

FALSE OPTIMISM? LEIBNIZ, EVIL, AND THE BEST OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS

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Abstract. Leibniz's claim that this is the best of all possible worlds has been subject to numerous criticisms, both from his contemporaries and ours. In this paper I investigate a cluster of such criticisms based on the existence, abundance or character of worldly evil. As several Leibniz-inspired versions of optimism have been advanced in recent years, the aim of my investigation is to assess not just how Leibniz's brand of optimism fares against these criticisms, but also whether optimism as a philosophy has the resources to meet these challenges. I show that none of the criticisms considered has sufficient force to pose a threat to Leibniz's version of optimism or to one modelled on it.

INTRODUCTION

Leibniz's doctrine of optimism, which holds that our world is the best of all those possible, has undoubtedly been one of the most vilified in the history of western philosophy. Its eighteenth-century critics – like those of today – tended either to treat it dismissively, as if the doctrine was unworthy of proper refutation, or to engage it with great passion. Many of the objections developed in the decades following Leibniz's most public airing of the doctrine in his *Theodicy* (1710) are still made today, such is their perceived strength; to these, various other objections have been added over the years, and their number continues to swell due to the efforts of contemporary thinkers who find Leibniz's views no less objectionable than did their philosophical forebears. To do justice to all the critical attention Leibniz's optimism has received would require more space than is available here. My aim in this paper will therefore be the more modest one of assessing a cluster of objections and complaints which seek to use some

feature of worldly evil – its existence, abundance, or character – either to demolish Leibniz’s optimism or erode confidence in it. It should come as no surprise to learn that Leibniz either anticipated or was aware of most of these objections, and thus had his responses to hand. Although I shall discuss his responses, at times in some detail, I should stress that the object of this paper is not primarily exegetical, but critical. Consequently, the aim is to determine if Leibnizian optimism is defensible in light of certain oft-made objections to it. Such an investigation might initially seem to be of historical interest only, but this is not the case; indeed, several versions of optimism, some very similar to Leibniz’s own, have been advanced in recent years (e.g. Strickland 2005, Little 2005), so assessing how Leibniz’s brand of optimism fares against various objections from worldly evil – objections still made by contemporary philosophers – will throw light on whether optimism as a philosophy has the resources to meet these challenges. I shall argue that, despite boasting support from a number of philosophical heavyweights past and present, the objections and complaints based on evil do not have sufficient force to pose a threat either to Leibniz’s version of optimism or to one modelled on it.

I. THE ‘TOO MUCH EVIL’ OBJECTION

I begin with what is perhaps the most obvious objection to optimism, namely that this world contains far too much evil to be plausibly identified as the best.¹ I shall henceforth refer to this as the ‘too much evil’ objection. The objection itself has a solid philosophical pedigree. It has been claimed, for instance, that Voltaire’s aim in *Candide* was to refute, or confound Leibniz by ‘bombarding him, so to speak, with the evil of the world ... sticking his nose in it, [to] force his belief in optimism closer and closer to the zero point, and, in doing so, put such a strain on his theological

¹ Some contemporary philosophers see this as the crux of the whole problem of evil. For example, McHarry formulates the problem of evil as follows:

‘(1) God exists and is all good, all knowing, and all powerful.
 (2) If God exists, the world must be in accord with His wishes, i.e., the best of all possible worlds.
 (3) Therefore, this *is* the best of all possible worlds.
 (4) This is *not* the best of all possible worlds; it contains too much evil.
 (5) Therefore, (1) is false; there is no God’ (1978, p. 132). Others have followed suit; see for example Taliaferro (2006, p. 141). Not all agree that the problem of evil should be formulated this way, however. See, for example, Swinburne (2008, p. 16).

belief system that it may crack' (Kivy 1977, p. 218).² This was certainly the approach favoured by Arthur Schopenhauer, who claimed that as 'the optimism of Leibniz conflicts with the rather obvious misery of existence,' there is a simple way of defeating it:

If we conduct the most hardened and callous optimist through hospitals, infirmaries, operating theatres, through prisons, torture-chambers, and slave-hovels, over battlefields and to places of execution; if we were to open him to all the dark abodes of misery, where it shuns the gaze of cold curiosity, and finally were to allow him to glance into the dungeon of Ugolino where prisoners starved to death, he too would certainly see in the end what kind of a world is this *meilleur des mondes possibles*. For whence did Dante get the material for his hell, if not from this actual world of ours? (1966, II, p. 184; cf. I, p. 325 and II, p. 585).

