

THE BEST OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS

By Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz
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8. Now this supreme wisdom [i.e., God], 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. ... [S]o it may be said likewise in respect of perfect wisdom, which is no less orderly than mathematics, that if there were not the best (*optimum*) among all possible worlds, God would not have produced any. I call 'World' the whole succession and the whole agglomeration of all existent things ... as one Universe. ... [T]here is an infinitude of possible worlds among which God must needs have chosen the best, since he does nothing without acting in accordance with supreme reason. ...

195. Someone will say that it is impossible to produce the best, 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 or 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. ...

196. [T]he adversary will be obliged to maintain that one possible universe may be better than the other, to infinity; but there he would be mistaken, and it is that which he cannot prove. If this opinion were true, it would follow that God had not produced any universe at all: for he is incapable of acting without reason, and that would be even acting against reason. It is as if one were to suppose that God had decreed to make a material sphere, with no reason for making it of any particular size. ...

9. Some adversary ... will perchance answer the conclusion by a counter-argument, saying that the world could have been without sin and without sufferings; but I deny that then it would have been *better*. For it must be known that all things are *connected* in each one of the possible worlds: the universe, whatever it may be, is all of one piece, like an ocean: the least movement extends its effect there to any distance whatsoever, even though this effect become less perceptible in proportion to the distance. Therein God has ordered all things beforehand once for all, having foreseen prayers, good and bad actions, and all the rest; and each thing *as an idea* has contributed, before its existence, to the resolution that has been made upon the existence of all things; so that nothing can be changed in the universe (any more than in a number) save its

essence or, if you will, save its *numerical individuality*. Thus, if the smallest evil that comes to pass in the world were missing in it, it would no longer be this world; which, with nothing omitted and all allowance made, was found the best by the Creator who chose it.

10. It is true that one may imagine possible worlds without sin and without unhappiness, and one could make some like Utopian ... romances: but these same worlds again would be very inferior to ours in goodness. I cannot show you this in detail. For can I know and can I present infinities to you and compare them together? But you must judge with me *ab effectu*, since God has chosen this world as it is. We know, moreover, that often an evil brings forth a good whereto one would not have attained without that evil. Often indeed two evils have made one great good. ...

11. The apostle, they say (Rom. iii.8), is right to disapprove of the doing of evil that good may come, but one cannot disapprove that God, through his exceeding power, derive from the permitting of sins greater goods than such as occurred before the sins. It is not that we ought to take pleasure in sin, God forbid! but that we believe the same apostle when he says (Rom. v. 20) that where sin abounded, grace did much more abound; and we remember that we have gained Jesus Christ himself by reason of sin. Thus we see that the opinion of these prelates tends to maintain that a sequence of things where sin enters in may have been and has been, in effect, better than another sequence without sin. ...

12. And is it not most often necessary that a little evil render the good more discernible, that is to say, greater?

13. But it will be said that evils are great and many in number in comparison with the good: that is erroneous. It is only want of attention that diminishes our good, and this attention must be given to us through some admixture of evils. If we were usually sick and seldom in good health, we should be wonderfully sensible of that great good and we should be less sensible of our evils. But is it not better, notwithstanding, that health should be usual and sickness the exception? Let us then by our reflection supply what is lacking in our perception, in order to make the good of health more discernible. ...

21. Evil may be taken metaphysically, physically and morally. *Metaphysical evil* consists in mere imperfection, *physical evil* in suffering, and *moral evil* in sin. Now although physical evil and moral evil be not necessary, it is enough that by virtue of the eternal verities they be possible. And as this vast Region of Verities contains all possibilities it is necessary that there be an infinitude of possible

worlds, that evil enter into diverse of them, and that even the best of all contain a measure thereof. Thus has God been induced to permit evil. ...

23. [O]ne may say of physical evil, that God wills it often as a penalty owing to guilt, and often also as a means to an end, that is, to prevent greater evils or to obtain greater good. The penalty serves also for amendment and example. Evil often serves to make us savor good the more; sometimes too it contributes to a greater perfection in him who suffers it, as the seed that one sows is subject to a kind of corruption before it can germinate: this is a beautiful similitude, which Jesus Christ himself used.

24. Concerning sin or moral evil, although it happens very often that it may serve as a means of obtaining good or of preventing another evil, it is not this that renders it a sufficient object of the divine will or a legitimate object of a created will. It must only be admitted or *permitted* in so far as it is considered to be a certain consequence of an indispensable duty. ...

