

# This world, ‘Adams worlds’, and the best of all possible worlds

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**Abstract:** ‘Adams worlds’ are possible worlds that contain no creature whose life is not worth living or whose life is overall worse than in any other possible world in which it would have existed. Creating an Adams world involves no wrongdoing or unkindness towards creatures on the part of the creator. I argue that the notion of an Adams world is of little value in theodicy. Theists are not only committed to thinking that this world was created without wrongdoing or unkindness but also must rule out the possibility that the world might have been better had God not existed. Nor is there much reason, independent of the availability of a satisfactory theodicy, for believing that the actual world is an Adams world. The need for a theodicy constructed along Leibnizian lines, incorporating the claim that this world is the best possible, is thus reinforced.

## Introduction

An *Adams world* is a possible world in which

- (1) every individual creature is at least as happy on the whole as it would have been in any other possible world in which it could have existed;

and

- (2) no creature has a life so miserable on the whole that it would have been better for that creature had it never existed.

This notion was introduced into philosophical theology (though not under this name) by Robert Adams, in his article, ‘Must God create the best?’ (Adams 1972/1987). Adams there maintains that even if there is a best possible world, God is under no obligation to create it. If God creates an Adams world, no wrongdoing or unkindness towards creatures is involved in creation; amongst the Adams worlds, God can choose to create less than the best without displaying any other moral defect. To think otherwise, argues Adams, is to import into the Judeo-Christian

moral ideal an ethics of maximization that is foreign to it. Adams thus presents a challenge to theodicies which tie the unsurpassability of God to the unsurpassability of creation, as Leibniz's does. I respond to this challenge in the third section of this paper ('Divine grace and creation').

The notion of an Adams world has also been deployed (though not by Adams) in arguing that, provided there is no best possible world, a morally unsurpassable being can create a surpassable world (Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder, 1994/1999). If God chooses among the Adams worlds, no wrongdoing or unkindness is involved in creation, and no moral defect is involved if God's choice among Adams worlds is made at random. This argument also presents a significant challenge to Leibnizian theodicy; I address it in the first two sections of this paper.

Throughout these sections, I assume that this world is an Adams world. But in the last section I argue that, unless we already have in place a robust theodicy that offers either explanations for or justifications of some of the world's most significant evils, we have little reason to believe that this world satisfies both the conditions set out above. If I am right, the notion of an Adams world is of limited value in theodicy: it either it leaves us with all the hard work of responding theologically to evil still to do, or it presupposes that work has already been done.

### **Random choice among Adams worlds**

If this world is an Adams world, no creature has been wronged or treated unkindly: no creature's rights are violated by being granted an existence that is on the whole good; no creature is harmed by being granted an existence that is on the whole as good as it could be. But presumably some Adams worlds are better than others, so even if the avoidance of wrongdoing and acts of unkindness is the largest part of morality, there is still room left to enquire into the character of the creator.

A world is *surpassable* if some possible world is better than it. If this world is unsurpassable and also an Adams world, it is hard to see how any challenge to the perfection of its creator might be mounted. But if this world is surpassable, we must consider two possibilities, in one of which some possible world is unsurpassable and in the other of which none is. I address the second possibility in this section and the next, and the first possibility in the third section.

If there is no best world among the Adams worlds because each is surpassed by some other, God has no choice but to create a surpassable world, on pain of not creating at all. May God choose at random amongst the Adams worlds without displaying any moral defect? Leibniz, famously, answers 'No':

As in mathematics, when there is no maximum nor minimum, in short nothing distinguished, everything is done equally, or when that is not possible nothing at all is done: so it may be said likewise in respect of perfect wisdom, which is no less orderly than mathematics, that if there were not the best among all possible worlds, God would not have produced any. (Leibniz (1951), 128)

Leibniz's reason for thinking this is disarmingly simple:

Now this supreme wisdom, united to a goodness that is no less infinite, cannot but have chosen the best. For as 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 greater good; and there would be something to correct in the actions of God if it were possible to do better. (Leibniz (1951), 128)

This reasoning is unpersuasive. Were there no best among possible worlds, and God had therefore chosen not to create, it would still be possible to do better; the existence of some good world or other is better than the existence of no world at all. Leibniz intends his argument to work as a *reductio* of the supposition that there is no best among possible worlds, and he takes it for granted that any supposition that forces us to conclude that God might have done better is absurd. But what Leibniz takes for granted is just what is at issue: is it in fact absurd to suppose God might have done better?

Leibniz's reasoning is endorsed by Kant, in his lectures on philosophical theology, in a form that appears equally question-begging:

That the world created by God is the *best* of all possible worlds, is clear for the following reason. If a better world than the one willed by God were possible, then a will better than the divine will would also have to be possible. For indisputably that will is better which chooses what is better. But if a better will is possible, then so is a being who could express this better will. And therefore this being would be more perfect and better than God. But this is a contradiction; for God is *omnitude realitatis*. (Kant (1978), 137)

It is not indisputable that 'that will is better which chooses what is better'; this is precisely the claim in dispute. But Kant's formulation is helpful, for it suggests a thought-experiment that might settle the dispute: first we suppose that the world created by God is surpassable; then we imagine a being that chooses to create a world better than it; and finally we see whether incoherence results.