The same thought is to be found in the work of various other philosophers, both historical and contemporary (Malebranche 1967, p. 73; Helvétius 1774, p. 59; Journet 1963, p. 110; Corey 2000, p. 282; Everitt 2004, p. 238). In most cases, proponents of the 'too much evil' objection construe it to serve as a disproof of optimism. In order for it to be such, I suggest that its proponents need to ensure that the criteria for what we might call 'strict comparative evaluation' are satisfied.

There are two of these. First, they must determine how much evil (or what ratio of good to evil) is consistent with a particular notion or definition of 'best world.' Second, they must supply an accurate calculation of the amount of evil (or ratio of good to evil) in this world which is beyond the threshold consistent with the notion of the best world. Neither of these requirements is peculiar to the case in question; in fact such requirements must obviously be met by any claim of the kind 'X has too much (or too many/few) Y to be Z.' For example, suppose one were to claim that 'this creature has too many legs to be an arachnid.' To establish that this is so one must state the maximum number of legs that a creature can have to qualify as an arachnid, and show that the creature under consideration has more legs than the maximum number allowable. If either of these requirements is not met then there is no reason to take seriously the claim that the creature has too many legs to be an arachnid. Similarly with the claim that

² W. H. Barber concurs, claiming that for Voltaire 'it is enough to confront the optimist with the brute facts of human misery, to dwell upon some of the less agreeable aspects of life in the best of all possible worlds, in order to demonstrate his folly' (1955, p. 231; cf. Nadler 2008, p. 91). Others have argued that in *Candide* Voltaire was not out to refute optimism so much as to make fun of it (e.g. Brailsford 1963, pp. 86f, and Jimack 1989, p. 148).

this world is not the best because it contains too much evil. In order to get their objection off the ground, then, proponents of the ‘too much evil’ objection need to quantify evil, both in our world and in the best world. If this seems like an unfeasibly tall order, it is, as I have noted, merely a direct consequence of the style of objection used. Needless to say, no proponent has ever attempted such a feat, nor are we likely to take seriously the calculations arising from such an attempt, were one to be made.

According to Leibniz, however, such a calculation *is* possible, at least theoretically:

The wisdom of God, not content with embracing all the possibles, penetrates them, compares them, weighs them against each other, in order to assess their degrees of perfection or imperfection, the strong and the weak, the good and the evil (1990, p. 267, translation modified).

Evidently such a grand calculation can only be made by God, requiring as it does a complete understanding of the detail of entire worlds. So while Leibniz’s best world does contain a precise amount of evil, as no doubt does our world, evidently the calculation of either figure is going to be impossible for anyone unfortunate enough to be less than omniscient.³ And without these figures to compare, it is going to be impossible to determine whether there is more evil in our world than in the best world.⁴ Yet this insurmountable difficulty has not stopped opponents of optimism from claiming that there is too much evil in our world for it to be the best. On what basis, then, do they make such a claim? Quite possibly those who press this point are using what we might call ‘loose comparative evaluation,’ whereby they feel they possess a rough enough idea of how much evil the best world would contain, and a rough enough idea of how much evil exists in our world, in order to establish that our world contains too much evil to be the best. Alternatively, proponents of the ‘too much evil’ objection might not even be exploiting such vague observations and calculations, supposing instead that they just *know*, intuitively, that there is too much evil in this world.⁵ Neither strikes me as a particularly rigorous

³ Not, however, that this prevented some from trying their hand at quantification; Adam Smith, for example, wrote ‘Take the whole earth at an average, for one man who suffers pain or misery, you will find twenty in prosperity and joy, or at least in tolerable circumstances’ (1781, p. 216; cf. Tucker 1777, III, p. 149).

⁴ For some other responses to the ‘too much evil’ argument, see Yordan (2001, pp. 92–94).

⁵ This is the view of James Sully, who writes: ‘The conclusion that the world, in spite of its myriad evils, is fair and good, or that it is smitten to its core with foul disease, presents itself for the most part as a certain and immediate conviction or intuition’ (1877, 30).

way of grounding the ‘too much evil’ objection, but I cannot see what other grounds anyone could have for advancing it. It goes without saying that when constructed in such woolly ways the objection cannot serve as a refutation of optimism, in the logical sense of the term; instead, the best it can do is create doubts about optimism’s merit in the minds of those who might otherwise be inclined to be receptive to it.

