

***The Best Possible Subset of Possible Worlds:
A Quasi-Leibnizan Theodicy***

Abstract: In this paper I attempt to set out the first steps for a theodicy which is roughly in the tradition of Leibniz in that it affirms that our world must be in some category of "best". However, I argue not that the actual world is the best individual world, but the best kind of world. A special feature of this view is the allowance made for a more robust view of human freedom than in Leibniz' original theodicy, paving the way for a free will defense to supplement theists' justification of God in light of natural and moral evil.

I

Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz thought the actual world to be the best possible world. His belief was not a case of extreme optimism, nor was it a hypothesis based on the abundance of goodness in the world. It was simply the conclusion of what he thought a sound deductive argument. The premises were for Leibniz nearly axiomatic, and the reasoning was simple.

(1) God created the world.

(2) God must always do the best possible.

therefore,

(3) This must be the best of all possible worlds.

Let us look at this simple argument more closely, premise by premise.

The truth of (1) is underwritten in three ways for Leibniz. First, the supernatural creation of the world is a tenet of the Christian revelation and as such was fitting to be believed. Second, according to the Principle of Sufficient Reason every contingent event must have a reason for why it occurs. Since

universal contingency is absurd, there must be a necessary being. Third, the existence of a necessary being is either impossible or necessary. Since the idea of God contains no contradiction, there is a necessary being. There are objections to his reasons and insofar as they are relevant to this paper they will be considered later, otherwise they are outside the scope of this paper and will not be considered.

The truth of (2) is almost a matter of definition. Surely a maximally excellent being can do the best, and why would he not? For any two non-indifferent choices A and B where A is better than B, surely God must choose A. Leibniz suggests “one acts imperfectly if he acts with less perfection than he is capable of.”¹ If so, then given that the world exists by the creative and sustaining hand of God, we must be living in the best of all possible worlds.

But what about the enormous counter-intuitivity of such a claim? One might say this just *can't* be the best of all possible worlds, there is too much gratuitous suffering, suffering which cannot be linked to punishment or the enlightenment of the afflicted by any stretch of the human imagination. But that's just the problem, answers Leibniz. The human imagination and intellect are far too small and weak to understand the infinitely intricate plans of our omniscient and omnibenevolent creator. “To know in particular, however, the reasons which have moved him to choose this order of the universe, to permit sin, to dispense his salutary grace in a certain manner, -this passes the

¹ *Discourse on Metaphysics*, trans. George Montgomery (Open Court: LaSalle, IL, 1902), 5.

capacity of a finite mind . . .”² Thus, in a crescendo of intellectual humility our doubts are to be assuaged. But are they?

II

What if there is a valid deductive argument that this is *not* the best of all possible worlds? Consider the argument

(4) There is a possible world w_b , such that every person in w_b makes all the right choices in w_b and there is no natural evil.³

(5) w_b is the best of all possible worlds.

Let w_a be the actual world.

(6) $w_a \neq w_b$

from which it follows

(7) This is not the best of all possible worlds.

Since (3) and (7) are contradictory and yet the arguments for both are valid, there must be a problem with at least one premise. Since the premises supporting (3) have already been given a cursory analysis, let us examine the premises advanced in support of (7).

In regard to the truth of (4) consider the following. If each individual choice is such that it could be made rightly then it is possible that every choice

² *Ibid.*, 8.

³ If the reader prefers a subjunctive reading of this proposition, in accordance with the authors actualistic modal stance, it may be read: There is a world w_b , such that had it been the actual world, every person would have made all the right choices.

could be made rightly. Freedom is a counterfactual affair⁴. So the truth of (4) seems to be the logical result of instancing the proper counterfactual for any and all wrong choices with the result that the whole aggregate is composed of right choices. If it is possible for each particular choice to be made rightly, then it is possible for the sum of all those particular choices to be made rightly. This aggregate plus the absence of natural evil will be w_b .⁵

In regard to (5), what world could possibly be better than w_b ? Any other world would contain a wrong choice or choices. How could it be better for a wrong choice to be made? The very notion seems to be incoherent. But since (6) is indubitable, we are left with two valid arguments composed of apparently true premises, but contradictory conclusions. Logic dictates that there must be a falsehood in at least one of the premises of one or the other argument, so a deeper analysis is required.

III

The premise of the second argument which has been most often attacked is (5). Not all theists are agreed that a world in which there is no evil is the best possible world. Swinburne points out that

⁴ The view of freedom as consisting in having been able to have done otherwise, may be at odds with Leibniz' doctrine of preestablished harmony in which every substance necessarily moves in accordance with an inner impulse given it by God, but few contemporary theists hold this position.

⁵ In fact, there may be a whole set of worlds such that all its subjects choose rightly all the time. In this case, let W_b be the set of all such worlds and let w_b be any member of that set.