A version of this thought-experiment has recently been conducted by Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder, and unlike Leibniz and Kant, they find no incoherence in the claim that an unsurpassable being can create a surpassable world (Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder (1994/1999), 35–41). They ask us to imagine that Jove – a merely good but essentially omnipotent and omniscient being – is inclined to create a world. Jove first rejects a number of worlds as candidates for creation because they fail to satisfy certain criteria. For example, Jove might reject all the non-Adams worlds and all the worlds that contain gratuitous evils (Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder (1994/1999), 35). With the unacceptable worlds set aside, Jove orders the remaining worlds according to their goodness, and assigns each a positive natural number: 1 for the worst, 2 for the next worst, and so on. Jove then creates a device that will select a number at random, activates it, and creates the world that corresponds to the number selected, say World 777. According to the Howard-Snyders, there is no incoherence in this story, nor is any introduced when Jove is stipulated as being not merely good, but essentially and unsurpassably good. It is true that Jove could have done better, but this 'does nothing to impugn

his status as essentially morally unsurpassable *in any respect whatsoever*' (Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder (1994/1999), 35). For although there are decision procedures that an omnipotent being might adopt instead of using Jove's randomizing device, these procedures would either have resulted in the creation of nothing at all – a worse outcome than the creation of World 777 – or would have resulted in the creation of a better world than 777 only because of factors outside Jove's control, as happens when Juno, who is also omnipotent, uses a device like Jove's and ends up creating World 999. According to the Howard-Snyders, 'Factors outside of one's control can make a difference to how much good one brings about *without* making a difference to how good one is' (Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder (1994/1999), 37).

The Howard-Snyders' thought-experiment is puzzling in several respects. It depends upon the idea of a randomizing device, but no such device is possible if the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) holds exceptionlessly. So Leibniz and his followers are unlikely to be persuaded. Well, perhaps the PSR does not hold exceptionlessly; but then its use elsewhere in philosophical theology is problematic, and it is no longer available to underwrite the cosmological argument, or to connect omniscience and unsurpassable goodness together when giving an account of the coherence of the divine attributes.<sup>1</sup>

We must also wonder about the relation between the randomizing device and Jove's essential omnipotence, for it is odd that an essentially omnipotent being should have no control over what number the device delivers. Perhaps this is like the case of creatures with free will. It is often claimed – usually in the course of developing free-will theodicy – that it is incoherent to suppose both that God creates free creatures and that She can nevertheless control their choices: 'free' implies 'uncontrollable even by an essentially omnipotent being'. Equivalently, then, it is incoherent to suppose that Jove can create a randomizing device and yet control what number it delivers: 'random' implies 'uncontrollable even by an essentially omnipotent being'. Well, again, perhaps this is right; but it leaves rather little of the traditional notion of omnipotence, for now an essentially omnipotent being has no control over the free choices of creatures or over the outcomes of random processes. This leaves only whatever is causally determined subject to divine control. If random processes are ubiquitous, as some interpretations of contemporary physics suggest, there will be little an omnipotent being can do.

A third puzzle concerns the relation between Jove's essential omniscience and the deliverances of the randomizing device, and here there are several possibilities to consider. Suppose there are no truths about which number would be selected by any randomizing device, perhaps because there are no truths about the outcomes of any random processes until they come out. This may itself have disturbing consequences for the doctrine of divine omniscience, but here we can only note that worry and move on. On this supposition, then, Jove does not know which world he is going to select until he creates a randomizing device and it selects a

number for him. So even if the randomizing device picks World 1 we ought not, according to the Howard-Snyders, to think any less of Jove, even though he creates the very worst of the acceptable worlds. Whether this is plausible depends on how bad World 1 is, and that in turn depends upon the criteria by which unacceptable worlds are rejected before the random selection is made. If the initial screening merely removes all the non-Adams worlds, it is likely that World 1 is pretty bad – or at least pretty boring – for every lifeless world is automatically an Adams world. But perhaps the initial screening is more rigorous, excluding lifeless worlds, worlds in which there is life but no intelligent life, worlds in which there is uncompensated suffering, worlds that are unintelligible or aesthetically displeasing to their inhabitants, and so on. The tougher the screening, the more plausible it is that we ought not to think less of Jove for risking the creation of the very worst of the worlds that survives that screening. But, and by the same token, the less plausible it is that the actual world is as good as that world.

Suppose instead that there are truths about which number any particular randomizing device would select. If we are to stick with an account that requires an omniscient being to know all the truths there are, then Jove, considering any possible randomizer, knows in advance which number it will select. Here the Howard-Snyders, responding to some objections advanced by Thomas Flint, raise the question whether there might be a randomizing device that would select a higher number than any other device would select (Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder (1994/1999), 39–40). If there is such a device – a 'best randomizer' – but Jove fails to deploy it, we presumably ought to think less of Jove, for although he has no control over the number that any particular device will deliver, he knows what that number will be, and so can exercise control indirectly by deploying the best randomizer.

Could there be a best randomizer? The job of the device is to select one positive natural number out of infinitely many. If each device operates once, and Jove knows which number each will select when operated, how do these devices 'select' at all? A randomizing device is presumably one that, although it picks one particular number, say 777, nevertheless might have picked any other number instead. But given Jove's essential omniscience, it is unclear what force this 'might have' has. What difference is there between a randomizing device that Jove creates, foreknowing that it will select 777, and a device created to select the number 777? It is easy to imagine the beginnings of an answer here, and the analogies between this problem and the problem of the relation between divine foreknowledge and human freedom suggest how the answer might go on. But even if we suppose all these difficulties solved, we still face a situation in which Jove must choose between randomizers, foreknowing the number each will select. Jove could in fact order these randomizers according to the number they will select: R<sub>1</sub> is the device that selects the number 1, R<sub>2</sub> the number 2, and so on. And now we are back at the beginning of the story.