In any case, I should think that, in order to squeeze even the barest amount of psychological force from the woolly version of the ‘too much evil’ objection, proponents are still going to have to meet the two requirements laid down earlier, namely stipulating how much evil the best world would contain, and how much our world contains. But as accurate answers are not attainable, proponents will just have to provide rough calculations that seem intuitively plausible. So the two questions we need to ask are: how much evil (roughly) does a proponent of this objection suppose would be contained in Leibniz’s best possible world, and how much evil (roughly) does the proponent suppose is contained in our world? Although I cannot be sure that the following answers tally precisely with those a proponent of the woolly ‘too much evil’ objection would give, I imagine a likely answer to the first question would be ‘very little’ or ‘none at all,’ and a likely answer to the second would be ‘a lot.’ Let us see whether either assessment is reasonable.

If one were to suppose that the Leibnizian best world contains no evil at all she would be mistaken. Leibniz makes it clear that although God could have created a world without evil, it was not open to him to create the best possible world this way, as the best possible world contains evil (see 1990, p. 129 and p. 378; 2006, p. 208).⁶ Leibniz takes this to be a conceptual truth, such that when God reviewed all possible worlds prior to creation he found that the best one included some evil. So although we cannot calculate an exact amount of evil, or an exact ratio of good and evil, that the best world will contain, we can categorically rule out that it will be free of evil altogether. As for how much evil it contains, Leibniz is adamant that it features less evil than good (‘in the universe... the good surpasses the evil,’ 1990, p. 263, translation modified), and even that evil is vastly outweighed by good, and is thus only a tiny part of the best world (‘the small amount of evil that there is [in this universe] is required to provide the full measure of the immense good found in it,’ 1990, p. 380, translation modified). This might seem difficult to square with some of Leibniz’s other comments in

⁶ For an explanation as to why the Leibnizian best world contains evil, see Strickland (2006, pp. 144-148).

which he clearly acknowledges the extent of human misery and sin in this (best possible) world, for example, that ‘it is evident that far too often punishments are deferred to another life, so that in these times wickedness seems to prevail as though it had a privilege in the kingdom of this world’ (2006, p. 205; cf. 1990, p. 281, p. 286 and p. 288). As both misery and sin qualify as evils for Leibniz, by acknowledging their extent he seems to commit himself to the position that the quantity of evil in the world is not insignificant after all. *Prima facie* Leibniz seems to be caught in an inconsistency here, saying on the one hand that evil is prevalent in this world, while on the other claiming that there is scarcely any evil in it. As is often the case, however, a more careful analysis is able to resolve the apparent tension. In this case, such an analysis will reveal that the two apparently inconsistent claims are made in different contexts: when it is a matter of our earthly existence on this planet Leibniz willingly concedes that the amount of evil is not insignificant, but when it is a matter of the world as a whole, i.e. the entire universe from creation onwards, inclusive of the afterlife,⁷ then Leibniz insists that the amount of evil is trifling. These claims and the distinction upon which they rest can be found in a number of Leibniz’s writings, although the distinction is often made implicitly (e.g. 2006, p. 172; 1923-, I, 14, p. 196).

Now how one can fudge Leibniz’s (understandably) vague remarks into a calculation of how much evil there would be in the best world I am not exactly sure, but in the spirit of woolliness fostered by the woolly ‘too much evil’ objection let us say that, in normal life, it comes to ‘a fair amount,’ or ‘quite a bit,’ though it does not exceed the quantity of good (since Leibniz writes, ‘I would dare to maintain that even in this life goods exceed evils,’ 1990, p. 281), while in the world as a whole, inclusive of the afterlife, it comes to ‘very little.’⁸ Since the ‘too much evil’ objection clearly appeals only to this life, we need henceforth focus only on Leibniz’s assessment

⁷ And this is how Leibniz usually thought of the world or universe: ‘I call „World” the whole succession and the whole agglomeration of all existent things’ (1990, p. 128); ‘the universe [is] extended through all future eternity’ (1990, p. 249, translation modified).

⁸ Madden and Hare have made the rather curious claim that, so far as Leibniz was concerned, the best world is that which ‘contains the minimum amount of evil that was compatible with the creation of any world at all’ (1968, p. 58). However they cite absolutely no evidence for this claim, and it is clearly at odds with Leibniz’s assertion in the *Theodicy* that God could have made a world without any evil at all if he had so chosen, (cf. 1990, p. 378) though such a world would have been inferior to the best. A similar mistake has been made by Little, who ascribes to Leibniz the view that ‘Because this is the best of all possible worlds, one can be sure that the amount of evil in the world is at a minimum’ (2005, p. 55).

of evil for this portion of our existence in the best of all possible worlds, which I have suggested approximates to ‘a fair amount’ or ‘quite a bit.’ This leaves us needing to determine roughly how much evil there is in normal life in our world. I suspect that a proponent of the woolly ‘too much evil’ objection would endorse the following assessment, from Bayle’s *Historical and Critical Dictionary*:

Man is wicked and miserable. . . It suffices to have been alive for five or six years to be completely convinced of these two truths. Those who live long and who are much involved in worldly affairs know this still more clearly. . . Monuments to human misery are found everywhere – prisons, hospitals, gallops and beggars. . . Properly speaking, history is nothing but the crimes and misfortunes of the human race (1990, p. 281).