31. The imperfections ... and the defects in operations spring from the original limitation that the creature could not but receive with the first beginning of its being, through the ideal reasons which restrict it. For God could not give the creature all without making of it a God; therefore there must needs be different degrees in the perfection of things, and limitations also of every kind. ...

115. [I]t is better to permit ... crime than to act in a way which would render God himself blameworthy, and provide the criminals with some justification for the complaint that it was not possible for them to do better, even though they had or might have wished it. God desires that they receive such grace from him as they are fit to receive, and that they accept it; and he desires to give them in particular that grace whose acceptance by them he foresees. ...

117. I draw ... this conclusion, that God does the very best possible: otherwise the exercise of his goodness would be restricted, and that would be restricting his *goodness* itself, if it did not prompt him to the best, if he were lacking in good will. Or again it would be restricting his *wisdom* and his *power*, if he lacked the knowledge necessary for discerning the best and for finding the means to obtain it, or if he lacked the strength necessary for employing these means. ... Thus love of the best in the whole carries the day over all other individual inclinations or hatreds ... and some vice being combined with the best possible plan, God permits it. ...

119. "The benefits [God] imparts to the creatures that are capable of felicity tend only to their happiness. He therefore does not permit that these should serve to make them unhappy, and, if the wrong use that they made of them were capable of destroying them, he would give them sure means of always using them well. Otherwise they would not be true benefits, and his goodness would be smaller than that we can conceive of in another benefactor. (I mean, in a Cause that united with its gifts the sure skill to make good use of them.)"¹ ...

It is not strictly true (though it appear plausible) that the benefits God imparts to the creatures who are capable of felicity tend solely to their happiness. All is connected in Nature; and if a skilled artisan, an engineer, an architect, a wise politician often makes one and the same thing serve several ends, if he makes a double hit with a single throw, when that can be done conveniently, one may say that God, whose wisdom and power are perfect, does so always. ... Thus God has more than one purpose in his projects. The felicity of all rational creatures is one of the aims he has in view; but it is not his whole aim, nor even his final aim. Therefore it happens that the unhappiness of some of these creatures may come about *by concomitance*, and as a result of other greater goods. ... God gives reason to the human race; misfortunes arise thence by concomitance. His pure antecedent will tends towards giving reason, as a great good, and preventing the evils in question. But when it is a question of the evils that accompany this gift which God has made to us of reason, the compound, made up of the combination of reason and of these evils, will be the object of a mediate will of God, which will tend towards producing or preventing this compound, according as the good or the evil prevails therein. But even though it should prove that reason did more harm than good to men (which, however, I do not admit), whereupon the mediate will of God would discard it with all its concomitants, it might still be the case that it was more in accordance with the perfection of the universe to give reason to men, notwithstanding all the evil consequences which it might have with reference to them. Consequently, the final will or the decree of God, resulting from all the considerations he can have, would be to give it to them. And, far from being subject to blame for this, he would be blameworthy if he did not so. Thus the evil, or the mixture of goods and evils wherein the evil prevails, happens only *by concomitance*, because it is connected with greater goods that are outside this mixture. ... Such is God's gift of reason to those who make ill use thereof. It is always a good in itself; but the combination of this good with the evils that proceed from its abuse is not a good with regard to those who in consequence thereof become unhappy. Yet it comes to be by concomitance, because it serves a greater good in relation to

¹ This and the following several quotations are objections from Pierre Bayle.

the universe. And it is doubtless that which prompted God to give reason to those who have made it an instrument of their unhappiness. Or, to put it more precisely, in accordance with my system God, having found among the possible beings some rational creatures who misuse their reason, gave existence to those who are included in the best possible plan of the universe. Thus nothing prevents us from admitting that God grants goods which turn into evil by the fault of men, this often happening to men in just punishment of the misuse they had made of God's grace. ...

But to say that God should not give a good which he knows an evil will abuse, when the general plan of things demands that he give it; or again to say that he should give certain means for preventing it, contrary to this same general order: that is to wish (as I have observed already) that God himself become blameworthy in order to prevent man from being so. ... Thus one can esteem fittingly the good things done by God only when one considers their whole extent by relating them to the entire universe. ... Must God spoil his system, must there be less beauty, perfection and reason in the universe, because there are people who misuse reason? ...

120. "It therefore does not beseem the infinitely good Being to give to creatures a free will, whereof, as he knows for certain, they would make a use that would render them unhappy." ...