We might instead suppose that a randomizing device can be run as many times as desired, with Jove foreknowing which number it will select on each run: 777 on its first, 84,717,243,678 on its second, 3 on its third, and so on. For each device, Jove knows that there are some numbers that will never have been selected no matter how many times it has run. Is the device then truly randomizing? How are the numbers that are never selected nevertheless numbers that the device might have selected? But if there are not such numbers, how can it be choosing among infinitely many positive natural numbers? It is very hard to know what to think here. What sense does it make to transfer our normal intuitions about randomizing devices, derived as they are from surveyable cases such as tossing coins and throwing dice, to the case of a random selection among all the positive natural numbers?

Again, we can wave these problems away, and imagine that Jove confronts a choice between devices distinguished by the infinite sequence of numbers that each would select were Jove to create it and then run it infinitely many times (whatever exactly that might mean). Jove can then choose – what? The device that selects the highest number on its first run? If there is such a device, still it would seem possible to improve upon it by creating one of the other devices (or the same device) in the state that it would be in just before it selects a higher number, thus redesignating that run of that device as its first. Or should Jove choose the device that has the highest number appearing anywhere in its sequence of outputs in the state that it is in just before it selects that number? But there is no reason to suppose that there is any such device, or if there is, that is reason to suppose that the devices are not up to the job they were designed to do. The choice between randomizers, like the choice between worlds, will require a further deployment of a randomizing device. This way regress lies. Jove, in order to prevent this regress, on pain of not creating any world at all, must arbitrarily choose a device and then let it go about selecting a world to create, thus again risking the creation of the very worst of the acceptable worlds. And, of course, if Jove can arbitrarily choose a randomizing device, he can arbitrarily choose a world to create and dispense with the device altogether.

The Howard-Snyders do not think that the fact that the randomizing device is dispensable reveals any incoherence in their story, for the randomizer is merely a narrative device, serving to illustrate the point that Jove can choose amongst acceptable worlds without moral defect (Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder (1994/1999), 40). But in thought-experiments where our intuitions are thin and pliable, it is narrative devices that do most of the work, and it seems unfair to pump up our intuitions with such a device and yet expect them not to deflate when it is taken away. More to the point, if Jove is now plumping for a world arbitrarily rather than deploying a randomizing device – or plumping for a device foreknowing what number it will select – what are the ‘factors beyond Jove’s control’ that allow him to create a world worse than Juno without thereby being judged to be less good?

Leibniz, besides claiming that God would not create were there no best possible world, also claimed that God would not choose between two possible worlds that were equal in goodness (Leibniz (1956), 39).<sup>2</sup> Why could God not toss a coin, a simple example of a randomizing device? The answer is obvious: before tossing the coin, God must decide which world to assign to 'heads' and which to 'tails'. But 'before' is empty here. God foreknows how the coin will fall, so the decision of which world to assign to which face of the coin is just the original decision between the worlds again. The Howard-Snyders' thought-experiment sidesteps this problem by numbering the worlds up from the cut-off between acceptable and unacceptable worlds; the assignment of numbers to worlds is distanced from the subsequent selection of a number, and hence of a world. But Jove's foreknowledge is still problematic if there are truths about which number each randomizing device will select. If there are no such truths, or if Jove somehow sets them aside, he is risking the creation of the very worst of the acceptable worlds. And if no device is deployed at all, there are no factors beyond Jove's control to which we can point in explaining why Jove is not to be thought badly of, even though he underperforms relative to Juno.

### **Divine omnipotence and the choice among Adams worlds**

There are, then, several puzzles surrounding the Howard-Snyders' thought-experiment. Tackling them will require attention not just to the doctrine of divine goodness but also to the divine attributes of omnipotence and omniscience, and it is unlikely that the required modifications will be easily made within the confines of traditional theism. But the problems do not stop here. The Howard-Snyders' thought-experiment considers only omnipotent beings like Jove and Juno, whereas Kant refers to 'beings' in general; and they consider only the question whether creating a surpassable world is compatible with the status of a being as morally unsurpassable. In this section, I shall argue that a different sort of problem reveals itself when Jove has as a rival some less-than-omnipotent being.

In the Howard-Snyders' thought-experiment, Jove creates World 777 because 777 is the number his randomizing device delivers, whilst Juno creates World 999 because 999 is the number that her device delivers. But Juno is no better, morally speaking, than Jove, because neither has any control over what number their device will deliver. Thor, yet another omnipotent being, forgoes any device and just creates World 888. But Thor is no better than Jove either, for if creating a world better than 777 is sufficient by itself to make its creator better than Jove, Juno would be better than Jove, which she isn't. So Thor's moral superiority must consist in something else. But what? The only plausible candidate here is that Thor is better because, noticing that World 888 is better than World 777, Thor adopts some principle that forbids the creation of any world than which there is a better. And the adoption of that principle will, of course, lead not to the creation of World 888 but

to the creation of no world at all (Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder (1994/1999), 37–38).

