Incommensurability and the Best of all Possible Worlds

Author(s): Stephen Grover

Source: *The Monist*, OCTOBER 1998, Vol. 81, No. 4, Rethinking Leibniz (OCTOBER 1998), pp. 648–668

Published by: Oxford University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/27903614

INCOMMENSURABILITY AND THE
BEST OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS

In "The Best of All Possible Worlds" William E. Mann argues that some possible worlds are morally incommensurable with some others, because some choices are between incompatible alternatives that are themselves incommensurable.[1] The best possible world must be better than, and hence commensurable with, every other world. So if anyone in the actual world ever faces a choice between incompatible alternatives that are morally incommensurable, this is not the best possible world. But it seems that some of us do, on occasion, face such choices. So this is not the best possible world.

The argument is an intriguing one, and opens up a new front in the already unequal conflict between the few who assert and the many who deny the coherence of the notion of a best among possible worlds. Most contemporary philosophical theists view this notion with suspicion, either because they assume that any possible world can be improved quantitatively by adding more good things to it, or because they think that the entities within any possible world could always be improved qualitatively, for example by exchanging lower forms such as satisfied pigs for higher forms such as dissatisfied philosophers. Mann's argument is of a quite different kind in that it denies what other criticisms typically assert, namely, that possible worlds are always commensurable in value. I do not find these other criticisms compelling, and have argued against some of them elsewhere.[2] In the first part of this paper (sections I–III) I hope to show that the appeal to incommensurability need not worry those who, with Leibniz, think both that the notion of a best of all possible worlds is coherent and that it forms an essential component in any adequate response to the problem of evil. I shall then suggest (sections IV–V) that claims about the incommensurability of values, however helpful they may at first appear in tackling the problem of evil, are ones that philosophical

theists should shy away from rather than embrace. The most natural setting for such claims is a strong form of value pluralism, but this is a meta-ethics that is, to put it mildly, unusual for traditional theism, and one that is very hard to integrate into orthodox doctrine. Leibniz's claim that this is the best of all possible worlds is indeed an unpalatable one, but Mann has not shown that philosophical theists will not have to swallow it anyway.

<div align="center">I</div>

It is, of course, principally against Leibniz that Mann's argument is addressed. Mann draws attention to the striking image of a pyramid that Leibniz employs in the closing sections of the *Theodicy* to illustrate how possible worlds are ordered in terms of their value. The pyramid is built up out of "apartments" each of which corresponds to one possible world:

> The apartments arose in a pyramid; they became ever more beautiful as one ascended towards the apex, and they represented more beautiful worlds. One arrived at last in the supreme ["apartment"] that completed the pyramid, and which was the most beautiful of all; for the pyramid had a beginning, but one did not see the end; it had an apex, but no base; it went on increasing to infinity. It is because (as the Goddess explained) among an infinity of possible worlds there is the best of all; otherwise God would not have decided to create any of them. But there is not any of them which does not have yet less perfect [worlds] beneath it; that is why the pyramid descends for ever to infinity. (*Theodicy* s. 416; GP VI, 364/H372)

The image of a pyramid rather than, say, a tower or staircase, suggests that at any point below the apex of the pyramid there are possible worlds that are equal in value. So Leibniz may not hold that the "better-than" relation ordering the possible worlds displays *connectivity*: that, for any two worlds, w and u, either w is better than u or u is better than w.[3] Instead, the "better-than" relation need only possess *comparability*: for any worlds, w and u, either w is better than u or u is better than w or w and u are equal in value. In order that the pyramid have an apex consisting of just one world, the following constraints on the "better-than" relation must be met: *asymmetry*, by which, for any worlds w and u, if w is better than u, then u is not better than w, and *maximality*, by which some world is better than every other world. That the pyramid has no base is guaranteed by *seriality*,

in virtue of which every world is better than some other world. Completing the picture, the "better-than" relation also has the following properties: *irreflexivity*, by which no world is better than itself, and *transitivity*, by which, for any worlds, w, u, and v, if w is better than u and u is better than v, then w is better than v (260–1).

How seriously should we take Leibniz's image of a baseless pyramid? One of Leibniz's favourite argumentative strategies appeals to the impossibility of any determination in cases of indifferent advantage. If every world below the apex has at least one equal, it is not surprising that the actual world is the best possible; God will not choose to create a world when there are others that God has just as much reason to create, and so must choose a world whose level of goodness is unique. Were the pyramid inverted, so that there was a worst but no best world, the only world God could possibly create would be that worst one. Obviously something is wrong with this picture; there must be more to God's goodness than a Buridanesque inability to choose between equals coupled with the happy fact that the pyramid is one way up rather than the other.[4] It is partly for this reason that interpreters of Leibniz have maintained that the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) is by itself insufficient to determine God's choice of which world to create, and that it requires supplementation by some further principle of contingency such as the Principle of Perfection.[5] Otherwise God might have chosen the worst or most mediocre world for creation instead of the best. On this view the PSR merely requires that God have some reason or other for creating this world, and it is the supplementary Principle of Perfection which assures us that the reason is related to the goodness of this world rather than some other feature.

