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Extrapolations from the Theodicy of Leibniz

Whatever post-Cartesian meditation Leibniz was pursuing in his *Théodicée*, it seems not to have impressed favorably either his contemporaries or their immediate successors among European intellectuals, thinkers, philosophers, theologians, or satirists. Perhaps possibly maybe some other meditation of his met with greater success or acclaim.

Of course, even if Leibniz had made valid points in his work, it is entirely possible that all of his early commentators missed them, even if his work had been published in “the best of all possible publishing environments” for receipt in “the best of all possible intellectual atmospheres”. (Could Leibniz be said to have been living and breathing in “the best of all possible intellectual atmospheres” when even in his day he could not make his views on the relativity of space and time understood by Newton and Clarke?)

Constituent to Leibniz’s thinking, though perhaps not explicitly adduced there (who today reads works devoted to theodicy? —the one time in my life I had the opportunity to steal a printed copy of *Théodicée* [in what passed for a competent English translation], I resisted the temptation with little effort)—if any merit could be assigned to Leibniz’s arguments, that is, especially his notable invocation of this universe being the best of all possible universes (within the best possible universe of all possible multiverses, our cosmologists might today argue) and this planet being the best of all possible worlds among the billions now said to be swarming around and crawling through our own miniscule galaxy (attached to the stars and suns of their births or detached and migrating roguely through interstellar [if not also intergalactic] space), surely today, some three centuries after Leibniz, we would be obliged to admit a couple of things, at least.

To start with one: must we assume with Leibniz that the Almighty is constrained by Leibniz’s insistence upon the universality of the Principle of Sufficient Reason? (What kind of flattery is this supposed to be, anyway? Are we being invited to be grateful to the Almighty for having gifted us with a brainiac like Leibniz?)

For another: if we trust, assume, think, or believe (or hope) that we do in fact and in truth live in and upon “the best of all possible worlds”, then surely we live among and are constituent members of “the best of all possible humanities”.

The latter clearly cannot possibly be the case, though. (I am no pessimist, mind you: I am willing to concede that humanity on the whole could be much worse than it has given evidence for being thus far, in which case the humanity lurking hereabouts is . . . about average, or maybe at least slightly below average.)

Perhaps a plausible argument could be built if we applied Leibniz’s basic thought to justification of “some other god”, not the Almighty Creator of omnipotence and omniscience and omnibenevolence typically adduced.

If Leibniz’s basic argument therefore holds water better than a sieve,

could Leibniz's theodicy justify the ways of, say, Holy Science (surely a god created by humanity if ever one there were) to poor beleaguered idiot humanity, who even in so-called "advanced societies" ooh and ah over applied technology, technical prowess, and tech gadgetry in just the manner anticipated by Clarke's notorious Third Law (the twentieth century Arthur C.'s, not the eighteenth century Samuel's)? Since the days of Leibniz, has poor beleaguered idiot humanity been ushered through the intervening history of our collapsing Modern Era by "the best of all possible institutional sciences", and in each and every institutional domain of science?

If Leibniz's argument is at all apt, could we possibly conclude that humanity is served and has been served across recent centuries by "the best of all possible avant-gardes", the intellectual elites who have gifted us all the benefits of Holy Science? —Not that we're obliged to pick on scientists and technologists exclusively: other self-proclaimed and self-identifying avant-garde personages (still typically decorated with suitably impressive academic credentials or affiliation) promising or offering to lead poor atavistic, anachronistic humanity through contemporary circumstances have confidently led our huddled masses through one historical morass after another, decade after decade, century after century, into some promised or predicted future or other that not one of them ably predicted or promised in sufficient detail (with the immediate future of the decades approaching, we now can begin to anticipate affliction with the pernicious effects, outcomes, and residues of Technogenic Climate Change for decades, centuries, or millennia to come, should any posterity live to see those more distant times ever in fact arrive . . . odd that Holy Science itself helped conjure the conditions that are giving rise to Technogenic Climate Change, even though the high priests and prophets of Holy Science conspicuously failed to predict its advent a century and more ago.) —so how well is atavistic, anachronistic humanity equipped to judge whether it is being served and led by "the best of all possible avant-gardes"? These avant-gardes routinely claim aesthetic, cognitive, and intellectual if not also temporal (economic and political) privilege, claim to see the lineaments of the future before it can ever lift its chin above any next day's horizon. Are our "best of all possible avant-gardes" in fact equipped with "the best of all possible visual acuity" or "the best of all possible sense", are they capable of exhibiting and exercising "the best of all possible judgments"? (Do avant-garde personages even qualify as "the most articulate of all possible speechifiers"?)

If from age to age, era to era, century to century, decade to decade, year to year, month to month, week to week, day to day, et cetera et cetera et cetera, poor beleaguered atavistic and anachronistic idiot humanity is compelled by its innate limitations to wallow in its innate ignorance, what would it mean for avant-garde personages to wallow with them in "the best of all possible ignorances"? Would this ever be a condition they could gladly share (or admit to sharing) with those they are so eager to lead from dreaded darkness to glaring light? When prophets of the avant-garde advertise their readiness to perform publicly as the benefactors of humanity, are they ever exhibiting "the best of all possible philanthropies"? —"the best of all possible misanthropies?"

It begins to seem as if most of the trouble with Leibniz's conjecture was his celebration of and focus upon the superlative condition—"the

best”, “the worst”, though much or all of the available evidence does not support either his thought or his belief that superlatives do or can apply to our ontology: the notations of “best” and “worst” seem constrained within some kind of axiological chirality present in the very structure of existence, a narrow axiological constraint that does not permit either “best” and “worst” conditions. Certainly, the Almighty was never constrained by Herr Leibniz’s categories and felt perfectly free to create at least one baryonic universe compelled to change continuously, moment by moment, simply in order to maintain any existence at all—to begin, to become, to grow, to attain and achieve, to mature and ripen, to flourish, to die—on both the micro-scale of biologic structures and on the macro-scale of cosmic structures, as on intermediate scales of history.

Just as any velocity can be esteemed only as a prevailing condition with the metrics of any local geometry or physics, ceaseless change is well perceived close up: though the distant cosmos might seem to naked eyes to exhibit eternal stability, it merely seems to change more slowly at immense distances than do the mayfly eyes in our mayfly heads, and will outlast us all merely because its vast structure is somewhat larger than our own, which remains perhaps much more microscopic than we ever dare to recognize or confess.

We might also observe, to console ourselves further, that Leibniz some three centuries ago did not have access to our latest astronomical and cosmological data: we have actually begun to assess “other worlds”, though so far not one yet fit or compelling (or accessible) for human habitation has been found, as on no candidate thus far have we found any “better” or “worse” humanity lurking. Perhaps, then, Leibniz might have wanted to concede only that we live on “the best possible world fit for human habitation” (circling our Sun in its so-called “Goldilocks Zone”, the abundant resources at our disposal or command, ample opportunities to assert our status as the planet’s apex predator . . . for however many decades, centuries, or millennia). If the constraints of baryonic existence are as real as they begin to seem, though, “best” seems altogether a useless superfluity, and Leibniz might as well concede with us that we live upon “the only possible world (presently) fit for human habitation”.

This baryonic universe—“our” universe—spins and writhes from cosmic non-existence into cosmic oblivion, just as we ourselves do on our micro-biologic scale, and nothing stops either it or us from doing so. If mortality must be considered one of the “best” conditions for life and existence, we might do well simply to recognize it for what it is, with or without the fanfare of celebration but certainly without lying to ourselves about it continually.