

Handout 13: Leibniz's Optimism

Philosophy 322: Modern Philosophy
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In section 3 of the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, Leibniz argues against “those who believe that God might have made things better” (Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics and Other Essays*, ed. Garber and Ariew, p. 3). On the contrary, Leibniz claims, what God has made is “of the highest perfection.” This view is often referred to as Leibniz’s *optimism*. Here is Leibniz’s argument for this claim:

- (1) God is perfect in every respect.
- (2) If this is not the best of all possible worlds, then God is imperfect in some respect.¹
- ∴(3) So, this is the best of all possible worlds.

To deny the conclusion you must deny the first or second premise. Let’s accept the first. Here is an argument for the second premise (Leibniz does not give this argument, but it is a helpful way of framing the issues):

- (2.1) This is not the best of all possible worlds. (Supposition.)
- (2.2) God exists and created the world.
- (2.3) If God exists and created the world but this is not the best of all possible worlds, then either:
 - (a) God did not have the power to create the best possible world, or
 - (b) God did not know which possible world was the best, or
 - (c) God did not choose to create the best possible world.
- ∴(2.4) So, (2.3a), (2.3b), or (2.3c) is true. (From (2.1), (2.2), and (2.3).)
- ∴(2.5) If (2.3a), (2.3b), or (2.3c) is true, then God is imperfect in some respect.
- ∴(2.6) So, God is imperfect in some respect. (From (2.4) and (2.5).)

¹By “world” we mean not just the planet earth or the cosmos, but everything that exists, except God himself.

We will grant premise (2.2). The reason for accepting premise (2.3) is something like this. Suppose God created this world and it's not the best possible world. What would explain that fact? Well, either God wasn't *able* to create the best possible world (2.3a), or else he didn't *know* which world would be the best of all possible worlds (2.3b), or he *chose* to create a world that's not the best (2.3c). (2.1), (2.2), and (2.4) imply (2.4). What about (2.5)? On this handout, I'll consider three objections to (2.5).

First, what does Leibniz mean by saying that this world is the "best" possible world? In section 5 of the *Discourse*, he says that "the happiness of minds is the principle aim of God" (Leibniz, p. 5). In section 6 of the *Discourse*, he writes:

God has chosen the most perfect world, that is, the one which is at the same time the simplest in hypotheses and the richest in phenomena, as might be a line in geometry whose construction is easy and whose properties and effects are extremely remarkable and widespread (Leibniz, p. 6).

And in another essay not in our textbook, he writes that the actual world is "morally most perfect." He expands on this idea as follows:

[T]he world is not only the most admirable machine, but insofar as it is made up of minds, it is also the best republic, the republic through which minds derive the greatest possible happiness and joy ("Ultimate Origination," Leibniz, p. 46).

So on Leibniz's view, the actual world contains as much happiness and joy for minds as is possible.

OBJECTION I: THERE IS NO BEST POSSIBLE WORLD

If, for any possible world W , there is a better possible world W^* , then there is no *best* possible world. And if there is no best possible world, then it is no sign of God's imperfection that he does not have the power to create the best possible world. So, if there is no best possible world, the truth of (2.2a) does not imply that God is imperfect. Hence, if for any possible world W , there is a better possible world W^* , then (2.5) is false.

Leibniz briefly considers this objection in section 3:

Besides, these moderns [i.e., Leibniz's opponents] ... imagine that nothing is so perfect that there is not something more perfect—this is an error (Leibniz, p. 3).

Leibniz does not here tell us why he thinks this is an error. And it is not clear why it would be: there seems nothing inconceivable about an infinite sequence of possible worlds, each of which is better than the next.

However, Leibniz would still have a response to this objection. For suppose that there were no best possible world, but that God created this world anyway. Since there is a better world than this one which God could have created instead, God could have acted in a more perfect way than he did; i.e., he could have created an even better world than the one he did. So in creating this world, God acted imperfectly. But God doesn't act imperfectly. So either this is the best of all possible worlds, or God did not create it. Since God created it, it must be the best.

OBJECTION 2: FOREKNOWLEDGE AND FREEDOM

The following principle is plausible:

FOREKNOWLEDGE PRECLUDES FREEDOM (FPF)

If, at t , God knows that S will do A at some time later than t , then S cannot freely choose to do A .

Suppose that God knew a thousand years ago that you would have Grape Nuts for breakfast this morning. Then, since God cannot know something that is false, it was true a thousand years ago that you would have Grape Nuts for breakfast today; i.e., your cereal choice this morning was already settled a thousand years ago. But if your cereal choice this morning was already settled a thousand years ago, it seems that you *couldn't have chosen otherwise*. And if you couldn't have chosen otherwise, then (it seems) you didn't *freely choose* to have Grape Nuts.

