

Kant and Leibniz on the Singularity of the Best of All Possible Worlds  
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“This is necessarily the best of all possible worlds.” This is what metaphysical optimism tells us. The doctrine which has its roots in Plato’s *Timaios* (28a-29c) leans on the axiom of an all-knowing, all-powerful, and benevolent God. If there were a better world than the one we are now in, God would notice it and he has the power to create that world instead of this one. And because God is supremely good, he would also do it for the simple reason that it would be a better world. But since he has created this world and not another one, it is clear that there cannot be a better world than this one.

In his classic work on optimism, *Essais de Theodicée*, or *Theodicy*, (1710) Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz declares that God knows all possibilities. For this reason we cannot know everything about the universe and we just have to believe that everything that happens, happens for the best. The English poet and satirist Alexander Pope proclaimed in his *Essay of Man* (1733-34), “Whatever is, is right!”<sup>1</sup> Because we cannot doubt God’s nature, there is no reason to suspect his motives or deeds.

Metaphysical optimism was not to everyone’s taste. French philosopher François-Marie Arouet, better known as Voltaire wrote in the margin of his friend’s Pope book, “What can I hope for if everything is right?”<sup>2</sup> In his novel *Candide* (1759) the philosopher Pangloss, representing Leibnizianism, is presented as a simple caricature of a metaphysical optimist who cannot find any faults in the present state of things. The main character Candide cannot help, however, asking himself after a series of shocking experiences, If this is the best possible world, I wonder what the others are like?

### God’s Problems in Choosing the Best World

According to Leibniz, one should try to find a necessary, eternal, and intelligent substance behind everything we perceive. This substance must have an infinite understanding which

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<sup>1</sup> In Maynard Mack, *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, volume III i, Methuen, London, 1950, p. 166.

<sup>2</sup> Watt, Kathleen (2005), ““Candide” or, Cautiously Optimistic” <http://www.kewatt.com/Candide.html> (accessed 11.3.2009).

can choose rationally from several options, not only a will which randomly chooses one possible option it finds pleasing. In addition, the substance requires infinite power which realizes the option the intellect chooses. This substance, or God, chooses one and only one among all possible worlds and realizes it. In his deliberation, this world exists only as a possibility, not as an actuality.

The theory includes some difficult internal problems. Besides the problem of evil, one soon encounters the problem of God's free will. From the perspective of metaphysical optimism, however, there is still one, even more fundamental problem: why is it necessary that there is a *best* world? Wouldn't a good world suffice?

Leibniz thinks not. The reason for this lies in the intelligibility of the world. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century a new way of thinking arose among the Arab Aristotelians. They thought that there exists several simultaneous possible worlds and that what happens in one, does not necessarily happen in another.<sup>3</sup> Leibniz adapted this model, which gave him the opportunity to argue that God's choice is based on his wisdom, not blind willing. Leibniz was an ardent opponent of voluntarism from an early age and could not accept the kind of arbitrariness of God's willing it professed.<sup>4</sup> The world has to be understandable to us, one has to be able to conceive it through God's essence (G VI, 252, VII, 301, 356 & 365<sup>5</sup>).

But why did Leibniz not try to argue harder to justify his claim that there can be one and only one best world? As we will see, Kant challenged his view and argued that his theory leaves open the possibility that there can be two equally good worlds. It appears as if for Leibniz the matter was self-evident. How could God choose a less than perfect world (although the option is open to him)? Perhaps Leibniz's work with mathematics affected his view – the situation is like an equation where there is only one possible solution. Thus the sufficient reason for God's choice is the perfection of the best world. Another difficulty related to the problem is that Leibniz did not, as far as I know, argue anywhere on behalf of the coherence of the concept of the best world. Can the best world be defined in some way or is it the best only because it is actual, chosen by God, and the one we witness every day? Leibniz's view seems to be the latter.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Sven K. Knebel, "Leibniz, Middle Knowledge, and the Intricacies of World Design" *Studia Leibnitiana* 28 (1996), 2, 199-210.

