as we have seen, by and large the same thoughts as Leibniz, without being familiar with his teachings (Lovejoy 2009, 212).

18. Nordenflycht's friend Carl Christoffer Gjörwell claimed that Voltaire was Nordenflycht's great hero and idol—of which he, as a warm Christian, was critical—and that she found everything that Voltaire wrote good (Kruse 1895, 272 f.).

God sends not ill; if rightly understood,
Or partial ill is universal good. (Pope 1733-34, Epistle IV)¹⁹

The argument of Pope's poem is that what seems to be evil about individual suffering is really good if the whole is considered. This type of reasoning is the target of sharp critical satire in Voltaire's earthquake poem. Above all, it is individual suffering and the destiny of the individual that Voltaire focuses on. His poem vibrates with empathy, illustrating the sufferings of individuals in the earthquake-afflicted Lisbon. The poem insists that it is an affront to the afflicted to say—as Pope and Leibniz did—that “all is well.” Already in the fourth line the “philosophes trompés” [mistaken philosophers],²⁰ shouting “All is well”, are addressed and asked to come and see all the maimed, suffering, and injured victims in the earthquake-afflicted city (l. 4–12). The poem does not mince its words when asking how it can be possible to claim that all is well and that everything is necessary, when viewing this infernal suffering. It is not pride but sensitivity that makes people complain about events such as a natural disaster (l. 42–58). Voltaire is here explicitly critical of Pope, who, in the *Essay*, repeatedly accuses those who question and complain of being conceited.²¹ Saine discusses this aspect of Pope's poem, saying that it demonstrates how conservative the Neo-Platonic doctrine of “the great chain of being” is, as also the Leibnizean doctrine of pre-established harmony. According to such doctrines everything has its given place in the whole and in the hierarchy, and trying to leave a predetermined position or question the system would be arrogant. Pride is therefore the worst conceivable sin, according to Pope's poem (Saine 1997, 79 f.).

Voltaire's poem also wonders if it is really a comfort for suffering and dying people that their agonies are beneficial to other people, and it mocks the thesis of Pope's poem that everything that dies will nourish new life:

“Ce malheur”, dites-vous, “est le bien d'un autre être.”
De mon corps tout sanglant milles insectes vont naître;
Quand la mort met le comble aux maux que j'ai soufferts
Le beau soulagement d'être mangé des vers!
Tristes calculateurs des misères humaines
Ne me consolez point, vous aigrissez mes peines.”
[“This misery”, ye say, “Is others' good.”
Yes; from my mouldering body shall be born
A thousand worms when death has closed my pain.
Fine consolation this in my distress!
Grim speculators on the woes of men,
Ye double, not assuage, my misery.] (Voltaire 1911 [1756] ls. 97–100)

The argument in Nordenflycht's Exodus ode is in parts so close to Voltaire's Lisbon poem (particularly stanzas 9 and 10) that it is possible to speak of apparent influence. Voltaire writes:

19. This quotation might be a bit tricky to interpret. There is an implicit colon after “or” in the last line, so that the two closing lines in fact vary the same thought: If he be rightly understood, God does not send ill, or: what is partially ill, is universally good.
20. The English translation by McCabe does not make clear that Voltaire here is speaking about philosophers who are wrong.
21. Through the whole of *Essay on Man*, those who dare claim that all is not good are accused of being proud or impious or presumptuous, foolish or “blind to truth”. “To reason right is to submit”, Epistle I also declares.

Le vautour acharné sur sa timide proie
 De ses membres sanglants se repaît avec joie;
 Tout semble bien pour lui, mais bientôt à son tour
 Un aigle au bec tranchant dévore le vautour;
 L'homme d'un plomb mortel atteint cette aigle altière:
 Et l'homme aux champs de Mars couché sur la poussière,
 Sanglant, percé de coups, sur un tas de mourants,
 Sert d'aliment affreux aux oiseaux dévorants.
 Ainsi du monde entier tous les membres gémissent;
 Nés tous pour les tourments, l'un par l'autre ils périssent:
 [The vulture fastens on his timid prey,
 And stabs with bloody beak the quivering limbs:
 All's well, it seems, for it. But in a while
 An eagle tears the vulture into shreds;
 The eagle is transfixed by shaft of man;
 The man, prone in the dust of battlefield,
 Mingling his blood with dying fellow-men,
 Becomes in turn the food of ravenous birds.
 Thus the whole world in every member groans:
 All born for torment and for mutual death.] (ibid. ls. 109–118)

Similarly, the Exodus ode, as we have seen, employs fauna images. Like Nordenflycht's lamb, Voltaire's vulture is eating peacefully when it suddenly falls victim to the hunger of another animal. Like Voltaire's eagle, Nordenflycht's lamb must fear the gun of a human being.²² In the thirteenth stanza of the Exodus ode we also find droves of people dying on battlefields, as in Voltaire's poem.²³

In the tenth stanza, the ode relates to Pope's thesis in the second epistle that self-love, or passion, is one of the two foundational principles of human nature—reason being the other—but makes this the basis of the same polemical question that Voltaire poses against Pope and Leibniz: Why has God created humans and animals with survival instincts and a love for their own individual lives, if individual life has no meaning beyond the general? Thus, we can clearly see that Nordenflycht had read and been inspired by Voltaire's earthquake poem, and that she sides with it in the polemics against Pope and Leibniz.

