

Handout4

This Actual World is the Best of All Possible Worlds!

Leibniz's proof for the thesis that this actual world is the best of all possible worlds can be found in the Monadology, paragraphs 36-58. Unfortunately, this version of the proof (there are others¹) is rather compressed and hard to follow. So I will try to spell it out more explicitly below.

As I read it, the proof has three phases: (I) an a posteriori argument that God exists as the cause of the world, (II) an a priori argument that God exists as the source of all eternal possibilities ("possible worlds") and truths, and (iii) an argument that this actual world is necessarily the best of all possible worlds.

Phase (I)

(1) Guided by the principle of sufficient reason, we can ask of each and every entity or event, what is its reason?

(2) This line of questioning can be pushed backwards from present effects to prior causes, and to the causes of those causes, until we ask it of the entire world: what is its reason? Why does the world exist, rather than nothing?

(3) Since the world as a whole also needs a sufficient reason, a single being must exist as the sufficient reason for the world.

(4) And that being is a necessary being. For while the world is metaphysically contingent (it might or might not have existed), the world's reason must itself be metaphysically necessary: it must exist unconditionally, and depend for its existence on nothing else. The very nature of this being (its essence) entails its existence.

(5) The being which is both a sufficient reason for the world and a necessary being is what we call "God." Such a being must be perfect because it contains the maximum amount of reality.

Phase (II)

(6) Assuming the world to exist on the basis of its sufficient reason (God), we can ask the further question: Why is the world this way rather than some other way?

(7) This directly implies that the world could have existed in another way, giving rise to the idea of a merely possible world as opposed to the actual world.

¹Leibniz's essay, "On the Ultimate Origination of the Universe," in Leibniz: *Monadology and Other Essays*, trans. P. Schrecker and A. Schrecker (Indianapolis, IN: Hobbs-Merrill, 1965, pp. 84-94, gives a somewhat clearer version of the proof. Also in that collection the essay, "A Vindication of God's Justice," pp. 114-145, contains Leibniz's responses to many of the most obvious criticisms.

In addition, there are four good reasons to think that there are possible worlds?

- (a) They are required for human freedom: I could have done otherwise than I did (in another possible world).
 - (b) They are required for the truth of counterfactuals: Socrates could have been taller than he was (in another possible world).
 - (c) They are needed for imaginative speculation: There could have been a winged horse (in another possible world).
 - (d) They are needed for the concept of eternal or necessary truth: for a truth (say, that $2+2=4$) to be necessary is for it to obtain under every conceivable set of circumstances (i.e., in all possible worlds).
- (8) Since there is clearly an infinite number of possible worlds, and since something must be the sufficient reason or ground for all possibilities and necessary truths, and since only a being with maximal reality (i.e., God) could function as this ground, it follows that God must exist.

Phase (III)

(9) Assuming that there are possible worlds, and that God is the source of all possibilities, what can we say about the nature of the actual world?
We begin by making three assumptions.

- (a) First, we assume that God exists (proved twice Above).
- (b) Secondly, we assume that God created this actual world (also proved above).
- (c) Thirdly, we assume that God is all-powerful, all-good, and all-knowing (this follows directly from God's perfection).

(10) This leads directly to three results, namely three logical constraints on god's nature:

- (a) First, She is under a constraint to create; this follows from her power and goodness (She cannot remain merely potential).
- (b) Secondly, Although She is under a constraint to create, She cannot create another perfect being. For this would violate the principle of identity.
- (c) Thirdly, because She is all-good, She will necessarily choose the best when she creates.

(11) Now the total set of all possible worlds can be ordered in the following way: we rank each world according to its total goodness (its quantity of perfection or essence).

(12) Notice, moreover, that not everything is "compossible" In each world. If in one world I take first prize in a certain contest, then necessarily no one else can also be a winner of that contest in that world.

‘Strictly speaking, a given possible world is defined by Leibniz as a maximally consistent set of complete individual concepts or “essences,” each of which completely defines a possible monad. [And you might get me to explain just what all that means.]

(13) Because God must create, because God cannot create another perfect being, and because God will choose the best (see step (10) above), She will necessarily choose the imperfect possible world with the greatest amount of compossible perfection in it, to be the actual world.

Such a world will have a certain amount of relative imperfection: for nothing created by God can be absolutely perfect (by step (13)); and not everything is compossible in a given world (by step (12)). But, overall, the world chosen by God must be the best there can be.

(14) But THIS world (my world, the one in which I exist now as a thinking being) is the actual world. (15)

Necessarily, then, THIS ACTUAL WORLD is the best of all possible worlds!

****How to go about criticizing the proof? Here is a two-part suggestion: first, criticize each phase of the proof separately; secondly, in any given phase, concentrate successively on (i) the truth of the premises, (ii) the legitimacy of the inferences, (iii) the acceptability of the conclusions.