Evils give men the opportunity to perform those acts which show men at their best. A world without evils would be a world in which men could show no forgiveness, no compassion, no self-sacrifice. And men without that opportunity are deprived of the opportunity to show themselves at their noblest.⁶

We may translate Swinburne's sentiment into an argument of the form

(8) Forgiveness and many other acts of moral heroism are logically incompatible with a world in which no one makes a wrong choice and there is no natural evil.

(9) These character traits are essential elements of the best possible world.

Thus,

(10) A world in which no one makes a wrong choice and in which there is no natural evil is not the best of all possible worlds.

If (10) is true then (5) is false, and the argument for (7) fails. I think most theists today would be inclined to accept Swinburne's argument, but (3) is not off the hook. For proving that w_b is *not* the best of all possible worlds is not the same thing as proving that w_a is the best of all possible worlds. There still exists the overwhelming counter-intuitivity of (3).

The counter-intuitivity of (3) is so strong for most people, and so much philosophy is guided by faithfulness to intuition, that it simply cannot be accepted by most philosophers. After all, the world would only have to be slightly imperfect for it not to be the best. It is just beyond the intellectual

⁶ Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 215.

powers of most contemporary philosophers to believe (3). The problem is that it just seems impossible for a theist to doubt (1) or (2). Or is it?

IV

Robert Merrihew Adams has claimed that “*even if* there is a best among possible worlds, God could create another instead of it, and still be perfectly good.”⁷ Adams frames his version of (2) as

(P) If a perfectly good moral agent created any world at all, it would have to be the very best world that he could create.⁸

Adams sees only two reasons for believing (P)/(2). First, it could be an extrinsic wrong for God not to do his best. Someone could claim that God wrongs someone by not creating the best world. Second, it may be an intrinsic wrong, an imperfection in God Himself to do less than His best.

The first reason might seem easily dispatched when one realizes that antecedent to creation there exists no one to whom there can be an obligation. As Adams puts it,

The difference between actual beings and merely possible beings is of fundamental moral importance here. The moral community consists of actual beings. It is they who have actual rights, and it is to them that there are actual obligations. A merely possible being cannot be (actually) wronged or treated unkindly.

Possible people do not have rights. However, it still may be wrong to take an action even if it does not, at the time, violate anyone’s rights. I might wrong

⁷ Robert Merrihew Adams, *The Virtue of Faith* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) 51. Originally published as “Must God Create the Best?” *Philosophical Review*, 81 (1972).

you by performing an act now which will cause you harm once you do exit in the future. For example I might infelicitously vow that if I have a male child I shall name him Rupret. Clearly, the vow is a vicious act, but to whom? The child is not yet conceived, and therefore does not exist. Yet it seems that the wrongness of the vow comes in virtue of the effect it will have on a person who may exist at a later date. The analogue is the case where God chooses to create a world whose subjects are less than perfect, this is a choice which would be wrong in virtue of adversely affecting individuals who will come to exist.⁹

Against the second reason in favor of (P)/(1) Adams points out that the Judeo-Christian tradition holds *grace* as a high moral ideal. Adams defines 'grace' as "a disposition to love which is not dependent on the merit of the person loved."¹⁰ He then argues that it is inconsistent to hold grace in high regard and then to say that "it would be an imperfection to choose objects to be created and loved on any basis other than merit . . ."¹¹ Adams seems to equate belief in (P)/(1) with a sort of metaphysical semi-pelagianism in which actuality is meted out on the basis of merit. Note that if he is right about possible people not having rights he has already refuted it himself, for if possible people cannot be the objects of obligation, neither can they be the subjects of merit.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ I here assume that Plantinga has shown that the theory of transworld identity is to be preferred over the theory of worldbound individuals. Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), chap VI.

¹⁰ *Op. Cit.*, 56.

So it seems that one of the most prominent attempts by a contemporary theist to do away with (P)/(1) has failed.

The only proposition which remains to be critiqued is (1). But mustn't a theist by definition accept the supernatural creation of the world? It depends on the definition of 'creation'. Throughout most of the literature on the subject, there seems to be an assumed model of creation where God picks a member from the domain of possible worlds and actualizes it. Not all theists, though, accept this model.

V

A recent and notable example of a philosopher who does not accept the Pick and Actualize model is Peter van Inwagen. He suggests that Leibniz "might be interpreted as saying . . . God creates only 'complete' states of affairs, fully detailed ones, 'possible worlds' . . ." ¹² But van Inwagen does not see why this must be the case.

It does not seem to me to be logically or metaphysically impossible that God should decree that either X or Y should be without decreeing that X should be and without decreeing that Y should be. Suppose God does decree that *either X or Y exist*; suppose Y thereupon comes into existence. Then it is no part of God's plan that Y -as opposed to X- ,exists and the result of His decree might just as well have been the existence of X. ¹³

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹² Peter van Inwagen, *God Knowledge and Mystery*, "The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God," (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 57.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 57-58.