The interpretive issues here are complex, but it is clear from the correspondence with Clarke that Leibniz did at least sometimes regard the PSR as sufficient to rule out the possibility that in creation God had been faced with a choice between alternatives that were indifferent. It is because the Newtonian conceptions of absolute space and time give rise to such choices that Leibniz rejects them, citing the PSR as his authority. The argument is a straightforward *reductio*: were space and time absolute, this universe would be distinguished from some other possible universes only by its location and orientation in space and time. But this would be a distinction without a difference; each of these other possible universes would be just as good as this one. God would not choose between such in-

different alternatives, and so there would be no universe in existence. But there is a universe in existence. So the Newtonian conceptions of space and time must be wrong. This argument is presented by Leibniz as solely dependent on the PSR, and he nowhere appeals to the Principle of Perfection. So here at least the PSR is sufficient by itself to rule out the possibility that God would choose between two worlds that were equally good.

If we could know that the possible worlds ordered according to their value assume the pyramidal structure described above, the PSR would be enough to ensure selection of the world at the apex, for that is the only world that has no equal. But the pyramid is just a pictorial device, and we are hardly in a position to determine its accuracy. Elsewhere in the *Theodicy* Leibniz employs another analogy, derived from geometry:

> . . . if God decreed to draw from a given point one straight line to another given straight line, without any determination of the angle, either in the decree or in its circumstances . . . the determination would spring from the nature of the thing, the line would be perpendicular, and the angle would be right, since that is all that is determined and distinguishable. It is thus that one must think of the creation of the best of all possible universes. . . . (*Theodicy*, s. 196; GP VI, 232–3/H 249)

Here there is but one line that is determined uniquely, for in the array of lines drawn from a point to intercept a line there is one shortest, no longest, and no line other than the shortest whose length is unique. But again, what assures us that the structure of possible worlds ranked according to their goodness is isomorphic with this geometrical array? Given Leibniz's characterisation of God's reasons for choosing which world to create, we can be confident that this isomorphism holds. When that characterisation is in dispute, we have little to fall back upon save the features of the "better than" relation that holds between possible worlds.

Mann has no quarrel with what he calls the "semantic properties" of the "better-than" relation as conceived by Leibniz: irreflexivity, asymmetry and transitivity (260). His disagreement is first with one of the "substantive properties" that Leibniz imposes, namely, comparability, and then through that with another substantive property, maximality. By itself, the denial of comparability would not lead to the downfall of maximality: it might be false of some pair of worlds w and u either that w is better than u or u is better than w or w and u are equal in value but still true that some

world is better than every other; the best world might be commensurable with all other worlds without each of these other worlds themselves being commensurable with every other. But Mann's argument against comparability appeals to features of moral decision-making in the actual world which suggest that this world is incommensurable with at least some other worlds. If Mann is right, Leibniz will either have to give up the claim that there is a best possible world or give up the claim that the actual world is the best possible. But is Mann right?

II

Comparability is false if there are pairs of worlds that the "better-than" relation does not order: they are neither equal in value nor is one better than the other. Mann thinks that choices between alternatives that are incompatible and morally incommensurable indicate that there are such worlds. His leading example is as follows:

> Suppose that Teresa is torn between two callings. She is a very talented soprano whose voice could enrich the operatic world. She also believes that the dying poor have a claim on all her energies. She perceives that she is not able to pursue both callings; she can follow one wholeheartedly only to the detriment of the other. She could pursue her operatic career and dedicate her earnings to a hospice, but that in itself would be to decide in favor of the one calling over the other. She could decide to follow the operatic career until she is fifty and then devote the remainder of her life to the dying poor. So to decide, however, will only compound the problem that may trouble Teresa the most. Which calling should she follow, the operatic career, the vocation of caring for the dying poor, or the mixed sequential life? (269)

Teresa's choice, Mann suggests, can be thought of as a choice between two possible worlds that share their histories up to the moment of her decision: in "Opera World" (OW) she chooses an operatic career and becomes a great soprano; in "Hospice World" (HW) she chooses to care for the dying poor and, besides doing much good herself, becomes an inspiration to others to do likewise. If the "better-than" relation displays comparability, then either OW is better than HW or HW is better than OW or else they are equal in value. Mann finds each of these three options implausible, and rejects comparability. OW and HW are incommensurable with each other; neither can be the best possible world (272). If choices

like Teresa's occur in the actual world, then it cannot be the best possible world, and Leibniz is wrong either about the necessity of God's choice as to which world to create or about the fact that some possible world is better than every other.

There are a number of responses that Leibnizians might make to this example. Determinists, among whose number Leibniz is standardly counted, must feel considerable discomfort at Mann's assumption that two possible worlds might share identical histories up to some moment and yet diverge thereafter. The most immediate threat to Leibnizian metaphysics posed by the example of Teresa is that it requires us to abandon the PSR. For suppose Teresa chooses an operatic career, and OW is actual: there must be an explanation of Teresa's choice other than a mere act of her will. Acts of mere will are fictions; not even God acts without sufficient reason, but in the divine case the reason is always related to advantage. Saying that God could have done otherwise is simply indicating that another course of action is possible in itself, i.e., implies no contradiction considered independently of the divine will.[6] With Teresa, God having decreed that OW exist, the situation is different, for although HW is a possible world, it is not within Teresa's power to make it actual. The choices of creatures are determined by the preceding states of those creatures and of the world they inhabit; unless this were so, those choices would spring from nothing, in violation of the PSR. If, led by Mann's example, we are willing to abandon the PSR, then the Leibnizian edifice is bound to crumble, for without the PSR we have no proof of the existence of God from the existence of contingent things, no argument against the possibility that there are several best possible worlds as opposed to just one, and no guarantee that the world God selected for creation was chosen for a good reason rather than a bad one, or indeed, for any reason at all. In these circumstances, it hardly seems to matter that comparability is under threat.

