

AXIARCHISM AND SELECTORS

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We may be said to account for a thing
when we shew that it is so best.
—Berkeley

Abstract: This essay offers a defense of Axiarchism's answer to the question, why does the world exist? against prominent objections leveled against it by Derek Parfit. Parfit rejects the Axiarchist answer while abstracting from it his own Selector strategy. I argue that the abstraction fails, and that even if we were to regard Axiarchism as an instance of a Selector hypothesis, we should regard it as the only viable one. I also argue that Parfit's abstraction leads him to mistake the nature and, thereby, the force of Axiarchism's claim to being an ultimate explanation. Finally, I defend the Axiarchist's claim that the good could not fail to rule.

In "Why Anything? Why this?," Derek Parfit evaluates a number of candidate answers to the title's questions, i.e., why does anything at all exist and why, out of all the vast number of possible universes, is this the one that exists?¹ Among the answers examined, one plays a pivotal role in the essay, Axiarchism. Though Parfit rejects the Axiarchist's answer, he abstracts from it what he thinks is a promising explanatory strategy involving what he calls "Selectors." In the following, I will argue that the Axiarchist's answer cannot be abstracted so as to open the door to Parfit's other Selectors. Moreover, if we regard Axiarchism as an instance of a Selector hypothesis, we should regard it as the only one with promise. In addition, I will argue that Parfit's abstraction leads him to mistake the nature and, thereby, the force of Axiarchism's claim to being an ultimate explanation. Finally, I will defend the Axiarchist's claim that the good could not fail to rule and offer an assessment of where the debate between Parfit and the Axiarchist stands in light of that defense.

Abstracting Axiarchism

In brief, Axiarchism is the view that the world exists because it is *good* that it exist. That is to say, the world exists because it *ought* to, where the "ought" is the ethical "ought."² Is this, in the end, a fundamentally different claim from the more familiar view that the world exists because it is good, but is brought into existence by the power of a divine personal agent? No quick answer is available. On the one hand, the leading contemporary exponent of Axiarchism, John Leslie, sees it and theism as enjoying a rather friendly relationship. He suggests that God, as the perfect being, may be what is immediately required by the principle and then in turn, God would be responsible for creating everything else.³ Other proponents, however, insist that Axiarchism does not appeal to an agent of any kind, but rather to something abstract in nature. Nicholas Rescher, another prominent advocate, insists that his version of Axiarchism, what he calls, "Axiogenesis," invites "[n]o such anthropomorphism." As he sees it, "[th]e real emerges from the manifold of possibility, a *modus operandi* that is altogether natural."⁴ Then again, there is a long tradition of Christian Platonism—ultimately inspired by Plato and Plotinus, but much of it travelling through the Christian Neoplatonist Pseudo-Dionysius—that is deeply inspired by axiarchic considerations. Some in this tradition see Axiarchism as providing insight into God's basic nature and the nature of divine power. The most deliberate development of this idea is to be found, I believe, in Ralph Cudworth's work where he attempts to use axiarchism to give an account of the nature of personal agency, both human and Divine.⁵ Regardless, Parfit treats Axiarchism as appealing to an abstract principle, that the best ought to be, not to a personal agent. Consequently, for the purposes of this paper, we will just assume that this is correct.

Despite the fact that Axiarchism is at least as old as Plato and has exerted a profound influence throughout most of our philosophical history, philosophers now are typically dismissive of it. Parfit, however, is not. As he sees it, there is some explanatory power here, but it needs to be honed in on. To this end, he breaks the view down into three claims:

- (1) It would be best if reality were a certain way.
- (2) Reality is that way.
- (3) (1) explains (2).⁶

Neither (1) nor (2) is unique to Axiarchism and it is clear enough what they are claiming. (3), the claim that (2) is true *because* of (1), is Axiarchism's distinctive claim and so he proposes that we simply allow both (1) and (2) so as to focus on it. But (3) poses a challenge. What sense of "because" is the Axiarchist appealing to in claiming that the world exists *because* it is good? Despite the apparent difficulty of understanding the nature of the explanation offered by (3), Parfit advises that we not be too quick to write it off. After all, we are seeking an answer to an extraordinary question, an explanation for the whole of reality. It's not unreasonable to suspect that the answer itself might be extraordinary in some way. If we hope to make progress here, we should keep an open mind.