Jove, Juno, and Thor are all omnipotent. That is why they have a hard time choosing which world to create. What about Freya, who is good, wise, and powerful but less-than-omnipotent, and hence capable of creating only some of the possible worlds? Freya needs no randomizing device, for she first weeds out the unacceptable worlds, using the same criteria as Jove, then ranks the acceptable worlds in terms of their goodness, again just as Jove does, and then creates the best world she is capable of creating, say, World 1000. If there is no incoherence in this story, we should conclude, I think, that it is most unfortunate that God is omnipotent; if She had only been less-than-omnipotent, the world might have been a good deal better.

Is Freya morally superior to Jove? Freya is doing her best, which is not true of Jove, but that is clearly something Jove can do nothing about if he is essentially omnipotent and there is no best possible world. Freya does create a world better than Jove, but if the Howard-Snyders are right, it is inappropriate to blame Jove for the deliverances of the randomizing device he creates. Nevertheless, it remains true that the world would have been better had Freya existed instead of Jove, and presumably this is true if we drop the disguise and put God in Jove's place. Whether or not Freya is to be judged morally superior to God seems beside the point here, for we have instead a different kind of absurdity, one not considered by the Howard-Snyders: that things might have been better had God not existed. This is a conclusion that every theist must reject.

One obvious place to locate incoherence in the story about Freya is in the claim that a less-than-omnipotent being might actualize any possible world at all. Creation is a privilege reserved to the omnipotent.<sup>3</sup> But on standard characterizations of omnipotence this does not follow. If omnipotence consists in the ability to do anything it is logically possible to do, omnipotence is not required to do any particular thing. Beings that can do only some logically possible things are not omnipotent, whatever the nature of the things they can do. Even if creation *ex nihilo* is the hardest thing of all to do, it does not follow that you have to be omnipotent to do it. If a strong, deductive version of the cosmological argument could be got to work, then a link between creation and omnipotence could be forged, for such an argument would show that the existence of anything contingent is impossible unless there is an omnipotent being. But such arguments are either regarded as failures or rely upon a version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason quite as strong as Leibniz's. The PSR rules out as incoherent the possibility of randomizing devices like Jove's, or any random choice between acceptable possible worlds, so the claim that an unsurpassable being can create a surpassable world cannot appeal to this principle.

Appeal to the cosmological argument would be redundant if the ontological argument could be appealed to instead. If God, defined as perfect, and hence as

omnipotent, exists necessarily, then any less-than-omnipotent being exists, if at all, only at the will of God. Freya is thus really only another randomizing device. But the ontological argument is widely regarded as a failure as well, and it is to say the least unclear whether even a successful version of it would show that the existence of any less-than-omnipotent being is impossible unless an omnipotent being exists necessarily. This is, in fact, the issue under discussion: whether it is impossible for anything contingent to exist unless there is an omnipotent God, and whether this can be shown without presupposing principles such as the PSR that render the story of random selection between possible worlds incoherent.

To recap: Leibniz thought it absurd to suppose that God might have done better than God in fact did. The Howard-Snyders, if their story is merely puzzling and not incoherent, show that this supposition is not in itself absurd. So long as God has no control over the factors that determine which world is selected, God can create a surpassable world without moral defect. But we are still owed an account of the factors that are beyond divine control once we drop the fiction of the randomizing device and allow God to plump for one of the acceptable worlds. And there remains the absurdity of supposing that some being other than God might have done better than God in fact did, a possibility that the Howard-Snyders' thought-experiment leaves entirely open. Leibniz did not have to worry about this possibility because he had in hand – or he thought he did – an argument strong enough to rule out the possibility that anything other than an essentially omnipotent being could create a world. We have no such argument in hand, and I think it will be very hard to generate one without adopting principles (like the PSR) that also rule out the possibility that an omnipotent being might choose at random amongst acceptable worlds.

Leibniz's position is remarkably stable: the ontological argument and a strong, deductive version of the cosmological argument underwritten by the PSR together deliver the conclusion that only an essentially omnipotent, omniscient, and morally unsurpassable being can create a world, and that such a being necessarily exists. The PSR also delivers the conclusion that such a being will only create an unsurpassable world. As there is a world, it must be the creation of a perfect being, and so must be unsurpassable. If we try and detach any part of this structure – for example, by claiming that this world is surpassable – we must revise the structure throughout. It will take far more than the Howard-Snyders' thought-experiment to show that this can be done satisfactorily, and within the confines of orthodox philosophical theism.

### **Divine grace and creation**

Most philosophical theologians have grave doubts about the coherence of the notion of a best possible world, and even graver doubts about whether, were there such a world, it could contain as much suffering and evil as this one. The

obvious strategy for escaping Leibniz's (and Kant's) conclusion that a perfect being would necessarily create the best possible world is to deny that there is any such world. I have argued that this strategy faces far more obstacles than is generally supposed. I have also assumed, along with the Howard-Snyders and against Leibniz and Kant, that no world is unsurpassable. But Robert Adams argues that even if some world is unsurpassable, God could create a world less good without displaying any moral defect (Adams 1972/1987). And unlike the Howard-Snyders, Adams does not make use of the notion of factors 'beyond divine control' in his argument.

The first part of Adams's argument is straightforward: provided that the world God creates is an Adams world, its creation involves no wrongdoing or acts of unkindness (Adams (1972/1987), 52–56). This seems to me right: no existing creature has any complaint against God on her own behalf if this world is an Adams world, whether or not there is a best possible world that God might have created instead. And no merely possible creature has any complaint, because merely possible creatures do not exist and so have no rights, cannot be wronged, and cannot be treated unkindly.