Presumably Mann does not intend to argue that we should reject the claim that this world is maximal in order to preserve a libertarian account of freedom. Although this might be a good argument, it does not depend upon the rejection of comparability. The claim that OW and HW are identical until the moment of Teresa's choice must therefore be interpreted loosely, as merely implying that to us, with our limited epistemic capacities, these worlds seem indistinguishable before Teresa makes her

choice. To God, things look altogether different: God sees all the many discrepancies between the two worlds stretching back even to their earliest moments and knows which, if either, of the two worlds is actual. OW and HW are thus to be specified as a pair of worlds as similar as they can be in their past and future trajectories as is consistent with each containing a person such as Teresa facing a choice of the sort that she faces. But now we have two Teresas—$Teresa_o$ and $Teresa_h$—and we cannot expect Leibniz to be shy in pointing out that, just as the two worlds are always different, so are $Teresa_o$ and $Teresa_h$. Otherwise, by the Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles (PII), they would not be two Teresas but one. So if we modify Mann's example to save the PSR, we must also make adjustments to compensate for the PII and the accompanying denial of transworld identity; this leaves us with an example in which, though the Teresas do as they choose, their choice is determined by the state of the world prior to the moment of decision. How much of the anguish of Teresa's situation survives these alterations is questionable, but that is again simply to point out that Leibniz rejects libertarian freedom and denies transworld identity.

Part of the problem here, as with other discussions of Leibniz's theodicy, is the conflict between Leibniz's way of conceiving possible worlds and that familiar from recent treatments of semantics for modal logic. Compare Kripke's Nixon with Leibniz's St. Peter;

> "Possible worlds" are *stipulated* not *discovered* by powerful telescopes. There is no reason why we cannot *stipulate* that, in talking about what would have happened to Nixon in a certain counterfactual situation, we are talking about what would have happened to *him*.[7]

> Many future conditionals are inconsistent; thus, when I ask what would have happened if Peter had not denied Christ, it is asked what would have happened if Peter had not been Peter, for denying is contained in the complete notion of Peter. (Gr 358)

Does this difference matter? If we rework Mann's example so that it presents us with two possible worlds, always distinct, comparability still insists either that one is better than the other or that they are equal in goodness. This is no more plausible just because the example is now compatible with determinism and the denial of transworld identity. But given Leibnizian views about the connectedness of all things, it is unlikely that the differences between the worlds are so restricted as to make compari-

son between them simply a matter of comparing the value of an operatic career with that of work among the dying poor, all else cancelling out. Even within metaphysical frameworks far looser than Leibniz's, decisions such as Teresa's are likely to have manifold and—to us at least—unpredictable consequences. How different would the world be now had Maria Callas devoted herself to the terminally ill, or (perhaps an even more disturbing thought) Mother Teresa attempted to become a *diva*?

Some choices that we make—whether to have chocolate cake or cheesecake—may make no difference to the subsequent history of the world; but this can hardly be true of decisions like Teresa's, which are momentous not just for her but for all the people whose lives she will subsequently touch. No matter how similar the previous histories of OW and HW, differences between them will begin to accumulate from the moment Teresa's choice is made, and these will generate still others, until little similarity remains. This is true especially because almost anything of moment, besides the direct effect that it has upon events, affects also the identity of people who will live in the future.[8] In Mann's example we are asked to reduce the task of comparing OW and HW to that of comparing the grandeurs of opera and the virtues of charitable work in the hospice movement, ignoring all the many effects that $Teresa_o$ and $Teresa_h$ have on others. The incommensurability between the values of these alternative careers is then supposed to transmit itself to the worlds as a whole. But even if these two values are indeed incommensurable, like the apples and oranges of the adage, the differences between OW and HW are not limited just to the differences between $Teresa_o$'s operatic career and $Teresa_h$'s care of the dying poor, but instead propagate throughout the respective worlds. Incommensurability at the level of the components may simply vanish at the level of worlds considered as a whole. Apples may be incommensurable with oranges, but a five-course dinner centred on duck *à l'orange* is not thereby incommensurable with another culminating in *pommes bonne femme*.

A similar problem arises with Mann's argument against the claim that OW and HW are equal in value. Mann thinks this claim is implausible because we can imagine slight variations on OW that would clearly make it better without thereby making it better than HW. In "Opera-plus-*Tosca* World" Teresa gives one more performance of *Tosca* than in OW: other things being equal, Opera-plus-*Tosca* World is better than OW. But it would be very odd to claim that if only Teresa had given one more per-

formance of *Tosca* her choice of an operatic career over a life spent caring for the dying poor would thereby have been vindicated (270–1). On the surface, this argument is quite compelling. However, a lot is buried in its liberal *ceteris paribus* clause. If Opera-plus-*Tosca* World differs from OW only in that it contains an extra performance of *Tosca* by Teresa, it is clearly better. But in the actual world, which OW is supposed somewhat to resemble, things are not like that: an extra performance of *Tosca* by Teresa means one less performance of *Tosca* by some other soprano, or one less performance of some other worthy but neglected opera. It means another night away from home for the members of the orchestra and chorus, some of whose domestic arrangements may already be under strain because of their unsociable working hours. It means extra traffic around the opera house, with the dangers attendant upon that. And because many opera companies make a loss, even on performances of such popular items as *Tosca*, it means the expenditure of money that could instead buy oral rehydration therapy for hundreds of dying children in Africa.