With this in view, Parfit then attempts to extract what he takes to be the valuable aspect of the Axiarchist's explanatory strategy.

Axiarchism might be expressed as follows. We are now supposing that of all the ways that the whole of reality might be, one is both the very best, and is the way that reality is. On the Axiarchist View, *that is no coincidence*. This claim, I believe, makes sense.⁷

That is not to say that he accepts the Axiarchist's answer. Axiarchism's (3) can only be the explanation of the world's existence if the world does, in fact, possess the characteristic of being the best. Parfit rejects the view not because of (3) but because of (2). There is just too much seemingly pointless suffering in the world for it to be true that value rules. However, for the sake of assessing the explanatory value of Axiarchism, Parfit simply allows that this is the best of all possible worlds.⁸

It should be mentioned at this point that any Axiarchist will readily agree that the presence of evil in this world, or even just anything less than the best, is both the most obvious and serious challenge the view faces. But we should also note that there is a long, rich, and we might add, still developing history of theistic responses to the problem of evil that Axiarchists can and do adapt for their own purposes. Naturally, Parfit's objection would have to deal with these to be successful. But set this aside. We will return to it at the very end of the paper.

Instead, let's focus on Parfit's suggestion that in Axiarchism we get an instance of a general explanatory strategy with some promise. To draw it out, we just need to "abstract from the optimism of the Axiarchist View."⁹ That gives us this:

Of the countless cosmic possibilities, one both has some very special feature, and is the possibility that obtains. That is no coincidence. This possibility obtains because it has this feature.¹⁰

Parfit then reviews a number of hypotheses that fit this form of explanation. For instance, one such very special feature might be *Maximality*. Suppose the world is such that it allows for the greatest number of possible beings to be actual. Well, if reality is, in fact, as full as possible, then it might be no coincidence that both these things are true. The suggestion is that the most full world might exist precisely *because* it has this feature. Maximality would then be a "Selector." So, according to Maximality, there is a fundamental principle that "being possible and part of the fullest way that reality could be, is sufficient for being actual."¹¹ In this sense, the world would exist because it was "selected" for this feature. Or to go in the opposite direction, if it were the case that nothing existed, then that might be no coincidence. Leibniz believed just plain nothingness would be the simplest of possibilities.¹² So, on this, the Null View, perhaps Simplicity would be the Selector. Accordingly, the Null hypothesis would appeal to a fundamental principle to the effect that being the simplest possibility is

enough for being actual. Of course, we know the Null hypothesis to be false. Maybe the Maximality hypothesis has legs. But so may other Selectors. Each will have to be judged on its merits. Regardless, the upshot is that the abstraction from Axiarchism has yielded a potentially viable explanatory approach to the question, why does the world exist.

Why the Abstraction Fails

The problem Parfit faces is that abstracting from Axiarchism in this way abstracts away all the explanatory power. If we allow that Axiarchism is a Selector hypothesis then we should regard it as the only one with any promise.

Recall Parfit's simplification of the Axiarchist's answer:

- (1) It would be best if reality were a certain way.
- (2) Reality is that way.
- (3) (1) explains (2).

According to what Parfit tells us, the abstracted version would be:

- (4) Of the countless cosmic possibilities, one has some very special feature.
- (5) Reality is that way.
- (6) (4) explains (5).

I take it from this that Parfit intends (1) and (1*) to be equivalent.

- (1*) Of all the countless cosmic possibilities, one has the very special feature of being the best that could exist.