To wish that God should not give free will to rational creatures is to wish that there be none of these creatures; and to wish that God should prevent them from misusing it is to wish that there be none but these creatures alone, together with what was made for them only. If God had none but these creatures in view, he would doubtless prevent them from destroying themselves. One may say in a sense, however, that God has given to these creatures the art of always making good use of their free will, for the natural light of reason is this art. But it would be necessary always to have the will to do good, and often creatures lack the means of giving themselves the will they ought to have; often they even lack the will to use those means which indirectly give a good will. ... This fault must be admitted, and one must even acknowledge that God would perhaps have been able to exempt creatures from that fault, since there is nothing to prevent, so it seems, the existence of some whose nature it would be always to have good will. But I reply that it is not necessary, and that it was not feasible for all rational creatures to have so great a perfection, and such as would bring them so close to the Divinity. It may even be that that can only be made possible by a special divine grace. But in this case, would it be proper for God to grant it to all, that is, always to act miraculously in respect of all

rational creatures? Nothing would be less rational than these perpetual miracles. ... And it appears quite consistent with the order of divine government that the great privilege of strengthening in the good should be granted more easily to those who had a good will when they were in a more imperfect state, in the state of struggle. ...

121. "It is as sure a means of taking a man's life to give him a silk cord that one knows certainly he will make use of freely to strangle himself, as to plant a few dagger thrusts in his body. One desires his death not less when one makes use of the first way, than when one employs the second: it even seems as though one desires it with a more malicious intention, since one tends to leave to him the whole trouble and the whole blame of his destruction." ...

Wisdom only shows God the best possible exercise of his goodness: after that, the evil that occurs is an inevitable result of the best. I will add something stronger: To permit the evil, as God permits it, is the greatest goodness. ...

122. "A true benefactor gives promptly, and does not wait to give until those he loves have suffered long miseries from the privation of what he could have imparted to them at first very easily, and without causing any inconvenience to himself. If the limitation of his forces does not permit him to do good without inflicting pain or some other inconvenience, he acquiesces in this, but only regretfully, and he never employs this way of rendering service when he can render it without mingling any kind of evil in his favors. If the profit one could derive from the evils he inflicted could spring as easily from an unalloyed good as from those evils, he would take the straight road of unalloyed good, and not the indirect road that would lead from the evil to the good." ...

All these objections depend almost on the same sophism; they change and mutilate the fact, they only half record things: God has care for men, he loves the human race, he wishes it well, nothing so true. Yet he allows men to fall, he often allows them to perish, he gives them goods that tend towards their destruction; and when he makes someone happy, it is after many sufferings: where is his affection, where is his goodness or again where is his power? Vain objections, which suppress the main point, which ignore the fact that it is of God one speaks. It is as though one were speaking of a mother, a guardian, a tutor, whose well-nigh only care is concerned with the upbringing, the preservation, the happiness of the person in question, and who neglect their duty. God takes care of the universe, he neglects nothing, he chooses what is best on the whole. If in spite of all that someone is wicked and unhappy, it behooved him to be so.

God (so they say) could have given happiness to all, he could have given it promptly and easily, and without causing himself any inconvenience, for he can do all. But should he? Since he does not so, it is a sign that he had to act altogether differently. If we infer from this either that God only regretfully, and owing to lack of power, fails to make men happy and to give the good first of all and without admixture of evil, or else that he lacks the good will to give it unreservedly and for good and all, then we are comparing our true God with the God of Herodotus, full of envy. ... That would be trifling with God in perpetual anthropomorphisms, representing him as a man who must give himself up completely to one particular business, whose goodness must be chiefly exercised upon those objects alone which are known to us, and who lacks either aptitude or good will. God is not lacking therein, he could do the good that we would desire; he even wishes it, taking it separately, but he must not do it in preference to other greater goods which are opposed to it. Moreover, one has no cause to complain of the fact that usually one attains salvation only through many sufferings, and by bearing the cross of Jesus Christ. These evils serve to make the elect imitators of their master, and to increase their happiness. ...

124. "The way whereby that master can give proof of greatest love for virtue is to cause it, if he can, to be always practiced without any mixture of vice. If it is easy for him to procure for his subjects this advantage, and nevertheless he permits vice to raise its head, save that he punishes it finally after having long tolerated it, his affection for virtue is not the greatest one can conceive; it is therefore not infinite."