Perhaps, then, Opera-plus-*Tosca* World is worse than OW. If OW is the actual world, it had better be; otherwise the fact that it could be improved by the addition of an extra performance of *Tosca* would itself be enough to show that it is not the best possible world. Mann here tacitly assumes that OW is not maximal in order to bolster an argument for the incommensurability of OW with HW, the point of which is to undermine comparability and so lead us eventually to reject the claim that OW (or HW) is maximal. But the non-maximality of OW is built in at the start.

Mann's argument against comparability is nevertheless unaffected by this complaint. He can rewrite using Opera-less-*Tosca* World instead: clearly worse than OW, this world is not thereby worse than HW, and so OW and HW are not plausibly thought to be equal in value. Mann's point is that we can sensibly make comparisons between OW and worlds that are variations upon it, but cannot make similar comparisons between OW and HW. This would seem to lead straight to the downfall of maximality, at least when that doctrine is combined with the claim that the actual world is the best possible. But perhaps there is room for manouevre even here. Mann assumes that if HW and OW are commensurable, they must be so in much the same way that OW is commensurable with worlds such as Opera-plus- and Opera-less-*Tosca* World. But comparability is a more complex phenomenon than this. Direct comparison is possible between

OW and its trivial variants, but as we move through the worlds, such direct comparison may become impossible. Still, a chain of judgements may provide, *via* transitivity, grounds for judging that one world is better than another even when that judgement cannot be made directly. Is it implausible to suppose that there is a world better than HW, but worse than a world that is plausibly judged to be about as good as some worlds that are comparable with OW but rank below it? This looks like an unanswerable question, but that is perhaps just an indication that it is the kind of question only God can be expected to answer.

Mann's suggestion is that possible worlds fall into partitioned clusters. There is no way of ranking worlds from different clusters because there is nothing on which to base the ranking (271). Are there worlds that fall into more than one cluster? Consider Crossword-Puzzle World, in which Teresa, shrinking from the choice between opera and the hospice movement, devotes herself to becoming a champion crossword-puzzle solver, with great success. Mann concedes that this world is comparable with HW, for he thinks there is a right answer to the question, "Which world is better?" (270). Presumably he would think the same thing of the comparison of OW with Crossword-Puzzle World as well. But then Crossword-Puzzle World appears in two clusters. Of course, to establish the commensurability of OW with HW, there must be a right answer to the question, "How much better than Crossword-Puzzle World are HW and OW respectively?" If we could answer this question, we could probably make the comparison between the two worlds directly, and not need Crossword-Puzzle World to establish a baseline.

The example of Crossword-Puzzle World shows that there are worlds that are commensurable with both OW and HW, even though these worlds are incommensurable with each other. How easily does this fit into the Leibnizian framework once shorn of its commitments to comparability and maximality? Because the "better-than" relation is transitive, the incommensurability of any two worlds w and u implies there are no worlds worse than w but better than u. It also implies that there are no worlds worse than any of the worlds that are just as good as w but better than any of the worlds just as good as u. We may not even need exact equals of both the incommensurable worlds in order to draw further conclusions still, for we might judge some world to be worse than Opera-plus-*Tosca* World by more than Opera-plus-*Tosca* World is better than OW, and yet judge it to

be better than HW. And so on. It is not surprising that incomensurability has often been thought to entail the failure of transitivity.[9]

Crossword-Puzzle World is troubling in another way as well: if there are worlds that are worse than both OW and HW, there may be worlds that are better than both as well, and neither is the best world in its cluster. Crossword-Puzzle World is generated simply by replacing Teresa's devotion to opera or the dying poor with a zeal for crossword-puzzles, holding all else constant. It seems obvious that a similar procedure could generate worlds that surpass both OW and HW, for these worlds, if they resemble the actual world at all, contain disasters like the Lisbon earthquake that so exercised Voltaire; certainly they must contain plenty of dying poor, and diseases like the tuberculosis that kills Violetta at the end of *La Traviata* and so provides that soprano role with so much of its pathos.

Mann claims, *pace* Leibniz, that sometimes the rational thing to do is choose randomly, especially in cases of equipoise or incommensurability (272). But we would still expect random divine choice to be exercised only among worlds that are at the apex of their own clusters. In the face of Voltaire's satire it is hard to believe that this is the best of all possible worlds. But by much the same token, it is hard to believe that this is the best world within the cluster of worlds commensurable with it, for nothing seems easier than imagining worlds better than this. Leibniz claims that among all the possible worlds there is none better than this, because all the rest are worse; if that is incredible, is it really much easier to believe that among all the possible worlds there is none better, because all the rest are either worse or incommensurable?