But this way of wording it masks the vital core of the Axiarchist's answer, because the wording of (1*) masks what's so special about Axiarchism's special feature by mimicking the form of a merely *descriptive* claim. But, of course, the Axiarchist is making use of the claim that the best *ought* to exist. According to Axiarchism, (1) is an *evaluative* claim that is more perspicuously expressed by (1**),

- (1**) Of all the cosmic possibilities, one has the very special feature of being the one that ought to exist.¹³

Therein lies the heart of the Axiarchist explanatory strategy. The reason Plato, Plotinus and so many others looked to the ethical realm to explain why the world exists is because there is an intrinsic connection between goodness and being. Maximality, Simplicity, Mathematical Elegance, what have you, might qualify as special in some sense of "special," but only the good is special in the *relevant* way.

To see this, it helps to see that the Axiarchist is exploiting three points. First, ethical facts are *necessary*. God could no more make benevolence evil, or wanton cruelty good, than He could make a round square.¹⁴ Second, these

necessary ethical facts are, if you will, directed to being. For contrast, consider another necessary claim, such as that if there are three cats and they are joined by four more cats, there will be seven cats.¹⁵ While perfectly necessary, that fact says nothing at all about the existence of those cats, one way or the other. But the necessary ethical facts have a built-in connection with existence. The good should *be*. And the bad should *not be*. The best world should *exist*. The worst world should *not exist*. Third, ethical claims aren't just *directed* to being, they make *demands* on it. They say things *must* be a certain way; it is *necessary* for them to be a certain way. The best world *must exist*. The worst world *must not*. This necessity is, of course, ethical necessity, but the Axiarchist's admittedly extraordinary proposal, the part addressed to our extraordinary question, is the claim that perhaps it is a metaphysical necessity that this ethical demand itself is creatively efficacious.¹⁶ However extraordinary that claim is, the key point is that it is based upon a real, intrinsic connection between Axiarchism's choice of a Selector, and a *necessity for something to exist*. And necessity, at least *some* kind of necessity, is presumably what we want.¹⁷ We are, after all, looking for an ultimate explanation of why the world exists. We don't want to leave room for any why-questions to linger about.¹⁸

With that in mind, contrast Axiarchism's answer with, for instance, Maximality's Selector and its filling in of (4).

(M) Of the countless cosmic possibilities, one is as full as possible,

and Maximality's Fundamental Principle,

(MFP) The world must be as full as possible.

One immediately wants to know what the Maximalist proposes is the *intrinsic* connection between (M) being the fullest world and, (MFP), the necessity for such a world to exist? No answer is forthcoming. Maximality's Selector, the feature of being as full as possible, says nothing one way or the other about the existence of that world. It only tells us something about its' denizens; it simply tells us that *if* it exists, there are as many as possible. Nothing about this feature tells us why this world would exist. The same goes for the other Selectors. That a world is, for instance, the Most Mathematically Elegant, tells us nothing about why this world would exist rather than nothing, let alone why this world would exist rather than some other. And it certainly tells us nothing about the *necessity* for this world to exist. The other Selectors simply don't carry an intrinsic reason for being with them. No other Selector has Axiarchism's natural connection with the *necessity for something to exist*. Consequently, Axiarchism would seem to be the only Selector which brings to the table anything resembling the kind of explanatory power we are looking for.

So much then for my first objection; Axiarchism is the only Selector hypothesis with any promise.

Axiarchism and Ultimacy

My second objection grows out of the first in the sense that it seems that mislocating the source of Axiarchism's explanatory power is what leads Parfit to mistake the nature and, thereby, the force of Axiarchism's claim to being an *ultimate* explanation.

Consider one of Parfit's other Selectors. Again, let's use Maximality. If that explanatory possibility obtains, then this world is the fullest and it was selected for this feature. But we can then ask, why does this explanatory possibility obtain rather than some other, say, Simplicity? Of course, it might just be a brute fact that it obtains. But, Parfit argues, it need not be. It could be that this explanatory possibility obtains because it has some feature which explains why it obtains.¹⁹ In other words, it may itself have been selected by some higher-order Selector possibility. Perhaps Maximality was selected because it produces the greatest variety of beings. In that case, Variety is the higher Selector principle. We now face the possibility of a regress of explanatory principles. But Parfit's view is that this doesn't mean that we haven't made some progress. After all, if we knew Maximality to be true, then we would have some explanation of why the world exists, but the regress of explanatory possibilities means that we don't have an *ultimate* explanation.