If no existing creature would have benefited from the creation of an unsurpassable world, and if no creature is wronged or treated unkindly by the creation of this world, what reason could we have for thinking that an unsurpassable being cannot create a surpassable world without moral defect? Adams argues that the answer to this question will be determined, in large measure at least, by what we include in the 'moral ideal' that a perfect being must satisfy. Included in the Judeo-Christian moral ideal is grace:

... a disposition to love which is not dependent on the merit of the person loved ... a gracious person sees what is valuable in the person he loves, and does not worry about whether it is more or less valuable than what could be found in someone else he might have loved. (Adams (1972/1987), 56)

With the notion of grace as part of the moral ideal in place, Adams then argues as follows:

A God who is gracious with respect to creating might well choose to create and love less excellent creatures than he could have chosen. This is not to suggest that grace in creation consists in a preference for imperfection as such. God could have chosen to create the best of all possible creatures, and still have been gracious in choosing them. God's graciousness in creation does not imply that the creatures he has chosen to create must be less excellent than the best possible. It implies, rather, that even if they are the best possible creatures, that is not the ground for his choosing them. And it implies that there is nothing in God's nature or character which would require him to act on the principle of choosing the best possible creatures to be the object of his creative powers. (Adams (1972/1987), 56–57)

The argument of this paragraph is arguably quite correct, but irrelevant. For it has nothing to do with the creation of the best possible world, but only the creation of

the best possible creatures, and these are two quite distinct issues.<sup>4</sup> How did Adams come to confuse them? Perhaps he thought that the best possible world, although it could hardly contain only the best possible creatures – for then it would be drearily uniform – must nevertheless contain at least some of them. In what else could its unsurpassable excellence consist?

But worlds are not creatures. They are, rather, collections or aggregations of them, and infinite collections or aggregations to boot. Adams earlier notes that it is unclear whether the best possible world would contain only creatures that are as happy on the whole as they would have been in any other world in which they could have existed (Adams (1972/1987), 55). It is surely at least as unclear whether the best possible world would contain any creatures that are as excellent as creatures can possibly be.

Nor is this the deepest problem here. So far, we have no reason to suppose that the notion of a most excellent creature is even coherent. Leibniz, perhaps the main target of Adams's argument, explicitly denied that there was such a thing as a best possible creature (Leibniz (1951), 249, 251). So Adams misses the Leibnizian target twice over, first by construing the moral necessity that God create the best as an obligation to create the best possible creatures, and then by supposing that this is an obligation that even an omnipotent being could fulfil. It is indeed puzzling that Leibniz denied the coherence of the notion of a best possible creature whilst maintaining the coherence of the notion of the best possible world, but I know of no good reason to suppose that the coherence of one of these notions is dependent on the coherence of the other. If there is such a conceptual dependence, then Leibniz is in trouble, for he wishes to admit one and reject the other; but I cannot see why, even if both notions are coherent, we should suppose that the best possible world would contain any of the best possible creatures. If both notions are incoherent, then Leibniz is in even deeper trouble; but so too is Adams, for the question, 'Must God create the best?' is now unaskable, whether it is the best possible world or the best possible creatures that is asked about.

Grace, as defined by Adams, is an attitude towards creatures. Could we reconstruct or reorient the notion of grace so that it encompassed God's attitude towards the world? If grace is a disposition to love persons, then no such reconstruction is feasible unless the world is itself a person, and this hardly reflects standard Judeo-Christian thinking. John's gospel does say that 'God so loved the world', but in context this can hardly be read as an endorsement of some 'world soul' as the object of God's love. The biblical perspective on creation is surely best expressed in the creation narrative in Genesis: 'And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.'

Very good, but perhaps not the best. I think Adams is right that, within a biblical perspective, the Leibnizian deduction of the unsurpassability of the world from the metaphysical perfection of its creator is out of place. But that is just because the notion of God's metaphysical perfection is also out of place here. The question

whether God must create the best is a question that does not arise within the biblical perspective at all. If we are interested in reconciling the biblical perspective with that of philosophical theism, we must have some idea how the biblical notion of grace as a disposition to love persons irrespective of merit bears on the issue of God's selection among possible worlds.

If the best possible world is not best in virtue of containing at least some most excellent creatures, in what does its bestness consist? What makes one world better than another? Leibniz says of the best possible world that it is at once the simplest and the most various; that it contains the richest phenomena, the most monads, and the greatest quantity of essence or reality; that it has the highest degree of affirmative intelligibility and universal observability; in short, that it is most harmonious.<sup>5</sup> Nearly every item on this list is puzzling in itself, and their joint affirmation is even more bewildering. But this does not matter. What does matter is that these various criteria are global rather than local, tallied at the level of entire worlds rather than at the level of the substances that compose them. Each individual substance is the object of what Leibniz calls God's *antecedent* will, which considers the goodness of each thing in itself, and wills it to exist in proportion to its goodness. But each good thing is compossible with only some others, and so it is God's *consequent* will, which considers worlds entire, that is final and decisive (Leibniz (1951), 136–138, 167–168, 185–186, 205–207, 254–255, 273).