If Bayle’s observation is right, then I think it would be acceptable to say that there is ‘a lot’ of evil in this life, which of course is greater than the ‘fair amount’ acknowledged by Leibniz. But is Bayle’s assessment right? Leibniz, of course, famously claimed that the quantity of evil in this life is often grossly exaggerated (e.g. 1854, p. 174), and to Bayle’s observation his response was to say that ‘there is incomparably more good than evil in the life of men, as there are incomparably more houses than prisons’ (1990, p. 216, cf. 1990 p. 264; 1965, p. 126). It has to be said that this is rather a clumsy response, and Samuel Johnson made the same point so much more eloquently in his novel *The History of Rasselas* (1759):

it is evident, that these bursts of universal distress are more dreaded than felt: thousands and ten thousands flourish in youth, and wither in age, without the knowledge of any other than domestic evils, and share the same pleasures and vexations whether their kings are mild or cruel, whether the armies of their country pursue their enemies or retreat before them. While courts are disturbed with intestine competitions, and ambassadors are negotiating in foreign countries, the smith still plies his anvil and the husbandman drives his plough forward; the necessities of life are required and obtained, and the successive business of the seasons continues to make its wonted revolutions (2000, p. 51).

I suspect Leibniz would have been delighted by this, and I think the general point that evil is not as prevalent in normal life as it is often made out to be has much to recommend it. If one only reads books by Bayle, or watches only the news, one surely gets an unbalanced and distorted picture of things.⁹ Murders, tortures, kidnappings, earthquakes, floods etc. may make

⁹ In the *Theodicy* Leibniz makes a similar point, that we tend to get an inadequate picture of the relative amounts of good and evil because we tend to focus our attention on the latter at the expense of the former (1990, p. 131 and pp. 264-265).

good news, and excellent subjects for books on the problem of evil, but they are hardly that commonplace, and for most people the worst they will ever do, or have done to them, is much lower down the scale of unpleasantness. Evils are not rare, but they are rarer than is sometimes supposed, and when they do occur they are, more often than not, relatively minor.

Perhaps understandably, some of Leibniz's opponents over the years have construed this kind of plea for a more realistic assessment of the prevalence and quantity of evil as an attempt to claim that there is only a negligible amount of evil in this life. There is some evidence that Leibniz had leanings in this direction, as he suggested that most of the evil in our world might be concentrated on the earth:

the proportion of the part of the universe known to us is almost lost in nothingness compared to that which is unknown to us, which we nevertheless have grounds to assume, and as all the evils that may be put forward against us are in this almost-nothingness it may be the case that all evils are almost nothing in comparison with the goods in the universe too (1990, p. 135, translation modified. Compare Bolingbroke 1754, IV, p. 386, and V, p. 1).

Such cosmic speculation did much to make Leibniz a laughing stock in the decades after his death, perhaps with some justification. But in finding fault with Leibniz's supposition it is easy to overlook his use of the subjunctive, which reveals that what he is offering is conjecture rather than doctrine. In any case, there is no reason why the mere call for a more realistic assessment of the evil in everyday life, need lead to this rather fanciful position. What is undoubtedly required here is a philosophical equivalent of the astronomer's principle of mediocrity, which states that there is nothing particularly remarkable or unusual about our planet or region of space. Such a thought seems to be fully consistent with, and indeed seems to follow from, Leibniz's celebrated principle of uniformity, the rallying cry of which (following that of the characters in Fatouville's *Harlequin, Emperor of the Moon*) is that it is elsewhere just as it is here (1875-1890, III, pp. 339ff and pp. 343ff). If we were to employ such a principle in the subject under discussion we would merely assume that should there be other planets inhabited by sentient beings, they are likely to be comparable to ours in terms of the quantity of good and evil (or the proportion of good and evil) they contain. Such an assumption may well be wrong, of course, but in the absence of any data to the contrary it seems the most balanced assumption that can be made. So let us say that the earth is an acceptable barometer for estimating how much evil there is in the universe as a whole (the afterlife excepted).