I am ... weary of refuting, and making the same answer always. M. Bayle multiplies unnecessarily his so-called maxims in opposition to my dogmas. If things connected together may be separated, the parts from their whole, the human kind from the universe, God's attributes the one from the other, power from wisdom, it may be said that God *can cause* virtue to be in the world without any mixture of vice, and even that he can do so *easily*. But, since he has permitted vice, it must be that that order of the universe which was found preferable to every other plan required it. One must believe that it is not permitted to do otherwise, since it is not possible to do better. ... Virtue is the noblest quality of created things, but it is not the only good quality of creatures. There are innumerable others which attract the inclination of God: from all these inclinations there results the most possible good, and it turns out that if there were only virtue, if there were only rational creatures, there would be less good. Midas proved to be less rich when he had only gold. And besides, wisdom must vary. To multiply one and the same thing only would be

superfluity, and poverty too. To have a thousand well-bound Vergils in one's library, always to sing the airs from the opera of Cadmus and Hermione, to break all the china in order only to have cups of gold, to have only diamond buttons, to eat nothing but partridges, to drink only Hungarian or Shiraz wine—would one call that reason? Nature had need of animals, plants, inanimate bodies; there are in these creatures, devoid of reason, marvels which serve for exercise of the reason. What would an intelligent creature do if there were no unintelligent things? What would it think of, if there were neither movement, nor matter, nor sense? If it had only distinct thoughts it would be a God, its wisdom would be without bounds: that is one of the results of my meditations. As soon as there is a mixture of confused thoughts, there is sense, there is matter. For these confused thoughts come from the relation of all things one to the other by way of duration and extent. Thus it is that in my philosophy there is no rational creature without some organic body, and there is no created spirit entirely detached from matter. But these organic bodies vary no less in perfection than the spirits to which they belong. Therefore, since God's wisdom must have a world of bodies, a world of substances capable of perception and incapable of reason; since, in short, it was necessary to choose from all the things possible what produced the best effect together, and since vice entered in by this door, God would not have been altogether good, altogether wise if he had excluded it. ...

211. I believe therefore that God can follow a simple, productive, regular plan; but I do not believe that the best and the most regular is always opportune for all creatures simultaneously; and I judge *a posteriori*, for the plan chosen by God is not so. ...

213. [T]he part of the best Whole is not of necessity the best that one could have made of this part. For the part of a beautiful thing is not always beautiful, since it can be extracted from the whole, or marked out within the whole, in an irregular manner. If goodness and beauty always lay in something absolute and uniform, such as extension, matter, gold, water, and other bodies assumed to be homogeneous or similar, one must say that the part of the good and the beautiful would be beautiful and good like the whole, since it would always have resemblance to the whole: but this is not the case in things that have mutual relations. ...

129. "The permission of a certain evil is only excusable when one cannot remedy it without introducing a greater evil; but it cannot be excusable in those who have in hand a remedy more efficacious against this evil, and against all the other evils that could spring from the suppression of this one."

The maxim is true, but it cannot be brought forward against the government of God. Supreme reason constrains him to permit the evil. If God chose what would not be the best absolutely and in all, that would be a greater evil than all the individual evils which he could prevent by this means. This wrong choice would destroy his wisdom and his goodness. ...

146. "The heavens and all the rest of the universe", adds M. Bayle, "preach the glory, the power, the oneness of God." Thence the conclusion should have been drawn that this is the case. ... Every time we see such a work of God, we find it so perfect that we must wonder at the contrivance and the beauty thereof: but when we do not see an entire work, when we only look upon scraps and fragments, it is no wonder if the good order is not evident there. Our planetary system composes such an isolated work, which is complete also when it is taken by itself; each plant, each animal, each man furnishes one such work, to a certain point of perfection: one recognizes therein the wonderful contrivance of the author. But the human kind, so far as it is known to us, is only a fragment, only a small portion of the City of God or of the republic of Spirits, which has an extent too great for us, and whereof we know too little, to be able to observe the wonderful order therein. ...

147. [Man] commits great errors, because he abandons himself to the passions, and because God abandons him to his own way. ... Man finds himself the worse for this, in proportion to his fault; but God, by a wonderful art, turns all the errors of these little worlds to the greater adornment of his great world. It is as in those devices of perspective, where certain beautiful designs look like mere confusion until one restores them to the right angle of vision or one views them by means of a certain glass or mirror. It is by placing and using them properly that one makes them serve as adornment for a room. Thus the apparent deformities of our little worlds combine to become beauties in the great world, and have nothing in them which is opposed to the oneness of an infinitely perfect universal principle: on the contrary, they increase our wonder at the wisdom of him who makes evil serve the greater good. ...

149. And these apparent faults in the whole world, these spots on a Sun whereof ours is but a ray, enhance its beauty rather than diminish it, contributing towards that end by obtaining a greater good. ...

161. All the more must one deem that God has acted well, and that we should see this if we fully knew of all that he has done. ...