Although God *could* decide exactly which world He wanted actualized and actualize it, it is not *necessary* that he creates in this way.

But why *wouldn't* God create a world in such a straightforward way? I suggest that by picking a maximally complete set of states of affairs (a complete 'possible world') to actualize, God would create a world whose creatures would lack substantive freedom. Even if the concept of a possible world includes the idea of its denizens acting freely, it would be God who determines which actions are freely performed. Leibniz claims that "everything which is to happen to anyone is already virtually included in his nature or concept, as all the properties are contained in the definition of a circle . . ." ¹⁴ When this principle is applied to a particular person, we get the following result, "we must not ask why Judas sinned because this free act is contained in his concept, the only question being why Judas the sinner is admitted to existence, preferably to other possible persons . . ." ¹⁵ To this last question, Leibniz tells us, "Find your own answer." ¹⁶

Leibniz does, however, give us a framework to find our own answer. He distinguishes between two types of necessity: *absolute necessity* and necessity "*ex hypothesi*". Aquinas makes the same distinction when considering God's knowledge of future contingents. He distinguishes between "necessity of consequent," and "necessity of consequence" respectively.

¹⁴ *Discourse*, 20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

If each thing is known by God as seen by Him in the present, what is known by God will then have to be. Thus, it is necessary that Socrates be seated from the fact that he is seen seated. But this is not absolutely necessary or, as some say, with *necessity of the consequent*; it is necessary conditionally, or with *necessity of the consequence*. For this is a necessary conditional proposition: *if he is seen sitting, he is sitting*.¹⁷

The distinction is between sentences which would be symbolized as $(P \rightarrow \Box Q)$ and those which would be symbolized as $\Box(P \rightarrow Q)$. With respect to Leibniz' argument we may ask what type of necessity the proposition

(11) If Caesar exists, he crosses the Rubicon.

has. Clearly, Leibniz is attributing to it only necessity *ex hypothesi*, thus the conditional as a whole is necessary, but the consequent is not necessary.¹⁸ As for why God makes the antecedent actual, that is the question Leibniz says we can never answer. But regardless of any forthcoming answer, it still remains that both Caesar's existence and his actions are logically contingent. This is all it takes for Leibniz to be satisfied that free will is preserved in his scheme.

Ought we to be satisfied as well? I think not. For mere logical contingency is not a very robust view of freedom. There is a deeper understanding of freedom which considers the ultimate source of an individual's actions. I contend that for human freedom to be a substantive concept, it must make the individual the ultimate source of her actions. I contend further that upon Leibniz' doctrine the individual is not the ultimate

¹⁷ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Bk.1, Ch. 67., π10.

¹⁸ That is, assuming the antecedent is not necessary.

source of her actions, for in creating her God would be initiating a set of actions the course of which were necessarily entailed.

VI

Having given a reason why God would choose not to create after the Leibnizian model, let us resume the investigation of how God might otherwise create. Recall van Inwagen's concept of disjunctive creation. Rather than holding all the infinitely many possible worlds in his mind and saying, "Let *that* one be," God could, says van Inwagen, decree "Let either X or Y be." One interesting result of this model is that although he is sure "that the existence of animals made in God's image -that is, rational animals having free will and capable of love- is a part of Gods plan. [He is] simply not convinced that He had any particular species in mind."¹⁹ The type of world designated would be the best kind of world there could be, but which token example of that type becomes actual need not be specified by God. Van Inwagen offers as an analogy a husband and wife who decide to have a child, but of course having the child, it could not be suggested that they decided to have *that* child.

God's decree could amount to no more particular a proclamation than, "Let there be a species in My image and likeness." Since, there are an infinite number of such worlds, there would be an infinite number of disjuncts in the decree, so it would be easier to speak in terms of subsets of possible worlds.

¹⁹ *God Knowledge and Mystery*, 55-56.

God's decree would then amount to "Let there be an element of A," where $A \subset W$, W is the set of all possible worlds, and $A = \{w \mid w \text{ contains rational, moral agents}\}$. This model of creation would be consistent with a robust view of human freedom in which we are the co-creators of our world, actualizing it with every choice, blazing a trail through possible space. It would also lay the responsibility for evil in the world squarely on our shoulders, for although God always does his best, unfortunately we do not.

Appendix A
A List of Propositions

- (1) God created the world.
- (2) God must always do the best possible.
- (3) This must be the best of all possible worlds.
- (4) There is a world w_b , such that every person in w_b makes all the right choices and there is no natural evil.
- (5) w_b is the best of all possible worlds.
- (6) $w_a \neq w_b$
- (7) This is not the best of all possible worlds.
- (8) Forgiveness and many other acts of moral heroism are logically incompatible with a world in which no one makes a wrong choice and in which there is no natural evil.
- (9) These character traits are essential elements of the best possible world.
- (10) A world in which no one makes a wrong choice is not the best of all possible worlds.