As indicated above, I think Leibniz is right to say that we routinely overestimate the quantity of evil on this planet. Anyone who claimed that there is 'a lot' of evil in the world as we know it, if by 'a lot' they mean there is considerably more evil than good in it, would be making a claim that is difficult to square with the experience of the majority. For although there are many horrors in this life, they do seem to spare most of its inhabitants (i.e., most rational beings are not murdered, kidnapped, tortured or utterly crushed by evils in other ways). Misery, wretchedness and vice are commonplace, but are not obviously more common than their opposites. I think it plausible, on the evidence available to us, to say that there is 'a fair amount' of evil in our world, but that it does not exceed the quantity of good.¹⁰

If these assessments are accepted, and it is agreed that there is 'a fair amount' of evil in both Leibniz's best world and in our world, then the woolly version of the 'too much evil' objection fails, as it would not have been shown that our world contains more evil than the best (and hence contains too much evil to be the best). I have no doubt at all that my assessments are challengeable, and many readers may find them unconvincing. I am certainly not confident that they are right. But I am confident that they cannot be easily shown to be wrong. The moral to draw from this, I should think, is that it will be virtually impossible to use the 'too much evil' objection against optimism.¹¹ Because of its inherent woolliness, the 'too much evil' objection is, at best, no more than a nagging concern without any kind of evidential basis rather than the powerful, knock-down objection it is often presented as being.¹²

¹⁰ Bayle, of course, would disagree with this. He rejected a similar assessment made by William King, arguing that it was 'an obvious falsehood' that there is more moral good than moral evil in the world (Bayle 1966, p. 653). On the matter of physical evil (pain and suffering), King had argued that it was clearly outweighed by physical good since every creature took whatever steps it could to preserve its own life, which it would not do if it was overwhelmed by physical evil (King 1731, p 78). Bayle denounced this 'proof' as lacking solidity, which it surely does.

¹¹ There exists a variant of the 'too much evil' objection, which aims to show that there is too much evil in the world for it to be compatible with the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good God. The problems with this version of the objection are similar to those found in the version just discussed. See Conway (1988, p. 58).

¹² It is quite possible that some proponents of the objection are wanting to make a rather different point, namely that there must be something wrong with Leibniz's criterion for the best world if it allows for there being a considerable amount of worldly evil. I think Voltaire can be read this way.

II. A NECESSARY EVIL: THE (UN)REALITY OF EVIL OBJECTION

Many of optimism's opponents, it must be acknowledged, do not seek to disqualify this world as the best on the ground of the quantity of evil it contains. Some are content to show that the very existence of evil, irrespective of its magnitude, is inconsistent with Leibniz's optimism. This objection hinges on Leibniz's supposed denial of the reality of evil, whereby what are ordinarily considered to be evils are really just goods. Voltaire claimed that Leibniz denied evil (1962, p. 117), while David Hume asserted that Leibniz's denial of it was essential to his whole philosophical system (2007, p. 69; cf. Castel 1737, p. 207; Kivy 1977, p. 216; Griffin 2004, p. 131 and p. 135). Such a denial is not just questionable, according to Hume; it is in fact 'bold and paradoxical' (p. 70), that is, contrary to all evidence and received opinion. Hume's subsequent remarks, that the denial of evil is an error, and one Leibniz really ought to have been sensible of, suggest that he considered such a denial absurd, a view echoed by numerous contemporary thinkers (e.g. Migliore 2004, p. 118; Murray 2008, p. 12; van Inwagen 2006, pp. 60-61). Although Hume did not frame his remarks in the form of a worked-out argument, it is clear that he has the raw materials for a *reductio ad absurdum* of Leibnizian optimism: if Leibnizian optimism involves the denial of evil, and the denial of evil is absurd (because evil is real), then Leibnizian optimism is likewise absurd. But does Leibniz's optimism involve the denial of evil?

The denial of true evil is certainly an integral part of the philosophy that *tout est bien*, which was popular in the first half of the eighteenth century, especially among English moralists. To hold that *tout est bien* literally commits one to holding that everything that there is, is good, as Shaftesbury nicely concedes in his *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*: 'If everything which exists be according to a good order and for the best, then, of necessity, there is no such thing as real ill in the universe, nothing ill with respect to the whole' (1999, pp. 164-165; cf. p 306).¹³ Other optimists likewise denied the reality of evil, such as Pope (1734, p. 20), Dugdeon (1765 p. 220), and – much later – Emile Durkheim (2004, p. 313). Yet despite not being member of the *tout est bien* set, Leibniz at times appears to concur with this. In his published review of Shaftesbury's book, for instance, he applauds his fellow optimist for teaching a number of sound