Leibniz's distinction between antecedent and consequent will should not be confused with another, superficially similar distinction often employed in treatments of the problem of evil. In standard 'greater-good' theodicies, the existence of certain evils is justified by appeal to concomitant goods that are sufficient to outweigh the evils that make them possible, as in the case of suffering, which is the necessary condition of virtues such as endurance, pity, solace, and compassion. Leibniz does often argue this way, but such combinations of evils and their concomitant goods (or goods and their concomitant evils) are the objects of God's *mediate* rather than God's consequent will (Leibniz (1951), 189–191). It is an interesting question, but not one that can be pursued here, to what extent Leibniz's 'greatest-good' theodicy and standard greater-good theodicies coincide. But it is clear that Leibniz's picture of God's choice among possible worlds never involves the selection of creatures solely because of their goodness, independently of other and more global considerations. Leibniz's characterization of God antecedently willing creatures in proportion to their goodness does seem to conflict with the inclusion of grace in the moral ideal; but as far as God's consequent and decisive will is concerned there seems as much room for grace as in any other scenario.

### **Is this world an Adams world?**

So far, I have assumed both that this world is an Adams world and that it is surpassable. I have argued that serious questions arise concerning God's essential

goodness on the second assumption; now it is time to consider the first. In order to be an Adams world this world must satisfy two conditions:

- (1) every creature in it lives a life that is on the whole as good as it would have been in any other world in which it could have existed;

and

- (2) no creature lives a life that is on the whole so miserable that it would have been better for that creature that it not have existed at all.

Many people think it obvious that these conditions are not satisfied: some peoples' lives go much worse than they might have done; some peoples' lives are so stunted, mean, and full of suffering that existing is overall a burden rather than a benefit to them. I think the second of these responses is mostly right but the first mostly wrong; I think this world probably does satisfy the first condition for being an Adams world but probably does not satisfy the second. Some of my reasons for thinking these things derive (appropriately enough) from Adams's own writings, even though my overall view is quite different from his.

Suppose that my life is not so miserable on the whole that it would have been better for me not to have existed at all, so that condition (2) is satisfied with respect to me. In order for me to have some complaint on my own behalf concerning God's selection of this world, it must be true that my life would have been on the whole better had some other possible world been selected instead. If there is no 'trans-world identity' I can never have grounds for such complaint, for I would not have existed had any other world been actual. With no trans-world identity, every world automatically satisfies (1). Leibniz rejected trans-world identity, holding that the complete concept of any created substance is tied to just this world. Possible, but non-actual, created substances also have complete concepts, and these are similarly tied to just one possible world. Thus no substance that exists according to one possible world exists according to any other.<sup>6</sup>

Modal realists like David Lewis also reject trans-world identity (Lewis (1986), ch. 4). Modal judgements are explained in terms of 'counterpart theory', according to which it is true that I might have had better hand-eye co-ordination only in the sense that there is a possible world in which someone who closely resembles me in many other relevant respects – one of my counterparts – can play ping-pong and catch a cricket ball better than I can. But my counterpart is not me, so I would not have been better off if the world in which my counterpart exists had been actual instead of this one.<sup>7</sup>

Neither Leibniz's complete concept theory of substance nor modal realism command widespread support. But those who accept trans-world identity will still find it difficult to defend the claim that (1) is not satisfied in this world. Possible worlds that differ significantly from ours – ones with different fundamental physical laws or different initial conditions at the time of the Big Bang, for example – are

unlikely to contain any of the creatures that are contained in this world. In possible worlds that resemble ours more closely, we may begin to get some overlap in types of creatures, but as each of us owes our existence to the occurrence of very many prior evils, it still remains unlikely that any existing creature would have existed in a world that, for example, contained no disease or war, or contained less horrible diseases or less terrible wars. My own maternal grandparents would almost certainly not have met had it not been for the Great War; my parents would very probably neither have met nor married had not my paternal grandfather died when my father was an infant. Similar things are true of everyone.

That we owe our existence to prior evils is true, but is it necessarily true? Why could God, being omnipotent, not have created a world in which just the same creatures would have existed as in the actual world, but in which those creatures would not have existed as a consequence of prior evils? Where is the impossibility in that? Well, perhaps there is none, if it is some bare logical or metaphysical impossibility that is being asked about. But Adams is surely right to observe that:

What we are attached to in ourselves, in a reasonable self-concern, is not just our bare metaphysical identity, but also projects, friendships, and at least some of the most important features of our personal history and character. If our lives are good, we have the same sort of reason to be glad we have had them rather than lives that would have been even better but too thoroughly different, as we have to be glad that we exist and not better and happier people instead of us. (Adams (1979/1987), 73–74).

This observation is cold comfort when we consider the evils that befall us in the present, when the richer identity that is the object of reasonable self-concern is already established, or when we contemplate the evils that threaten us and others in the future. But the fact that (1) is satisfied is not by itself meant to provide a complete solution to the problem of evil. It is intended only to deflect the claim that, by selecting this world to create, God has wronged any existing creature. It is a different, and open, question whether this world is such that an unsurpassably good being could create it without displaying some other kind of moral defect.

What about (2)? Were this condition satisfied, no creature would live a life that is overall not worth living. This is very hard to believe if we restrict our attention to the biological lifespan of creatures. Some creatures, including some humans, live short and stunted lives that are so full of pain and so deprived of pleasure that it is difficult to conceive of their existence as anything other than a burden to them. It is easier to believe that (2) is satisfied if creatures enjoy a pre-natal and/or post-mortem existence that provides an opportunity for the miseries of their post-natal, pre-mortem existence to be justified or redressed. Belief in life after death is one of the components of traditional theistic faith. So if there are good reasons to accept theism as a whole, or good reasons to believe in life after death independently of the need to save the appearance of God's goodness, perhaps it is reasonable to believe that (2) is satisfied.