<sup>4</sup> See Leibniz, *Meditationes sur la notion commune de la justice*, in G. W. Leibniz, *Rechtsphilosophisches aus Leibnizens Ungedruckten Schriften*, Hrsg. von Georg Mollat, Robolsky, Leipzig, 1885.

<sup>5</sup> I use the abbreviation G for G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophischen Schrifte I-VII*, Hrsg. von C. I. Gerhardt, Olms, Hildesheim, 1961 (1875-1890).

<sup>6</sup> See David Blumenfeld, "Is the Best Possible World Possible?" *Philosophical Review* 84 (1975), pp. 163-177.

## Kant's defense of optimism

In his early lecture note *Versuch einiger Betrachtungen über den Optimismus* (1759) a young supporter of metaphysical optimism called Immanuel Kant tested this Leibnizian optimism by posing some counter-arguments against it only to falsify them.<sup>7</sup> The background for Kant's writing was the furious debate concerning optimism, featuring, among others, Bayle, Le Clerc and in Germany Crusius and Reinhard (WM, Iv).<sup>8</sup> Kant's arguments were very proficient and they were to be repeated later (usually without reference to Kant) in several commentaries on Leibniz.

Kant's first argument against optimism says that the concept of the most perfect world is incoherent in the same way that the concepts of the fastest possible speed or the greatest possible number are incoherent. They do not represent any real idea (as Leibniz had already pointed out in his memoir *Meditationes de coginitio, veritate et ideis*, 1684). According to Kant, there is, however, a kind of limit value which distinguishes the created world from the infinite God. In God there is the greatest amount of reality and the reality of the created world is necessarily limited (AA 02: 32f). Kant's second argument says that it is possible that there exists two or more equally perfect worlds of which one cannot be held to be more perfect than the other (Kant 1905, 30). Thus there cannot be singularly best world.

Kant answers these objections with an argument which he mentions is evidently new. First, the absolute perfection of a being is to be identified with the degree of its actuality or reality.<sup>9</sup> The more perfect the world, the greater the degree of reality there is in it. Two realities cannot be separated from each other as such – one can only claim that there is present in one something which is not present in the other. Were they equally perfect in each respect (the sum of realities were identical), they would be one and the same world by virtue of Leibniz's principle of the identity of indiscernibles. And this would lead to the problem of Kant's second counter-argument.

This is why Kant argues that possible worlds should be thought of in terms of their negative attributes – they differ from each other only through their negations. Realities differ

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<sup>7</sup> In his later writing *Über das Mißlingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodizee* (1791) Kant rejects the possibility of metaphysical optimism, since it surpasses the necessary limits of our understanding. However, we can still believe that this is the best of all possible worlds through moral theology. Kant, *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*, trans. and ed. Allen W. Wood & Gertrude M. Clark, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1978, 131f.

<sup>8</sup> Kant, *Theoretical philosophy, 1755-1770*, trans. and ed. David Walford ja Ralf Meerbote. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992. I will use the abbreviation WM for this edition.

<sup>9</sup> This stance is adapted from Crusius, a critic of metaphysical optimism. WM, 72, n. 6.

from each other not by quality, but by quantity (AA 02: 31). In an unpublished manuscript from about the same time, (*Meditation*) 3704, Kant argues as follows:

The principal rule for the perfection of the world is that it is final in the greatest possible respect, that everything which is possible exists, and that nothing, which has the possibility to exist, lacks either from the great chain of being or from the boundless changes which they go through: the greatest deficiency which a world might possibly have is non-existence in some of its parts. (WM, 80f)<sup>10</sup>

Thus the world can be evaluated by the amount of existence it has. The more non-existence in the world, the worse it is. Thus realities in possible worlds differ from each other only in respect to quantity and not quality, because the crucial factor is what the world lacks, not what it features. Two different worlds can never have the same degree of reality and there cannot be two worlds which would be equally good and equally perfect since there is something in the other which the other lacks. There can only be one best world which has the greatest sum of reality. This world is finite, however, because it is created – in other words, it is the best finite world that is possible.