¹³ Quite possibly it was on account of this that Voltaire associated optimism with the denial of evil, as he clearly did in his *Philosophical Dictionary*.

doctrines, among them ‘the disappearance [l’evanouissement] of real evil, especially in relation to the whole’ (1969, p. 633). Yet we should be wary of construing such a remark as evidence that Leibniz denied the reality of evil. For one thing, Leibniz claimed in his review that ‘the disappearance of real evil’ is one of many doctrines advanced by Shaftesbury that could also be found in his *Theodicy*, yet the *Theodicy* contains no such denial of evil; in fact Leibniz explicitly states there that it would be a mistake to think that ‘the best in the whole be free from evil in the parts’ (1990, p. 251, translation modified).¹⁴

But while Leibniz’s official position is to recognize the reality of evil rather than deny it, some have argued that his commitment to optimism entails that this is not a line he can consistently take. In Susan Neiman’s words, ‘To claim that this world is the best is to view all evils as ultimately apparent: anything we take to be evil is in fact a necessary part of a greater plan. . . . The result is that no particular evil is genuine.’ This position, Neiman goes on to say, ‘seems to amount to straightforward denial [of evil]’ (2002, p. 41). So according to this reasoning, Leibniz, as an avowed optimist, was a denier of evil *malgré lui*, as were other optimists who ostensibly affirmed the reality of evil, such as William King (1731, pp. 73ff.), Christian Wolff (1739, §576), and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1997, p. 225 and pp. 232-246).

There is, I think, something seductive about Neiman’s reasoning, at least on the surface. Certainly it seems correct to say that, within the optimist’s framework, every true evil has to be considered intimately bound up with a greater good: this much follows from the fact that any alteration to the best world (e.g. removing an evil) would necessarily change it for the worse, and make it a different, and hence sub-optimal world.¹⁵ Leibniz admits as much (e.g. 2006, p. 102; 1990, p. 129 and p. 280). In fact he repeatedly states that all evils in the best possible world are bound up with greater goods: either they are a means to greater goods, or they are a by-product of greater goods (e.g. 1990, p. 129 and p. 200; 1989, p. 115; 1948, p. 448; 2006, p. 197). Leibniz would therefore need no coaxing to accept

¹⁴ Another reason to be wary of Leibniz’s remarks about accepting the ‘disappearance of evil’ is that he was, by his own admission, brought to a state of giddiness by Shaftesbury’s book (he claims that the ideas in Shaftesbury’s book ‘ravished me and brought me to a state of ecstasy,’ 1969, p. 633) and this seems to have remained with him even when he penned his review.

¹⁵ There is at least one contemporary optimist who disputes this reasoning, as he claims that although this is the best possible world it nevertheless contains numerous evils *not* bound up with a greater good (Little 2005).

Neiman's assertion that, for an optimist like him, evil is a necessary part of a greater plan. But does this commit him to the position that no evil is genuine, as Neiman supposes? If it does then Leibniz's optimism will fall to Hume's *reductio*. I cannot see that Leibniz is in any great danger here, however. Certainly he is committed to holding that certain evils are *instrumentally* good, since some evils make possible greater goods (while others are merely the result of greater goods). But there is a huge logical gulf between the position that evils are instrumentally good (which Leibniz holds) and that they are intrinsically good (which is what Leibniz should hold, according to Neiman). For as Peirce noted, 'To say. . . that whatever is is best is not to deny the existence of evil, but only to maintain that if any event is bad in one way it more than counterbalances for it by being good in another and higher way' (1984, pp. 126-127). Nor does it make a difference if the evils are necessary parts of the best world. As Leibniz nicely puts it, 'a thing does not become pleasing just because it is necessary' (1990, p. 263). So far as I can see, optimism does not – *pace* Neiman – actually *entail* the intuition-jarring denial of evil. At best, such a denial is an 'optional extra,' which optimists are under no pressure to adopt (although some do, as we have seen). Therefore Leibniz is not committed to denying the reality of evil, and there is no inconsistency at all in his accepting its reality within his optimistic framework.

III. THE 'USELESS PASSIVITY' AND 'NO HOPE' COMPLAINTS

We now come to two further complaints against Leibniz's optimism (I call them complaints rather than objections since they do not attempt to show that optimism is false, only that there are other reasons not to accept it). Both hinge on the fact that all evils in the best world are necessary evils. Given that this is so, it is argued, there can be no reason for our interfering to try and stop evils from occurring, and there can be no hope at all that things will get better for us. We shall consider both of these points in turn.