THE IMAGE OF GOD IS DISTORTED WHEN GOD PLAYS HIDE-AND-SEEK IN THE CLOUDS

The Exodus ode demonstrates as a further argument for enlightenment how the uncertainty regarding the image of God and the prevailing worldview can lead to conceptions of God as evil and the world order as immoral, which is hardly desirable if the doctrines claim the opposite. The image of God may well be erroneous and distorted when God refuses to show his true face. As we have seen, Voltaire's earthquake poem suggests that it is a reason-

22. The French original has "plomb"—"lead pellet", where McCabe translates "shaft".

23. Martin Lamm, in fact, claims that Nordenflycht's poem, like Voltaire's, deals with the Lisbon earthquake (Lamm 1918, 178.).

able request that God himself enlighten us about his essence and of the world order that he created and sustains, instead of humans having to guess the truth.

The fourth stanza of the Exodus ode is built on negations to illustrate how impossible comprehension is and how powerless human beings are: “Min tankefart kan dig ej finna, / Ditt anlet kan ej någon se, / Den som Dig ser kan icke leva” [“My speed of thinking cannot find thee, / Thy countenance can no one see / He who sees thee cannot live”]. This is part of God’s answer to Moses in Exodus, and it is also a recurring theme in the Old Testament. Seeing the face of God, or coming too near, is fatal.²⁴ In the fourth stanza of the Exodus ode a simile is used to illustrate why it is so dangerous to come too close to God: “Som veka blomman dör och visnar, / När Solens brand för häftig är” [“As the tender flower withers and dies, / When the heat of the sun is too strong”]. The human being is likewise too frail to endure seeing this great and powerful God—on whom we depend—and coming too close. In this stanza, the poem relates closely to the biblical context, and the trepidation of the poetic persona at the end of the previous stanza is also reminiscent of the fear of the Israelites before the appearance of God on Mount Sinai in smoke and lightning. In the next stanza, however, the poem diverges from the biblical original. The speaker seems obliged to accept the standard explanation as to why her questions are not answered—humankind is too small to fully understand the greatness of God—but stanza five questions this explanation with anaphoric force. Must truth be hidden from us? Should we really have to be condemned to uncertainty? The poem relates the biblical original and the contemporary religious and philosophical answers to the questions, only to challenge and reject them.

Three parallel negations are significant in the eighth stanza: “intet värn”, “ingen hjälp”, “ej i Din vårdnad” [“no protection”, “no help”, “not in your care”]. The impression created by the earthquake disaster is that God does not help those in need, or even attend to human affairs at all. The poem is reminiscent of Voltaire’s Lisbon poem, where we are told that the afflicted were given no help—“sans secours” (l. 11).²⁵ It is clear to the poetic persona of the Exodus ode that God is powerful, but she sees nothing to suggest that God is good. If the original and genre conventional purpose of the poem was to praise God, that praise is now transformed into lamentation and sighs. The stanza concludes with a focus on the persona’s personal emotional reactions: “Mit låf förbyts i suck och qual” [“My praise is turned into lament”]. The passive construction suggests that the change of the speaker’s mood and of the poem’s tone and genre—from ode to lament—is beyond control. It simply happens and is inevitable.

In a letter to a good friend in 1757, Nordenflycht said that she was in the process of writing an ode to this Exodus passage, which she planned to include in a collection of spiritual poems to be published a year later (Nordenflycht III, 264 f.). The Exodus ode was, however, never included in the spiritual collection. In a new letter to her friend, dated 1758, she explains that the poem turned out to be a “little too philosophical” to be included among

24. See, for example, Exod. 19: 12–25, where God orders Moses to draw a line around Mount Sinai and decrees that whoever crossed that line would be sentenced to death; Exod. 20: 18–21, where the people appeal to Moses not to have to meet God directly, or 2 Sam. 6: 3–8, where Ussa stops God’s Ark from falling off its carriage with his hand, but thereby falls down dead. See also Hes. 1: 28; 3: 23–24; Dan. 10: 5–11.

25. This does not show from the English translation.

the poems printed (Nordenflycht III, 269). The evident tension in the poem is reflected in this correspondence. The poem is something as anomalous as a sceptical Biblical ode and develops as a counter-text to the Biblical text instead of being laudatory.

According to the poems of Nordenflycht, von Haller and Voltaire, the world order seems to be amoral and God evil. If this perception is wrong, God should enlighten us about the true state of affairs, say both Voltaire and Nordenflycht. Pope's *Essay* prescribes: "Know then thyself, presume not God to scan".²⁶ Conversely, it is to precisely this scrutiny of God that Nordenflycht's Exodus ode, von Haller's poem on the origin of evil, and Voltaire's earthquake poem are devoted, and they argue for the right to do so. Nordenflycht's poem demands answers to questions that both the Church and Enlightenment religiosity insisted humankind should not ask.

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