In response, Axiarchists might claim that their view is immune to this concern. Axiarchists tell us that the reason the world exists is because so is best. But when we ask why *this* is the explanatory possibility that obtains, they might answer, *because that is best*. And when we ask, in turn, why this explanatory hypothesis obtains we get the answer, *because that is best*, and so on. In this way, we might regard the Axiarchic principle as "self validating," as Nicholas Rescher puts it. But this strategy, Parfit argues, won't work. What we have now is a series of explanatory truths, and so now we need an explanation of why this series obtains rather than another series or no series at all. The root of the problem, as Parfit sees it, is the following.

What could select between these possibilities? Might goodness be the highest Selector because that is best, or non-arbitrariness be the Selector because that is the least arbitrary possibility? Neither suggestion, I believe, makes sense. Just as God could not make himself exist, no Selector could make itself the one that, at the highest level, rules. No Selector could settle *whether* it rules, since it cannot settle anything unless it does rule.²⁰

There are a number of important things going on in this passage that need to be addressed, but the first thing to say is that I agree that appealing to a series of Selector principles (Axiarchic or otherwise) will not solve the problem. To explain more clearly why, but also why I don't think this point effects Axiarchism's claim to being an ultimate explanation, I believe it will be helpful to note that Parfit's point here bears an ironic resemblance to a point made by the 17th century Axiarchist, Ralph Cudworth. In his *A Treatise concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*, Cudworth is concerned to refute

ethical voluntarism, or as he describes it, the view that "all moral good and evil, just and unjust are mere arbitrary and factitious things, that are created wholly by will."²¹ In the course of making his case, he argues that even when it comes to positive laws it is not the will of a ruler that obliges one to obey. Because,

...laws and commands do not run thus to will that this or that thing shall become just or unjust, obligatory or unlawful, or that men shall be obliged or obey; but only to require that something be done or not done. ...For it was never heard of that any one founded all his authority of commanding others, and others' obligation or duty to obey his commands, in a law of his own making, that men should be required, obliged, or bound to obey him. [Because] if it should be imagined that anyone should make a positive law to require that others should be obliged or bound to obey him, everyone would think such a law ridiculous and absurd. For if they were obliged before, then this law would be in vain and to no purpose. And if they were not before obliged, then they could not be obliged by any positive law, because they were not previously bound to obey such a person's commands.²²

First the resemblance. Then the irony. The resemblance between Cudworth's point and Parfit's is that in both cases the complaint is that we have a boot-strapping problem. In Cudworth's case, the would-be ruler can't solve his authority problem by issuing a second-order demand that his first-order demand ought to be obeyed because then we'll just want to know why we are obliged to obey this second-order demand. The only way such a demand would be obligating is if we were already obliged to obey his demand. In which case, the second-order demand would be superfluous. It wouldn't serve to validate the first-order demand. And, obviously, the problem is not removed by issuing a series of higher-order demands. A person cannot make his claim to authority self-validating; even an infinite series of demands to rule won't make one ruler. In Parfit's case the complaint is that the situation is much the same when it comes to Selector principles. No principle, not even the Axiarchic principle, can be validated by appealing to the same principle only at higher-level. But Cudworth's argument suggests that the situation is even worse than Parfit thinks. If the first-order principle needed validation, then it still needs it even with a second-order principle in place. The second-order principle is *entirely* impotent. Just as in the case of the would-be ruler's second-order demand, introducing a second-order principle doesn't even manage to push our problem back a step.