The first concern, that optimism seduces people into believing that everything is arranged as excellently as it could have been and therefore robs them of any desire to strive for change, is nicely illustrated by an event that occurs in Voltaire's *Candide*: after a minor character, James the Anabaptist, falls into Lisbon harbour, Candide 'wanted to throw himself into the sea after the Anabaptist, but the great philosopher, Pangloss, stopped him by proving that Lisbon harbour was made on purpose for this Anabaptist to

drown there' (Voltaire 1947, p. 33). Leaving aside the rather un-Leibnizian explanation for Lisbon harbour, Voltaire here poses the question of how humans are supposed to respond to the evil events in the world if optimism is true. For if Leibniz is right, and the evils that do occur are necessary parts of the best world, then it would seem that we have no incentive to remove or avoid them. After all God has foreseen their existence and their connection to the best overall scheme of things, in which case would it not be somewhat presumptuous of us, with our limited knowledge, to try to do something about them? If so, then Pangloss' advocacy of inactivity would surely be appropriate, despite its surface absurdity. Following Haydn Mason, I shall call this the 'useless passivity' complaint against optimism.¹⁶

Leibniz was well aware of this criticism and called it the 'lazy sophism,' or occasionally *Fatum Mahometanum* on account of his belief that the 'Turks' actually advocated a passive response to all life's trials by urging: 'resist in vain, nothing is to be done for fate is not to be avoided' (2005, p. 59, translation modified. Cf. 1990, p. 54). For this thinking Leibniz had nothing but scorn, arguing that although the events of the world are fixed and determined and will certainly happen exactly as God has foreseen them, nevertheless *we* do not know what will happen and so we should always act as if the future is unwritten (see 1989, p. 113). This advice becomes more plausible when one realizes the fallacy inherent in the 'lazy sophism,' i.e. the move from 'all events are determined' to 'all events are determined irrespective of what we do':

if it is determined that so-and-so will be ruined, then without a doubt that will happen, not in spite of what he does, but because he will be the author of his own fortune, and if he neglects himself, he will ruin himself. If you break your neck on the steps, you will do what is necessary for that, because you could not be determined to an effect without being predetermined to the causes (2006, p. 98; cf. 1989, p. 113; 1990, p. 57 and pp. 153-154; 1965, p. 137).

This is, I believe, an effective reply,¹⁷ for if the activities of its inhabitants contribute to the overall merit or demerit of a world (which seems reasonable), then the best world will happen to be the best world *by virtue of* what its inhabitants do, not in spite of it. So Leibniz is a more consistent optimist than Pangloss, in that he would not advocate letting people drown. Instead he recommends that we always act to satisfy what we believe to

¹⁶ Mason (1975, 58) concurs with Voltaire's view that optimism leads to a state of 'useless passivity' and acquiescence to the events in the world.

¹⁷ And one that has been endorsed by at least one contemporary thinker, namely John Leslie (1971).

be God's presumptive will, i.e. that we act in a way we think God would want us to act (see Leibniz 1875-1890, VII, p. 548; 1990, p. 155). If we are successful in our good designs then that should give us cheer, but if not then at least we have the consolation of knowing that things could not have worked out otherwise. So optimism does lead to a kind of Stoicism – a coming-to-terms with the evils of the world – but only with regard to the past, not with regard to the present or future (see Leibniz 1875-1890, VII, p. 548). This is brought out nicely in the following passage, which contains Leibniz's own personal philosophy:

For my part, I have two maxims: one, to make use of everything in order to contribute towards some good, the other to be perfectly content when I am not successful, being persuaded that in the latter case it is for the best, as currently God does not want it. I do my part so long as there is hope, and I am pleased with his part when there is hope no longer (1923-, I, 17, p. 200).

Ironically enough, this leads us to the second of the two complaints now under discussion, namely that Leibniz's optimism is a barren philosophy which simply does not offer any hope because, in the words of John Hick, 'if this world, with its evils, is the best that is possible, there is no scope or hope for improvement' (1985, p. 81).¹⁸ As it stands this objection, at least as it is voiced by Hick, is rather vague. For is the point that Leibniz's optimism offers no hope of improvement at all, or just no hope of improvement during our current, earthly existence (i.e. that which occurs prior to the afterlife)? If the former then the complaint is without merit, as Leibniz is clear that in the life to come all wrongs will be righted, i.e. all evil actions will be punished and all virtuous actions rewarded.¹⁹ As these are presumably the very things human beings hope for, it is hard to see what basis there could be to say that optimism offers no hope for the life to come. More likely than not, however, Hick's complaint is intended to apply not to the afterlife, but to our mundane existence before any afterlife begins.²⁰ Hick's grievance, then, is presumably that optimism offers no reason to think that things will get any better for us in this life. Leibniz, as we shall see, dis-

¹⁸ John Leslie (1971, p. 200) identifies this as the principal reason why optimism is no longer a popular option among theists.