Whether there are good reasons to accept theism as a whole is not an issue that can be addressed here. Nor are the complex topics of reincarnation and life after death. But what can be noted is that, though it is relatively easy to believe that (1) is satisfied, and possible to believe that (2) is satisfied if we have other reasons for believing in life before birth and/or after death, it is hard to believe that these conditions are jointly satisfied. The best reasons that we have for denying that existing creatures would have lived lives that were overall better had God selected another world instead of this one are reasons that rely on distinguishing between bare metaphysical identity and the richer identity that is the object of reasonable self-concern. I find these reasons compelling. But very similar considerations suggest that life before birth and/or after death – presumably an existence conducted under quite different conditions from those that govern my present existence and establish my identity – would bear as little relation to my present life as would the life of a person barely metaphysically identical to me. The point can be overstated as a dilemma: either reasonable self-concern is restricted to existence under conditions that closely resemble those that obtain in my present existence, in which case (1) is satisfied but not (2); or self-concern can encompass existence under conditions that are dramatically different from those that obtain in my present existence, in which case (2) may be satisfied, but not (1). For what is post-mortem existence, free of frustration and failure, sadness and suffering, if not a life that is 'better but too thoroughly different' from the life that I presently lead? Or if it is better but not too thoroughly different, how is it that my life could not have been overall better without ceasing to be meaningfully mine?

Genuine dilemmas leave us impaled on one horn or the other, with no escape possible over, under or between. Here, by contrast, there is plenty of room for manoeuvre. Within the wider context of theodicy, it may well be possible to relieve the tension between the conditions that underwrite reasonable self-concern and the conditions that must obtain if life after death is to do the work of ensuring that every creature lives a life that is overall worth living. For example: free-will theodicies allow creatures to live lives that are not worth living provided that this is a consequence of their own free choices; 'soul-making' theodicies tie together pre- and post-mortem existence in a way that is developmental, rather than merely compensatory; doctrines of reincarnation involve causal continuities between successive lives that may help either explain or justify evils that occur in some of those lives in terms of events that occur in others. But the need to seek a wider theological context in order to render remotely credible the claim that this world is an Adams world shows that, independently of that wider context, the claim makes no real contribution to theodicy. That the creation of this world involves no wrongdoing or acts of unkindness on the part of the creator is something we can believe only if we already have in place a theodicy that makes sense of evil in theological terms. It is not something that any theist can reasonably present as an independent element within their overall response to the problem of evil.

The claim that this world is an Adams world might still be a necessary element in any theodicy, even if it carries no independent argumentative force. But need theism carry this commitment? Is it really a condition on believing that the world is the creation of an unsurpassable being that the world contain no creature whose life is not worth living? If so, then anyone who believes that some creatures do live such lives is precluded from believing in an unsurpassable creator. I argued above that very many puzzles and difficulties confront the view that the creator is unsurpassable whilst creation is not. One obvious way of evading those puzzles and difficulties is to claim that both creator and creation are unsurpassable; to claim, in other words, that this is the best of all possible worlds. Suppose we accept this claim: need it follow that this world satisfy either one of the conditions for being an Adams world? Leibniz, because he denied trans-world identity, believed that every existing creature lived a life that was as good as it could possibly be. If we admit trans-world identity, we must admit the possibility that, even though this is the best possible world, it contains some creatures whose lives would have been overall better if some other, worse world had been created instead. But so long as those creatures live lives that are overall good, this seems compatible with the unsurpassable goodness of the creator, for who can reasonably demand that things go worse overall in order that things be better for them?

The second condition on being an Adams world is much harder to waive. If the world contains creatures that live lives not worth living, these creatures have a complaint against the creator: their existence is overall a burden rather than a benefit to them. There may be nothing that the creator can do in the way of redressing this complaint, for perhaps, at least with respect to these particular creatures, (1) is satisfied and there is no world in which they would have existed and lived lives that were overall better. Perhaps there is no world in which any of these creatures would have existed and lived lives that were overall worth living. Or perhaps there are such worlds, but they contain as many or more other creatures that live lives not worth living. But even if all these things are true, the creatures who live lives that are not worth living in this world have been harmed. A harm that could not have been avoided without doing even greater harm is still a harm.

If anything could justify such harm, and so reconcile these creatures with their creator (or reconcile us to the creator on their behalf), it would be the fact that the world, even though it contains such miserable lives, is nevertheless as good as it could possibly be. At the beginning of this paper, I suggested that if this world is unsurpassable and is also an Adams world, no serious challenge to the goodness of the creator can be mounted. Here I am suggesting that even if this world is not an Adams world, the consequent still follows. I have argued that if the world is an Adams world but not unsurpassable, the challenge to God's goodness remains a real one. Together, these claims again suggest that theodicy has no real interest in the answer to the question, 'Is this world an Adams world?', for everything

that is of interest must either be settled before we can answer this question or remains unsettled when we have answered it.