Now the irony. The irony lies in the fact that the point of Cudworth's argument is not that this is an unsolvable problem, but that this is a problem for the Axiarchist's arch enemy, the *ethical voluntarist*. There can be binding positive laws because there can be genuine ruling authorities. We have such when "natural justice or equity...gives to one the right or authority of commanding, and begets in another duty and obligation to obedience."²³

Justice itself enjoys underived authority. If one's rule is founded upon justice, Cudworth is claiming, then his commands are genuinely authoritative, and one is obliged by them.

That's the magic of the ethical. It's not that ethical requirements merely *demand* something in the way that I might demand that you bring me my coffee. They demand with *authority*. And that authority is underived. No further backing for their right to rule is called for. The Axiarchist principle is not "self-validating." However, we might, if we like, say that the question, why does the Axiarchic principle rule? is self-answering. We can say it is self-answering in the same way we can say that the question, why be moral? is self-answering. To say that question is self-answering is not to appeal to a further justifying principle. For instance, it is an ethical requirement that you must not cause unnecessary suffering. Of course, it is true that if one were to ask, "Why should I do what this ethical requirement demands?" we might respond, "Because it would be wrong not to!" But it would be delivered with a difficult-to-hide tone of exasperation. The exasperation is warranted because you are not answering this illegitimate request for justification by offering a second-order principle that gives the ethical requirement the power to oblige. You're answering that illegitimate question by trying to get your interlocutor to recognize that it is illegitimate by, however ineffectually, getting them to recognize their natural obligation not to cause unnecessary suffering. To adapt Bishop Butler's famous description of conscience, the ethical is "in kind and in nature, supreme" and "bears its own authority of being so."²⁴

The key point here is the reason that generation after generation of philosophers have looked to the ethical realm for an *ultimate* explanation of existence is not merely because ethical truths are necessary truths but because of the peculiar, non-logical kind of necessity they enjoy. When it comes to ethical requirements, *their necessity is a function of their natural authority*. One does not come to recognize the necessity of something like, *it is wrong to cause unnecessary suffering*, by coming to recognize that its negation implies a contradiction. You come to recognize value's necessity when you recognize its authority. And what it takes to recognize its authority is to recognize that you *are* obliged by it; *you must recognize that it does, in fact, rule*. Value's peculiar form of necessity is grounded in its natural Sovereignty. The Axiarchist's idea is then to ground the principle of the world's existence as the *ruling principle* upon the kind of necessity provided by the natural Sovereignty of the ethical.

When it comes to Axiarchism and Axiarchism alone, there is no call for higher-order Selector principles. Therein lies the force of Axiarchism claim to being an *ultimate* explanation. Parfit's abstraction obscures this force.

That Value Cannot Fail and the State of the Debate
Finally, the preceding can be used to defend the claim that not only does value rule reality, it could not fail to rule. The good is necessarily efficacious. Against this, Parfit objects that that's hard to believe because "while it is inconceivable that undeserved suffering could not have failed to be in itself bad, it is clearly conceivable that value might have failed to rule, if only because it seems so clear that value does not *rule*."²⁵

In light of the preceding, I think, this gets the dialectic wrong. Again, according to the Axiarchist, value's peculiar form of necessity is grounded in its natural Sovereignty. You recognize the necessity of the ethical by recognizing its authority and that means recognizing that you *are* obliged by it; you accept its Sovereignty. So, since Parfit accepts both that undeserved suffering could not fail to be bad and that Selector hypotheses are genuinely explanatory, and since the Axiarchist's Selector is the only viable Selector, the question that seemingly unnecessary suffering raises is, *how could it be possible for value to fail to rule?*²⁶ Parfit will owe the Axiarchist an answer to that question. In turn, the Axiarchist will owe Parfit an answer to the problem of evil. These strike me as comparably difficult tasks.²⁷