Later in the note Kant offers an alternative solution which leads to the same truth and is equally valid, although less scholarly. In this argument this world is possible because it is real, and it is real because it has been produced by the most wise and benevolent choice. Since God's judgment never fails, it follows that this world is in fact the best (AA 02: 34). God could have created a worse world, but because God is supremely good and all-knowing, he decided to create this world which we live in. Because everything in God is real, the world which has most reality (and which harmonizes with his own reality), appeals to his wisdom and goodness and causes it to be chosen and created (AA 02: 34).

Kant's alternative solution is essentially the same that can be found in Leibniz's and Pope's classical formulation of metaphysical optimism. In this argument God sees directly the world which has the highest degree of reality and chooses it to be realized. One must note, however, that in the background there is constantly the hypothesis that there can only be one possible

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<sup>10</sup> "Die vornehmte Regel der Vollkommenheit der Welt ist, dass sie [so] im höchsten Grade vollständig sey, das alles dasen, was möglich ist und dass weder in der Kette der Wesen noch in der Manigsaltigkeit ihrer Abänderung etwas fehle, welches nur des Daseyns fähig ist; denn es ist vor die Welt überhaupt sein grösser Gebrechen, als das Nichts in irgend einem ihrer Theile." (AA 17: 235)

world which has the most reality and the least deficiencies. Thus Kant seems to think that God's will is directed to the world which has the least non-existence.

### *Kant's legacy*

Kant's writing on optimism is interesting both in itself and because one can find its main arguments in recent scholarly work on Leibniz. For example, David Blumenfeld and Donald Rutherford both interpret Leibniz saying that in the best of all possible worlds there is the most of everything – it has the maximal number of logically compatible possibilities and because of that, it has the most beauty, goodness etc.<sup>11</sup> According to their quantitative theory, God's understanding is fixed to the point that in the best world the best laws produce the greatest amount of goodness and beauty and the greatest number of perceptible phenomena. The more stuff there is in the world, the more it has essence and reality. In its essential parts Blumenfeld's and Rutherford's theory is the same as Kant's first solution although their starting-point is in Leibniz's formulations where he describes this world as the "richest" and having the "greatest amount of variety within the greatest order" and so on. Thus they are seemingly unaware of Kant's suggestion. In addition, Rutherford emphasizes the continuity of the world which is the determining law of creation. As one can see in the citation above, this view also has a Kantian flavor.

However, there is a basis for another kind of interpretation in Leibniz's writings. Nicholas Rescher and George Gale argue that Leibniz's real view is that God's choice is morally necessitated by the quality of the best world – it is a world in a sense that it includes a whole lot of stuff, but it is not necessary that it includes the maximum amount of beings in an absolute sense.<sup>12</sup> In other words, this best world is optimal in the sense that everything is in perfect harmony but that does not necessarily mean that God would have to create everything that is logically compatible. Of this world one can say, according to Rescher and Gale, that it is the richest and it has the greatest order with the greatest amount of phenomena – it differs from the quantity theory in that these parameters do not have to be maximal. The optimum between simplicity of laws and richness of phenomena produces a harmonious whole where the balance between these properties gives rise to the greatest degree of reality. Understood in this manner, the qualitative theory fits well with Kant's second solution. God chooses an

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<sup>11</sup> See Blumenfeld, "Perfection and happiness in the best possible world," in Nicholas Jolley (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Leibniz*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, pp. 382-410 and Rutherford, *Leibniz and the Rational Order of Nature*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Rescher, *Studies in Leibniz's Cosmology*. Ontos, Heusenstamm 2006 and Gale, "Leibniz on Metaphysical Perfection, Physical Optimality, and Method in Physics; or, a real tour de force," <http://cas.umkc.edu/philosophy/gale/glenn.doc> (2002; accessed 11. 3. 2009).

optimum which has the greatest degree of reality.

The defining concept in both of these theories is reality. In his pre-critical period Kant's view of reality was very different from that in his critical period when he found out (after learning about Hume's views) that metaphysical reality cannot be known in itself, independently of our phenomenal experiences. The background to his pre-critical view was a long tradition, starting with Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. In this tradition the substance always has more reality than its accident. Reality is an objective metaphysical property through which the essence of the world can be defined.

