The Best of All Possible Worlds?

T.S. Weaver makes a case for 18th-century philosopher Leibniz's contention that this fallen world is still the best of all possible worlds.

This world is just as embedded with pain and suffering as it is with beauty and joy. Can this world possibly be the best of all possible worlds?

18th-century philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz contended that it is.

In his book *Theodicy* (published in 1710{1}), he makes the very distinctive defense for the existence of God in view of the problem of evil.{2} ("Theodicy," combining the Greek words for God and justice, is the theological term for addressing the problem of how a good and just God can allow evil in His creation.)

One of the strengths of Leibniz's theodicy is how straightforward and precise it is. It is also traditionally recognized as one of his highly essential contributions to philosophy of religion. The place to start is God's omniscience (not evil). This allows God to understand all possibilities. {3} If God knows all possibilities, God knows all possible worlds. God is likewise completely good and so constantly aspires the best and continuously performs in the best way. Leibniz writes, "The first principle of existences is the following proposition: *God wants to choose the most perfect.*" {4} The power of the best-of-all possible-worlds theodicy is to show God's decision to generate this world out of every world that he could have produced, *for this creation is good.*{5}

Leibniz ties in several principles to the theodicy. The first

major principle is centered on the truth that God acts for worthy causes. Again, God's omniscience presumes God understands the value of every world possible prior to deciding which one to produce. This also implies God always decides on the base of sensible, stable rationales. This is called the "principle of sufficient reason."{6} Leibniz purports,

> Now this supreme wisdom, united to a goodness that is no less infinite, cannot but have chosen the best. For a lesser evil is a kind of good, even so a lesser good is a kind of evil if it stands in the way of a great good; and there would be something to correct in the actions (so, the omnipotence) of God if it were possible to do better.{7}

To believe God can intercede in what He has formed with sufficient reason, even to avoid or restrict evil, would be akin to a soldier who abandons his post during a war to stop a colleague from perpetrating a slight violation.{8} In other words, when we sometimes think God should have restricted a certain evil, the argument is that He could actually be guarding against a greater evil we are unaware of instead.

Leibniz does not leave the principle of sufficient reason to fend for itself. Instead, he reinforces the best-of-all-possible-worlds theodicy with the principle of "pre-established harmony." He describes it this way: "For, if we were capable of understanding the universal harmony, we should see that what we are tempted to find fault with is connected to the plan most worthy of being chosen; in a word we *should see*, and should not *believe* only, that what God has done is the best." {9} In other words, God performs corresponding to divine perfection and liberty, decides to produce, commands creation corresponding to this nature, and then can choose a world that includes evil. Living in the best of all possible worlds entails the world comprising the best goods out of any, with the greatest harmony. Jill Graper Hernandez states, "The mere existence of humans in creation requires that humans may

choose certain evil acts, and this is harmonious with God's perfection of intellect and will."{10}

This hints at the one last, ethical, principle of Leibniz's best-of-all-possible-worlds theodicy: God's creation includes human free will. For Leibniz, human freedom is vital to grasp how God's permission of evil is coherent with divine flawlessness and to grasp how God avoids ethical condemnation for letting evil into the best possible world.

> Free or intelligent substances possess something greater and more marvelous, in a kind of imitation of God. For they are not bound by any certain subordinate laws of the universe, but act by a private miracle as it were, on the sole initiative of their own power.{11}

A better world is created, if human beings are infused with free will, even if they decide to behave corruptly. While free will can ensue in evil (the risk), for humans to have the capability to be ethically good, or to build virtues, or to develop spiritually, free will is necessary. Human ethical integrity hangs on our capability to freely choose the good. His generosity makes freedom conceivable and makes it possible for His creation to pursue Him. By wanting the best, God gives the prospect some creatures will decide to behave corruptly.

Yet, since its publication over three hundred years ago, Leibniz's theodicy has had enduring condemnation. Two of the most troubling are about the existence of "natural evil" (suffering from catastrophes in nature) and whether God could have formed a world with less powerful evils and less free will. The first is insidious because in most cases, seemingly only God could avoid natural catastrophes and the suffering that comes from them. Yet I think Leibniz would argue, given the understanding of his theodicy, we must trust that God has given us the best despite natural evils.