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NOTES

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- ¹ The essay first appeared in *The London Review of Books*, 20:3, February 1998. It is reprinted as "Appendix D" in Parfit's *On What Matters*, (OUP 2011), vol. 2, 623-48.
- ² John Leslie offers a version of this kind of Axiarchism. My presentation of the view here is deeply indebted to his. See his *Value and Existence*, (Roman and Littlefield, 1979). However, I should not be read as presenting Leslie's own views; any short-comings in my exposition of Axiarchism or in its defense are entirely my own.
- ³ His view has changed somewhat more recently. He now thinks that it doesn't effect what one actually believes, whether "God" is taken to be the name of a creative force of ethical requirement or the name for whatever one thinks owes its existence to such a force. See Chapter 5 of *Infinite Minds*, (Oxford, 2001). However, Leslie is more often interpreted as actually advocating that it is abstract Platonic entities that are responsible for the world's existence. See, most recently, Timothy O'Connor's discussion in *Theism and Ultimate Explanation: The Necessary Shape of Contingency*, (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) 76-7.
- ⁴ *Axiogenesis: An Essay in Metaphysical Optimism*, (Roman and Littlefield 2010), 140.
- ⁵ See his *True Intellectual System of the Universe*, (Gould and Newman 1838), *passim*. This approach, which seeks to identify the Good (axiarchically conceived) with the traditional conception God, has the advantage of being able to cite God as the truth-maker for Axiarchism's claims that such and such is best. Leslie's approach might also allow this, but it is more difficult to assess.
- ⁶ Parfit, 633.
- ⁷ *Ibid.* 633-4.
- ⁸ N.B., the Axiarchic claim under consideration here is not that their view is more plausible and therefore it's more likely that ours is the best of all worlds.
- ⁹ *Ibid.* 634
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.* 634
- ¹¹ *Ibid.* 636.
- ¹² G. W. Leibniz, *The Principles of Nature and Grace based on Reason 7*, in *Philosophical Essays*, eds. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Hackett, 1989), 210.
- ¹³ Parfit is, of course, perfectly well aware of the fact that (1) is an evaluative claim. He explicitly identifies it as such. (Parfit 633). My claim is that the abstracting process seems to have served to obscure the importance of this point as Parfit's discussion proceeds.
- ¹⁴ Axiarchism is, of course, predicated upon the falsity of voluntarism.
- ¹⁵ The example is just a variation on of one of Leslie's. See *Immortality Defended* (Wiley-Blackwell 2007) 34.
- ¹⁶ The proposal is not that "creative necessity" and "ethical necessity" mean the same thing or that they can be shown through analysis that they do. The necessity in question is not simply the function of the meaning of words; it is a substantive metaphysical claim.
- ¹⁷ Although it is not a concern that Parfit raises, it might be objected that while this provides motivation to take the Axiarchic step, it also undercuts it. If the Axiarchist is right, the creative efficacy of the ethical is a necessity. In which case, isn't only the best truly possible? Won't this produce modal collapse, leaving us with the Spinozistic conclusion that the best is the only possible world? That may be. And it may be that the Axiarchist is best off simply setting about making that consequence more palatable. I think that may not be necessary, but because this issue falls outside of Parfit's concerns, I will not pursue it farther here.
- ¹⁸ Whether we have the right kind of necessity to put a satisfying end to the relevant why-questions is taken up in the last two parts of the essay where we consider, respectively, Axiarchism's claim to ultimacy and the question of whether or not the Axiarchic principle *must* rule.
- ¹⁹ Parfit, 644.
- ²⁰ Parfit, 644.
- ²¹ Ralph Cudworth, *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*, (Cambridge, 1996) 18.
- ²² *Ibid.* 18-9
- ²³ *Ibid.* 18.

²⁴ Joseph Butler, "Sermon II: Upon the Natural Supremacy of Conscience," in *The Works of Bishop Butler*, ed. by J. H. Bernard (Macmillan and Co. 1900) vol. I, 45.

²⁵ Parfit, 643-4.

²⁶ The Axiarchist, as we know, says that it could not. Value rules necessarily; it is metaphysically necessary that the best be. So this must be only *seemingly* unnecessary suffering.

²⁷ I would like to thank David McNaughton, Thom Flint, and two anonymous referees for *Faith and Philosophy* for their helpful advice and feedback.