It is, of course, extremely hard to believe that the world is as good as it could possibly be, even if the truth of this belief would allow us to reconcile the unsurpassable goodness of God with the fact that some creatures live lives that are not worth living. So why prefer this route to reconciliation rather than the more straightforward and well-trodden path that denies there are any such lives, because they will all be made better hereafter? I am not sure how much there is to say here except to reiterate that so long as this world is surpassable, the unsurpassability of its creator remains questionable; and to express a preference, when confronted by horrifying evils, for a theodicy that is mute, neither offering explanation nor proffering compensation. I do not think we can account for evil in the way that greater-good theodicies suggest, finding for each instance of evil some countervailing good of which it is the necessary condition. I do not see how lives that are miserable under the conditions that prevail in this world can be made good by continuing under conditions that are thoroughly different, unless the arguments in favour of the claim that this world satisfies (1) are unsound.

Leibniz believed in a 'perfect harmony ... between the physical realm of nature, and the moral realm of grace; that is, between God considered as designer of the machine of the universe, and God considered as monarch of the divine city of minds' (Leibniz (1998), 280). That some creatures live lives that are not worth living seems utterly at odds with such harmony. The more esoteric elements of Leibniz's metaphysics provided him with the resources to dispel the appearance of conflict, for in his system every creature has a dominant entelechy which is naturally indestructible, so that birth is only 'unfolding and growth', death only 'enfolding and diminution' (Leibniz (1998), 278), and everything is pre-arranged so as to ensure that sins 'bring along with them their own punishment through the natural order, and in virtue of the mechanical structure of things themselves' (Leibniz (1998), 280–281). It is hard to imagine these sorts of claims commanding widespread assent. But another aspect of Leibniz's system, recently emphasized by Donald Rutherford and Christia Mercer (Rutherford (1995), especially chapter 2; Mercer (2001), 215–216, 243–244), is perhaps more easily assimilated. Leibniz thought that pleasure, happiness, pure love of God, and the harmony of the world were all closely related:

Since God is the most perfect and the happiest, and therefore the most lovable, of substances, and since *true pure love* consists in being in a state which enables one to take pleasure in the perfections and the happiness of the person one loves, it follows that when God is its object love must give us the greatest pleasure of which we are capable. ... And quite apart from our present pleasure, nothing could be more useful to us for the future, for here too the love of God satisfies all our hopes. It leads us in the path of supreme happiness, because in virtue of the perfect order established in the universe

everything is made the best possible, both for the general good and for the greatest particular good of those who are aware of it and who are content with the government of God. (Leibniz (1998, 265–266)

There is surely something right in the thought that contemplation and love of God, and of the world God has chosen, is one of the chief satisfactions of the religious life. On this view, it is a mistake to think that the perfection of the world is a function of the amount of happiness it contains; genuine happiness is consequent upon perfection and not constitutive of it. When God is the object of pure love, the lover is thereby made happy. The world is similarly a source of happiness provided that we are aware of its perfect order and so are content with the government of God. The best possible world is not best in virtue of containing the most happiness, but contains the most happiness in virtue of being best. Perhaps only Leibniz could have been quite so confident that metaphysical speculation was itself the source of happiness, and that the harmony of the world thus ensured the happiness of all those creatures who opened their minds to it. But it is hard to imagine any more satisfactory resolution of the apparent conflict between the unsurpassable goodness of God and the manifest imperfections of the world that remains within the confines of an orthodox philosophical theology.<sup>8</sup>

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## Notes

1. For the reliance of deductive forms of the cosmological argument on the Principle of Sufficient Reason, see William Rowe *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction* (Belmont CA: Wadsworth, 1978) ch. 2 (repr. in Stump and Murray *Philosophy of Religion: The Big Questions*, 84–93).
2. Leibniz's claim that God will not choose in cases of 'indifferent advantage' is discussed in my 'West or best? Sufficient reason in the Leibniz-Clarke correspondence', *Studia Leibnitiana*, Band XXVIII/I (1997), 84–92.
3. This point is made by E. R. Kraemer, in 'Is the best really necessary?', *Analysis*, 50 (1990), 42–43.
4. The same confusion between best possible parts of a world and the best of all possible worlds is also to be found in George Schlesinger's 'DDS solution' to the problem of evil; see *idem* 'The problem of evil and the problem of suffering', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 1 (1964), 244–247; *idem Religion and Scientific Method* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1977), chs 9–10; *idem A New Perspective on Old-Time Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 53–76. I discuss Schlesinger's approach to the problem of evil in 'Satisfied pigs and dissatisfied philosophers: Schlesinger on the problem of evil', *Philosophical Investigations*, 16 (1993), 212–230.
5. For a summary of Leibniz's account of the best possible world, see David Blumenfeld 'Perfection and happiness in the best possible world', in N. Jolley (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Leibniz* (Cambridge and New York NY: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 382–410. For more detailed accounts, see Rutherford (1995), esp. chs 2, 3, 7, and 8; Mercer (2001), esp. parts 3 and 4.
6. If Leibniz held 'radical world-apart', the thesis that for each created substance, it is metaphysically possible that only it and God exist, then it is not true that every possible substance is tied to just one possible world. For discussion of this issue, see Robert C. Sleigh, Jr *Leibniz and Arnauld: A Commentary on Their Correspondence* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 180–182.
7. Lewis's view is that every possible world exists, though only one world – ours – is actual; 'actual' functions indexically, meaning 'this-worldly'. The only way there could be 'trans-world identity' on this view would be if someone was part of more than one world. See Lewis (1986), 192 ff.
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