III

The series of quibbles and rejoinders offered on Leibniz's behalf above has, I admit, as much the character of evasion as of refutation. Leibniz was a systematic thinker who sought to knit his metaphysical principles together in a tight and harmonious whole, and Mann's argument will hardly get going if it is required to conform to every element in the system bar Leibniz's commitments to comparability and maximality. Nor is it reasonable to demand from Mann's brief sketch the kinds of details that Leibniz presented throughout an entire philosophical life. So I suggest that we interpret Mann's argument as a piece of persuasion, designed to detach would-be Leibnizians from a commitment to maximality by showing

the undesirable consequences that holding fast to comparability forces upon us in the analysis of choices like that faced by Teresa.

But what are these undesirable consequences supposed to be? The defender of comparability is under no obligation to produce compelling reasons for believing that opera matters more than the dying poor, or the dying poor more than opera. It is obviously true that some people face agonising choices between alternative and incompatible lives they might go on to lead, and it does indeed trivialise those choices and that agony to claim that there is always a clear and right answer to the question, "Which is best?" This is one of the standard complaints against crude and even not-so-crude forms of consequentialism. But the defender of comparability need not and should not be committed to any such trivialising attitude. That there is a right answer to the question, "Which is best?" does not imply that this answer is easily or ever recognised, or that the choice will be unattended by regret. The boot may in fact be on the other foot here, for Teresa's agony surely reflects, amongst other things, the fear that she will make the wrong choice. Persuaded that there is no right choice to make, she may feel immense but inappropriate relief: if it's all just a matter of apples and oranges, what was she getting quite so worked up about? Equally, if the rational thing to do in cases of choice between incommensurables is to choose at random, we can imagine Teresa determining the path that her whole life is to take by tossing a coin. But it is hard to believe that anyone undergoing the agonies of choice that Mann attributes to Teresa could find any resolution in this manner, and there are few of us who would advise someone in Teresa's situation to flip a coin. Choices between incommensurables are not at all like choices between indifferent alternatives; the decision-procedures that we happily invoke to settle the latter are quite out of place when we face the former. Fidelity to the phenomenology of tragic choices like Teresa's is difficult to attain. Distortion seems just as likely to result from an over-hasty resort to incommensurability as from the glib insistence that if neither of two courses of action is better than the other then they must be equally good.

But, as we have seen, the defender of Leibniz's claim that this is the best among possible worlds need not believe that one of the choices open to Teresa is better than the other or else that they are equally good. Comparability may hold of worlds without holding of all their constituent parts. Mann is elsewhere sensitive to the difference between Leibniz's views about creatures and his views about worlds: there is no best possible

creature, but there is a best possible world, because the latter but not the former has an intrinsic maximum (267). But if there is this sort of difference between parts of worlds and worlds entire, then perhaps there is also another difference, namely, that parts of worlds are sometimes incommensurable whilst worlds entire are not.

Leibniz might have repudiated this suggestion. Where he does discuss degrees of goodness amongst creatures, it seems that he held to comparability, though not to connectivity. Responding to Diroys' claim that any change must either be for better or for worse, Leibniz argues:

> But I do not see why a thing cannot change its kind in relation to good or evil, without changing its degree. In the transition from enjoyment of music to enjoyment of painting, or vice versa from the pleasure of the eyes to that of the ears, the degree of enjoyment may remain the same, the latter gaining no advantage over the former save that of novelty. (*Theodicy*, s. 202; GP VI, 237/H253)

There is no threat to the uniqueness of the best possible world in this admission: "the best may be changed into another that neither yields to it nor surpasses it; but there will always be an order among them, and that the best order possible." What it suggests is that Leibniz would treat a case like Teresa's as a choice between equal degrees but different kinds of goodness, all the while maintaining that the choice she makes is part of that whole order of things that has no equal.

I agree with Mann that this insistence on strict comparability is unfaithful to our experience of moral choice, which confronts us with the unhappy fact that some good things must be given up in order to possess others. That we face such choices is of course true even when we can provide convincing reasons for thinking that one course of action is overall better than another: a career as a champion crossword-puzzle solver is not worthless just because it is incompatible with a more worthwhile life devoted to care of the terminally ill. If there are different kinds of goodness then we may face painful choices between them even when discrimination is possible on the basis of the degree of goodness involved. Equally, ignorance about how our choices will turn out often compels us to choose without being able to give any convincing reasons for choosing one way rather than another. All of this is consistent with a Leibnizian commitment to comparability, and allows us to give at least a moderate degree of recognition to the tragic character of so many of the choices that we face.

What cannot fit within the framework of Leibnizian optimism is the claim that some values are always in conflict with others and that the idea of some universal scale upon which they may all be weighed, and these conflicts resolved, is an illusion. If this is so, there can be no rational arbitration between competing values. To the non-Leibnizian who is also not a theist, that may be a cost that is easily borne. But admitting that some of our values are incommensurable with others is a harder task for those who, like Mann, wish to retain Leibniz's theism but dispense with his moral rationalism.