¹⁹ Optimists routinely appeal to an afterlife to balance out the world's wrongs. See for example Clarke (1823, p. 136).

²⁰ Voltaire made a similar complaint about optimism and its failure to offer any hope for improvement in this life at the end of his *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*. See Voltaire (1817, p. 474).

putes this.²¹ But even if were true it would do nothing to disadvantage optimism vis-à-vis other common responses to the problem of evil, none of which obviously offers any reason for thinking that our mundane lives will get better or easier in the years ahead. The free will defence merely says that God will never interfere in the free actions of his creatures, which all but guarantees that creaturely wrongdoing will carry on, while Hick's theodicy views this world as a vale of soul-making, with evils necessary in order for humans to perfect themselves morally and spiritually, a process which continues long after this earthly life has ended. What hope for improvement in our current circumstances do these philosophies offer? None as far as I can tell.²²

Yet according to Leibniz, his optimistic philosophy *is* able to improve our lot here and now, and to do so it only takes us to recognize (a) that God has ordered the universe providentially, that is, for the best, and (b) that God is concerned for the welfare of the citizens of the universe (which includes humans). If we acknowledge only (a), the best we can achieve, in Leibniz's view, is a Stoic-like tranquillity, whereby one conforms one's will to divine providence by accepting that events unfold as they do on account of God's providential ordering of things. But if we acknowledge (b) as well, we can go beyond mere tranquillity to achieve true satisfaction or contentment. Assuming one is virtuous, one draws comfort from the knowledge both that the trials and tribulations one endures could not have been otherwise and are good for the whole, and that on account of God's supreme justice all imbalances will ultimately be corrected, if not in this life then in the next.²³ That such a philosophy can have positive effects here and now is illustrated by the testimony of Queen Sophie Charlotte of Prussia, who thanked Leibniz for his 'instruction' on the matter 'that one

²¹ As would another optimist, Alexander Day: although he accepts that God could make nothing but the best, he construes this as involving an almost Bergsonian form of cosmic evolution, with better and better creatures evolving over time and eventually culminating in man, who then makes progress in art, truth and knowledge, and ultimately goodness. Thus in Day's view, the ultimate triumph of good over evil will occur in the years ahead on Earth, not in the afterlife. However Day does not specify how long this process will take, and therefore it is unclear how much improvement can be expected over the lifetime of each generation, i.e. whether his version of optimism actually promises better days ahead for those alive now. Day 1935, especially chs. V, VI and XII.

²² The same holds good of other responses to the problem of evil, such as that of Marilyn McCord Adams (1999), and Bruce Reichenbach's 'natural law' theodicy (1982, pp. 64-118).

²³ This is affirmed in numerous texts. See for example 2006, pp. 166-167 and p. 202; 1969, p. 305; 1923-, VI, 4, pp. 2238-2239; 1990, pp. 54-55 and pp. 282-283.

must be content and even feel happy with one's own state.' She informs Leibniz, 'You have so well convinced me of this, Sir, that I will be obliged to you for my peace of mind' (Leibniz 1923-, I, 17, p. 705). Leibniz would also have felt his philosophy vindicated by the words of Rousseau, who informed Voltaire that 'This optimism which you find so cruel yet consoles me amid the very pains which you depict as unbearable' (1997, p. 233). It is hard to imagine anyone saying the same of the free will defence.

Conclusion

Despite the efforts of its detractors, we have seen that Leibniz's optimism, as well as optimism generally (barring perhaps the *tout est bien* strain) is neither defeated nor rendered less plausible by any of the objections and complaints considered in this paper. Leibniz's doctrine is not threatened by the very existence of evil in this world, as he does not deny its reality, nor does his philosophy require him to do so. Likewise, there is no meaningful threat from the quantity of evil in this world. Moreover, Leibnizian optimism does not promote a useless passivity in this life, and in fact contains features capable of improving our lot here and now, at least in principle. It might seem strange that such an unpopular hypothesis apparently lacks many of the vulnerabilities commonly attributed to it, but the fact that it does so should give hope to contemporary optimists who seek, as did Leibniz, to construct the best of all possible theodicies.²⁴

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²⁴ I would like to thank Vernon Pratt and Daniel J. Cook for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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