The second critique is obvious on its face to nearly everyone.

One cannot help but wonder if this world is the best there could be, and if this is the best God could do. It appears there might be cases in which God should intercede to avoid suffering from atrocious evil, for example the Holocaust. As difficult as it is to accept, this critique interferes with the coherence of the principle of free will. This thinking does not declare we cannot *imagine* a world in which there is no Holocaust, or no evil at all. Even Leibniz concedes that point, but he argues, "It is true that one may imagine possible worlds without sin and without unhappiness, and one could make some like Utopian romances: but these same worlds again would be very inferior to ours in goodness."{12}

In summary, our world is the consequence of the merging of God's flawlessness and liberty, though the world includes flaws. Although this established world is not flawless, it is the best possible, and so it would be unfeasible for God to build a better world or to intercede in the world to avoid or restrict pain. A great God would produce only the best. Because this is the world God formed, this is the best. This theodicy has stayed philosophically persuasive for several reasons, starting with its genuine logical and practical influence. The theodicy protects theistic flawlessness despite evil in the world because the problem of evil does not prove the theist keeps conflicting ideas that God is omniscient, omnibenevolent and omnipotent and makes a world where his creatures morally fall. Additionally, Leibniz's theodicy protects free will, which is crucial for theists who think love and worship are needed to have freedom. This too is important for Leibniz to show God cannot be ethically responsible when people choose what is evil. Also, we understand the best of all possible worlds involves the ultimate extermination of sin and suffering (achieved through Christ's earthly work in the past and in His return and rule in the future).

Leibniz's theodicy proves the steadiness of God forever

selecting the best with this world really being the best of all possible worlds, whilst meeting the atheist's challenge that a great God must be kept ethically accountable for the existence of evil. I argue the theodicy is helpful to inspire individuals to love God, to take solace from His divine providence and to urge them to use their free will to choose to pursue God. Leibniz magnifies this point:

> Whether one succeeds or not in this task, one is content with what comes to pass, being resigned to the will of God and knowing what he wills is best. When we are in this benevolent state of mind, we are not disheartened by failure, we regret only our faults, and the ungrateful way of men causes no relaxation in the exercise of our kindly disposition.{13}

Taking all this into account, we can trust God is giving us His very best with this world, and in our individual existential lives, even when we can imagine better circumstances or outcomes. This ought to give us a sense of peace and gratitude knowing our Heavenly Father is not giving us the short end of the stick in any way. He loves us and cares for us. And that free will He gave us—if we are not using it to worship Him, we need to reconsider what we're using it for.

Notes

1. This was the first book-length philosophical consideration of this problem.
2. Jill Graper Hernandez, *God and Evil: The Case for God in a World Filled with Pain*, ed. Chad Meister, James K. Dew Jr. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 95.
3. Each possibility is a new sphere, or world, of possibility that varies from the world we presently occupy. A possible world comprises an extensive idea of God's intelligence that completely explains what could have happened if that world was generated (Jeffrey K. McDonough, "Leibniz: Creation and Conservation and Concurrence," Leibniz Review [2007], 33).

4. G.W. Leibniz, “On Freedom and Spontaneity,” Academy ed., VI 4-b, 1454 in *The Shorter Leibniz Texts*, ed. Lloyd Strickland (New York: Continuum, 2006)
5. God describes everything He created as “good.” See Genesis 1.
6. Hernandez, 100.
7. G.W. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, ed. Austin Farrer, trans. E.M. Huggard (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952), II. 8.
8. Causa Dei, in *Leibniz: Monadology and Other Philosophical Essays*, ed. and trans. Paul Schrecker and Anne Martin Schrecker (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965).
9. Leibniz, Theodiy, ed. Austin Farrer, trans. E.M. Huggard (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952), I. 44.
10. Hernandez, 101.
11. *On Necessity and Contingency*, in *Samtliche schriften und breife*, ser. VI, vol. 4 (Halle, Germany: Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1923), pp. 1449-50; “Philosophical Writings”), ed. G.H.R. Parkinson, trans. M. Morris (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991), 100.
12. Leibniz, preface.
13. Ibid.

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