<div align="center">IV</div>

In a footnote, Mann directs us, for further discussion of incommensurability, to Thomas Nagel's essay, "The Fragmentation of Value," and to work by James Griffin and Joseph Raz (271).[10] Nagel's characterisation of moral conflict rests upon the idea that there are several different types of practical reasons: self-interested reasons; reasons deriving from general frameworks of rights and obligations; particular reasons arising out of special relationships, voluntary and involuntary; reasons deriving from the intrinsic value of certain kinds of knowledge or creativity; and so on. Arbitration between these competing kinds of reasons is not always possible, for that presupposes a higher level of reasoning that allows us to adjudicate the claims of the lower, and no such higher level exists. Nagel thus adopts a form of value pluralism, a position that has been given its most eloquent and radical expression in recent times in the writings of Sir Isaiah Berlin. Now clearly it would be wrong, on the basis of a footnote, to attribute to Mann views expressed by Nagel, let alone the opinions of value pluralists like Berlin, whom he does not mention. But it is, I think, worth exploring the central claims of this value pluralism in order to get an idea of the philosophical framework within which views about the incommensurability of values are most commonly set out.

Leibniz, it is safe to say, is no value pluralist. Berlin, outlining those claims about the unity of values with which he finds himself in disagreement, sums them up as follows: .

> that there exist true, immutable, universal, timeless objective values, valid for all men, everywhere, at all times; that these values are at least in principle

realisable, whether or not human beings are, or have been, or even will be, capable of realising them on earth; that these values form a coherent system, a harmony which, conceived in social terms, constitutes the perfect society.[11]

Conceive this harmony in more than social terms—conceive it metaphysically—and we have here a nice account of Leibnizian optimism. Leibniz holds that in the best possible world all the various measures of perfection are jointly at a maximum. The best possible world is not, as some interpreters suggest, that world in which various competing perfections trade off in optimal fashion, for on Leibniz's view, no trade-off is required.[12] Leibniz claims that the various perfections are consistent with one another; he claims that value pluralism, as a metaphysical thesis, is false.

If Leibniz is a staunch defender of the unity and harmony of all values, its most distinguished opponent is perhaps Machiavelli, to whom Berlin attributes the recognition that

> ends equally ultimate, equally sacred, may contradict each other, that entire systems of value may come into collision without possibility of rational arbitration, and that not merely in exceptional circumstances, as a result of abnormality of accident or error . . . but . . . as part of the normal human situation.[13]

If this clash of value-systems is determined by the metaphysics of morals— if it is part of the normal human situation not merely because of the frailties of feeble humans or the fickleness of a fallen world but because some values are necessarily and in themselves in conflict with others— then even God, in selecting a world to create, must choose between competing ends. God must pursue some goals at the expense of others, and must do so without this choice being determined by reason. It is easy to see why Leibniz shies away from such a scheme.

Of course, Leibniz does think that some good things remain uncreated. That is true because not all good things are compossible. This kind of sacrifice could be avoided only if everything possible was actual, as would be the case either if there was but one possible world or if God could create all of them. You can't have everything unless you are a necessitarian like Spinoza or a modal realist like David Lewis.[14] Instead, you must be content with as much as you can possibly have. I take up the issue of pluralism's compatibility with an orthodox doctrine of creation in the next section. But the more immediate threat to traditional theism posed by strong versions of value pluralism is that they render the very notion of

God as being embodying all perfections incoherent. The Machiavellian fox, who knows many things, may be roguishly appealing in a way that the Leibnizian hedgehog, who knows one big thing, is not, but speculative theists are surely and above all else those who know one big thing, something that encompasses everything else within it.[15] Leibniz does not beg the question of the relation between the goodness of God and the goodness of creation by assuming a logical entailment between a perfect being and a perfect world; rather, he sees that the notion of a perfect being is coherent only if there is no incompatibility between perfections as such. Leibniz's favourite argument for the existence of God, the ontological, is standardly prefaced by him with a proof that the concept of a perfect being is consistent, this proof depending upon a demonstration that all positive attributes or perfections are consistent one with another.[16] Having shown that the existence of a perfect being is possible, Leibniz goes on to prove that the existence of such a being is necessary. Whether these arguments are good ones or not, it is obvious that any philosophical theist is going to have to endorse the Leibnizian claim that all perfections are consistent, on pain of rejecting the coherence of the notion of a perfect being altogether.

To the extent that claims about the incommensurability of values rest upon intuitions that drive towards a strong version of value pluralism, they also drive away from traditional theism and its claim that perfections are all compatible one with another, at least in God. If values are incompatible and incommensurable, what sense can attach to the orthodox theistic claim that God is perfectly good? How can we talk about "goodness" in general terms at all? Traditional theism presupposes the falsity of value pluralism, and so cannot help itself to conclusions made plausible by that pluralism when doing theodicy.

V

Even if we set this deep problem aside, we must be able to incorporate value pluralism into an orthodox doctrine of creation. If either OW or HW is the actual world, God must have chosen one rather than the other to create. Did God have a reason for so choosing? If these worlds are incommensurable, the reason has nothing to do with goodness construed as a common currency into which all values can be converted, for pluralism rejects any such neutral medium of exchange. Although God knows all

there is to know about these worlds, the choice of one over the other is opaque to knowledge and wisdom; divine choice cannot be exercised in accord with good will, for there is no fact about the relative goodness of these worlds to which a good will might respond.