Much more would need to be said to defend the principle. But suppose it is true. Suppose further that any world which even has a shot at being the best possible world is one where people act freely. Then God, if he intended to create a world that even had a shot at being the best possible world, would have created a world where people act freely. But given FPF, that means that he couldn't have created a world where he knew in advance what people would freely choose to do. Thus he couldn't have known in advance whether the world he created would actually *be* the best possible world.

Thus, the objection concludes, (2.2b) is no indication of God's imperfection: if the actual world is to have any shot at being the best world, God *can't* know in advance everything that will happen in it. So (2.5) is false.

Leibniz would respond to this objection by denying FPF. As we'll see in his discussion of human freedom, Leibniz holds that God's knowing in advance what you will do is no bar to your freely choosing what you will do.

OBJECTION 3: MUST A MORALLY PERFECT BEING CHOOSE THE BEST?

Suppose that there is a best possible world, and that God knows which one it is. But suppose that God chooses to create another, worse world instead. Would this indicate that God is imperfect?

The philosopher Robert M. Adams argues that the answer is "no."² God's knowing choice to create a sub-optimal world would be wrong if:

1. God would be thereby violate someone's rights, or
2. God would be thereby display a character defect.

And, Adams thinks, neither is the case. Moreover, he thinks, there is no plausible alternative reason for supposing that God would do something wrong by creating a sub-optimal world.

His argument for each claim is more sophisticated than we can go into here, but here are the basic ideas. First, it doesn't seem that any creature has a right to have the best life it is possible for her to have. So if by creating a sub-optimal world, God makes someone's life go less well than it could have, he does not thereby violate her rights. He might violate her rights if he created

²Adams, Robert M., "Must God Create the Best?" in *Philosophical Review* 81:3, 1972.

her in such a way that her life is actually worse than never having existed at all. But we have no clear reason to think that the actual world contains anyone with such a life. So even if the actual world is sub-optimal, it doesn't seem that God has violated anyone's rights in choosing to create it rather than a better world.

Second, Adams notes that the idea of grace is central to the Judeo-Christian understanding of God. God's grace is, roughly, God's disposition to love his creatures independently of their merit; i.e., even when they don't deserve God's love. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, grace is seen as a virtue, not a defect. But, Adams concludes, if God wants to manifest his grace, he needs to create a world that contains creatures who do not merit God's love. In Adams's words, God "might well choose to create and love less excellent creatures than he could have chosen" (Adams, p. 324). The less his creatures merit love, the greater God's grace. So we have no clear reason to think that God's choosing to create a world with creatures who do bad things is evidence that God has done something less than morally perfect.

VOLTAIRE'S OBJECTION

Even if none of the foregoing objections works, there is still something incredible about Leibniz's optimism. No one has articulated this thought better than the 18th century French writer Voltaire, who satirized Leibniz in his novel *Candide*. The character of Dr. Pangloss teaches Candide, the novel's protagonist, that "all is for the best in this best of all possible worlds." Candide witnesses and experiences war, disease, death, slavery, torture, and other horrible things, all of which lead him to abandon the optimism he learned from Dr. Pangloss and to conclude that "God has abandoned [this globe] to some evil creature." Who in his right mind, Voltaire is asking, when confronted with the evil and suffering in the world, could think that this is the *best* God could have done?

Leibniz anticipated Voltaire's objection. In an essay not in our textbook, he draws aesthetic analogies intended to counter it:

We know but a small part of the eternity which extends without measure, for how short is the memory of several thousand years which history gives us. But yet, from such meager experience we rashly make judgments about the immense and the eternal [...]. Look at a very beautiful picture, and cover it up except for some small part. What will it look like but some confused combination of colors, without delight, without art [...]. But as soon as the covering is removed, and you see the whole surface from an appropriate place, you will understand that what looked like accidental splotches on the canvas were made with consummate skill by the creator of the work. What the eyes discover in the painting, the ears discover in music. Indeed, the most distinguished masters of composition quite often mix dissonances with consonances in order to arouse the listener, and pierce him, as it were, so that, anxious about what is to happen, the listener might feel all the more pleasure when order is soon restored [...]. He who hasn't tasted bitter things hasn't earned sweet things, nor indeed, will he appreciate them. Pleasure does not derive from uniformity, for uniformity brings forth disgust and makes us dull, not happy: this very principle is a law of delight ("Ultimate Origination," Leibniz, pp. 46-47).