Kant's idea of reality as a quantitative attribute is more or less his own invention, as he notes in his writing, although there are scholastic predecessors who thought that reality is an affirmative predicate of a thing. The view seems peculiar, though. Let us think, for example, that we have two very perfect worlds and one includes gold, but not silver and the other one includes silver but not gold. Usually gold is regarded as more valuable than silver – in other words, it seems obvious that the former world is better than the latter one. What if we suppose, in addition, that in the silver world there is one more species of mosquitoes than in the gold world, but they are otherwise continuous and equally rich with respect to phenomena. Would this one species automatically make the silver world a more real world than the gold world which has one less species of mosquitoes? Will God choose not to create gold because of one species of mosquitoes? The only reason why he would not sacrifice one species of mosquitoes is to make sure that the continuum in the world is not disturbed, but one can easily argue that sacrificing one species of mosquitoes is better than not to create gold at all.

Leibniz himself was never very clear on the matter. His most well-known articulation concerning the quantity of beings is the following: "God creates as much being as he can, and what drives him to find simple laws is the need to find space for as many beings as can be created in the same time (G I, 331). According to supporters of the quantitative theory, this means that in the best world all that matters is maximality. The description can, however, be understood as a description of God's effort to create a qualitatively best world which is as harmonious as possible. In other words, it includes as many beings as possible with respect to their mutual compatibility. The number of beings depends on the laws. When laws and phenomena are in perfect harmony, the number of beings does not really matter that much. This does not mean, of course, that there would not be a great deal of beings.

To my mind, the problem with the quantitative theory is that the best world is thought of as finite, existing as a whole in the same manner as in Kant. God's creation is seen as less

perfect than its creator in a similar manner as accident is seen as less perfect than substance. However, Leibniz does not necessarily think this way. In his view, God compares different compatible wholes, or worlds, in his understanding and chooses the one he thinks is best and then realizes it. Thus the world is a logical option, not something which exists before it is chosen and realized. Among these possible worlds may be one which is potentially maximal in the sense that the substances which form it can develop to perfection, or in other words, their perceptions can become maximally clear and distinct. Thus the possible world can be potentially maximal even though it would not be that absolutely when it is created. The all-knowing God can see the whole history of a possible world by analyzing the substantial forms which form it and thus know which world will be the best, taken its whole course.

When we discuss worlds in the Leibnizian manner, they cannot be short of infinity in any way. Even though one might allow that the created world is less real or less perfect than its creator, it is nevertheless infinite. Leibniz himself points this out in *Theodicy* where he in fact anticipates Kant's writing on optimism:

Someone will say that it is impossible to produce the best [world], because there is no perfect creature, and that it is always possible to produce one which would be more perfect. I answer that what can be said of a creature of a particular substance, which can always be surpassed by another, is not to be applied to the universe, which, since it must extend through all future eternity, is an infinity."<sup>13</sup>

To conclude, I find Kant's first solution (which is founded on the amount of reality) problematic. What about his second suggestion? If we think, following the qualitative theory of Rescher and Gale, that Leibniz's faith in the simpleness and self-evidence of the concept of the best world is founded on the view that there is only a unique, overwhelming optimum available to God which contains the greatest degree of reality, we soon end up with Kant's second solution, according to which the choice is simple or "subjective." However, as I have indicated, this choice is not arbitrary because Kant seems to think that God would choose the world with the least non-existence. Thus his second solution is also in fact quantitative by nature and consequently problematic. Leaving this fact aside, we can note that his second solution represents a species of Leibnizian metaphysical optimism. This leads us to our

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<sup>13</sup> G VI, 232; Leibniz, *Theodicy* (trans. Huggard), Open Court, La Salle, 1985, p. 249; see also Rescher, *Studies in Leibniz's Cosmology*. Ontos, Heusenstamm 2006, p. 79.

original problem of which we can say that although the doctrine of metaphysical optimism may be regarded as logically unsatisfactory, it is a theologically believable solution, at least in the framework of early eighteenth-century thought. Perhaps for this reason Kant thought that it was useful to present it in his lecture.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>I would like to thank Professor Olli Koistinen for bringing Kant's lecture note to my attention and Godfrey Weldhen for language revision.