Perhaps this is not too bad. If possible worlds are partitioned into clusters within which comparability holds but between which it does not, God chooses between clusters without reference to goodness but within clusters in accord with it. If OW is the actual world, it is the best world in its cluster: God's goodness explains why it was chosen over the other worlds in the cluster, and the choice of cluster either has no explanation or is explained by something other than goodness—divine love for opera, perhaps.

That God might pursue some ends and neglect others on the basis of mere will is a suggestion that Leibniz would of course reject. Free of Leibniz's metaphysical assumptions, it does not at first appear grotesque. Robert Adams notes that we often pursue a goal even when we realise that the pursuit of some alternative would be overall better, as when we devote ourselves to the preservation of, for example, Welsh culture, whilst recognising that the resources thus consumed might be devoted to something more excellent.[17] To the Welsh, if to no-one else, such a choice seems a perfectly good one. If we can rightly neglect better goals for the sake of others that we love then God may do the same. But here incommensurability plays no role at all: the goal pursued is explicitly recognised to be less excellent than the goal that is neglected. Adding incommensurability to the mix might at first seem to strengthen the proposed theodicy, for the goals neglected are now judged neither better nor worse nor much the same. However, it is easy to see that the pursuit of one goal to the neglect of others can turn vicious. There must be a balance struck between the good attained by preserving Welsh culture and the real and opportunity costs thus imposed. Few of us would claim that the preservation of national culture trumps fundamental liberties or the provision of basic necessities such as food and shelter, and we can easily recognise when the demands made on behalf of such a goal have become outrageous. We acknowledge a hierarchy of goods as well as a scale upon which different goods can be weighed, and though we may refuse to let the best drive out the good, we do so only on condition that the good is not the enemy of the tolerable.

Value pluralists have a harder time making sense of the ways in which we strive to balance the pursuit of rival goods; if there is no hierarchy

of goods nor any scale in which they can all be weighed, then there is no sense of 'overall' with which to criticise the pursuit of one good at the expense of others as worse overall than a more balanced diet. But value pluralism is in a strong position to resist the designation of some restricted set of goods as the only goods worthy of pursuit: no political authority can have good reason to impose a particular pattern of life on its citizens if there is no pattern of life that is privileged. Thus pluralism has often been linked with political liberalism.[18] Value pluralism rejects any form of moral rationalism, denying that agonising choices arise only from limitations in our knowledge, understanding or reasoning. But unlike moral relativism, value pluralism insists that the various and conflicting values really are all values, not mere preferences. The liberalism to which it gives rise is therefore tragic and agonistic rather than optimistic.

What happens when this tragic and agonistic liberalism is transposed into a doctrine of divine creation? Mann introduces his discussion of the topic of the best of all possible worlds by rehearsing the conflict between theological voluntarism—that God's will completely determines what is good and bad—and moral rationalism—that goodness and badness completely determine God's will. Leibniz is of course an exponent of the latter. Extreme voluntarism of the Cartesian sort exalts divine sovereignty by insisting that there are no truths binding on God; had God willed differently, two plus two would not equal four and sadism would be a virtue. Moral rationalism binds God fast, even if, as Leibniz claims, with a moral rather than a metaphysical necessity. Value pluralism appears to offer a neat way to split the difference between the extremes of voluntarism and rationalism. The voluntarists suggest that, whatever world God had chosen for creation, it would thereby have been good, whilst the rationalists are driven to assume that there is but one best possible world, and that is the one and only world that a perfectly good God will create. If values are objective, as the rationalists claim, but incompatible and incommensurable, as voluntarism suggests, then even God, in creating, must make the kind of painful choice with which we, as political animals, are all too familiar. Comparability will direct God to choose one of the best possible worlds that is at the apex of its cluster, but the choice between clusters will necessarily be tragic, involving the sacrifice of some values for the sake of others.

Speculative theism has a hard time accommodating the notion that creation is itself tragic. At least in its mainstream, Christian versions,

theism traces the agonies of this world to the Fall rather than to the
creative activity preceding it. Theism must also incorporate the claim that
values are incompatible and incommensurable into an adequate theologi-
cal ethics, and again, the extremes of rationalism and voluntarism define
the boundaries here. Voluntarism fits neatly with a simple version of
divine command theory in which what is good or bad is so merely because
God commands or condemns it. The equally simple view on the rational-
ist side is that what is good or bad is so independently of God's will, and
it is because of this intrinsic goodness or badness that God either pre-
scribes or proscribes it. In either case, we are assured that the content of
divine commands correlates perfectly with what is good or bad, for God
is either the font or else the perfect conduit of value.

     If value pluralism is true, some choices are between incommensu-
rable and rival goods, and if God commands the pursuit of some goods
over others, still these others are goods all the same. Teresa's choice of
career is easily reconfigured so as to present a choice between a religious
life and a life devoted to other and incommensurable values whose pursuit
God proscribes. It is hard to know how a theist could respond to this
challenge. Love and worship of God and obedience to divine command-
ments require the devout to make many sacrifices, and theology has at
least sometimes recognised that the things sacrificed by the religious are
in some sense good. But it has also standardly claimed that, in compari-
son with the value of the religious life, those things incompatible with
devotion to God are as nothing. Although hardly an exact term, 'as
nothing' is comparative, implying the commensurability of religious and
non-religious ways of life. Perhaps we might read it non-comparatively,
understanding God to call us away from the pursuit of some values and
into the pursuit of others not because the latter are in any sense better but
simply because those are the ones that God chose. This hardly seems to
offer a happy medium between voluntarism and rationalism. If God
selects from among the many and competing values a few that we are
enjoined to pursue, proscribing all others, and if that selection is itself es-
sentially arbitrary, we are forced to abandon the perfect correlation
between what is good and bad on the one hand and what God commends
and condemns on the other. Just as the standard theistic notion of a
perfectly good being is rendered incoherent by the recognition that some
goods are in themselves incompatible with others, so the notion of obedience

to God is threatened when religious values are set against other values for no reason besides the exercise of a divine yet arbitrary will.

Because value pluralism is so foreign to Western moral thought and so distant from the traditions of theism, its incorporation into theology is highly problematic. If pluralism is true, then this is of course a task that philosophical theology must address. But if pluralism is attractive mainly because it appears to offer a handy way out of certain difficulties within theodicy, these benefits are hardly likely to outweigh the costs. This is not to deny that value pluralism offers us a profound insight into the tragic nature of the human condition; perhaps it gives us a better account of that condition than any other. But it is to reject pluralism as an adequate metaphysical basis for theology: incommensurability, if it be admitted, must be contained within the scope of the choices made by creatures, and not allowed to transmit itself upward into the choice that a perfectly good God made in selecting just this world for creation. That we often face hard choices is undeniable, but any account of those choices that threatens the high doctrine of the absolute perfection of God is one that theists must reject.

It is understandable that theists should seek to distance themselves from Leibniz's claim that this is the best of all possible worlds; no-one wants to be the butt of Voltaire's many good jokes. But Mann offers little relief here, for he still requires us to believe that there are no worlds better than this one, even if there are many that are neither worse nor much the same. I think Leibniz has the better of the argument: if there is no best of all possible worlds because of incommensurability, we are owed an account of how anything—even God—can be thought of as perfectly good.

Stephen Grover

Queens College
New York

NOTES

    1. William E. Mann, "The best of all possible worlds," in Scott MacDonald, ed., *Being and Goodness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 250–77. Page references in the text are to this article.
    2. "Why Only the Best is Good Enough," *Analysis* 48:4 (1988), 224; "Satisfied Pigs and Dissatisfied Philosophers," *Philosophical Investigations* 16:2 (1993), 212–30.

3. Leibniz admits that something may change without thereby becoming either better or worse; the degree of goodness remains the same, but the kind alters (*Theodicy*, s. 202; GP VI, 237/H 253). He therefore did not hold to connectivity where parts of worlds were concerned. But lack of connectivity at the level of parts of worlds need not imply lack of connectivity at the level of worlds as a whole. See below, section III.

4. I discuss some aspects of Leibniz's use of the principle that God will not choose in cases of indifferent advantage in "West or best? Sufficient Reason in the Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence," *Studia Leibnitiana*, Band XXVIII/1 (1996), 84–92.

5. See, e.g., Nicholas Rescher, *Leibniz: An Introduction to his Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979), pp. 23–37.

6. The 'possible-in-its-own-nature' defense against the necessary existence of the best possible world is discussed in Robert Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Idealist, Theist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 12ff. Robert Sleigh doubts that Leibniz still held to the defense at the time of the Theodicy; see Robert C. Sleigh, Jr., *Leibniz and Arnauld: A Commentary on their Correspondence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990) pp. 80–83.

7. Saul Kripke, "Naming and Necessity," in D. Davidson & G. Harman, ed., *Semantics of Natural Language*, 2nd ed. (Dordrecht, 1972), p. 267.

8. "How many of us could truly claim: Even if railways and motor cars had never been invented, I would still have been born?"; Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1984), p. 361. Whilst no George Stephenson or Henry Ford, Teresa can be presumed to have enough of an impact to bring it about that some people live who owe their existence to her choice of career.

9. See, for example, Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), p. 325.

10. Thomas Nagel, "The Fragmentation of Value" in his *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1979), pp. 128–41.

11. Quoted from Sidney Morgenbesser and Jonathan Lieberson, "Isaiah Berlin", in *Isaiah Berlin: A Celebration* (Chicago, 1991) p. 3.

12. Here I follow David Blumenfeld, "Perfection and happiness in the best possible world," in N. Jolley, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Leibniz* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1995), 382–410, pp. 385–93.

13. Quoted from Sidney Morgenbesser and Jonathan Lieberson, "Isaiah Berlin", in *Isaiah Berlin: A Celebration* (Chicago, 1991) pp. 6–7.

14. Lewis is also a necessitarian; he holds that it is necessary that there is something—in fact, everything—rather than nothing; D. Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), p. 73.

15. For the contrast between the fox and the hedgehog, see Berlin's essay of that name (London; Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1953), reprinted in his *Russian Thinkers* (London; Hogarth Press, 1978), 22–81.

16. See, for example, A VI, iii, 572–9/Park 90–102.

17. Robert M. Adams, "Existence, Self-Interest and the Problem of Evil," *Nous* 13 (1979), reprinted in Robert M. Adams, *The Virtue of Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 65–76, p. 72.

18. Whether the link between pluralism and liberalism is really as strong as this is questioned at length by John Gray; see J. Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (London: Harper Collins, 1995/Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 143–56.