

Daeley, Justin J. *Why God Must Do What is Best: A Philosophical Investigation of Theistic Optimism*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, 195 pp.

Chris Tucker

William & Mary

Leibniz famously argued that God must create the uniquely best possible world, where a *possible* world is a maximally specific way things can be. The *actual* world—the possible world that is actual—is like the complete history of everything (that is, was, and will be). In other words, Leibniz argues that God brings about the best possible complete history of everything. Daeley calls this view **Theistic Optimism**. His *Why God Must do What is Best* defends this view from a variety of objections. It is clear and accessible to graduate students and maybe even advanced undergraduates who have already been introduced to talk of possible worlds. The argumentation is plausible.

There are 9 total chapters, including the introduction and conclusion. After the introduction, chapter 2 explains Leibniz's rationale for Theistic Optimism. If we assume that God creates a world, the main rationale can be crudely stated in two simple premises. First, the principle of sufficient reason holds that there is a reason, or explanation, for God's choosing which world to create, such that the reason entails that God creates that particular world (21-3). Second, God's perfection entails that the reason for God's choosing a world is that the world is a best world (19-21). Together the two principles entail that there is a single best possible world. If there were more than one best possible world, then the reason *this world is best* would not entail God's choosing any particular world as required by the first premise.

Chapters 3-7 each consider and respond to a single objection to Theistic Optimism. Chapter 8 claims that a certain Theistic view is most plausible given Theistic Optimism. Chapter 9 quickly addresses a range of concerns and doubles as the conclusion. In the rest of this review, I will summarize chapters 3-8, sprinkling in a critical reaction here and there.

Chapter 3 considers an objection from divine freedom. A common *libertarian view of freedom* holds that freedom requires the ability to do otherwise. Theistic Optimism holds that God must choose a particular world (the best possible), and so God could not have done otherwise and is thus not free according to libertarianism. Following Leibniz and some of the contemporary literature, Daeley responds by opting for a non-libertarian account of divine freedom: roughly, God's perfect freedom consists in choosing in accordance with what God has most reason to do.

In *Chapter 4* Daeley considers the objection that God could not be praiseworthy or thankworthy since God could not have done otherwise. He *had* to create the best. In reply, Daeley argues that God can be praiseworthy and thankworthy because he is gracious. I didn't deserve three wonderful children, but God lovingly gave them to me anyway. God is praiseworthy and thankworthy for this loving grace—this loving favor that I did not merit—and this is true even if God *had* to give them to me because they inhabit the best possible world. (And who could be surprised that my children inhabit the best possible world? How could it be the best possible world without them?)

I think Daeley's appeal to grace here is poorly motivated. He explicitly relies on Robert Adams' classic, "Must God Create the Best?". Part of the paper's point is that grace rules out a necessary overriding concern for the best, exactly the sort of concern that Daeley argues that God has. Someone who chooses to create and raise goldfish rather than creating and raising more excellent pigs can manifest grace *as an excellence*. This person could not have been more perfect

or more praiseworthy simply because they could have created more excellent creatures than they did. Parents who decide to have natural, normal, healthy children when they could have had genetically improved children can manifest excellence in this choice. Grace, as Adams is thinking about it, is connected to a kind of perfect partiality. Grace entails that, within limits, a perfect agent can prefer to create and love a creature even at the cost of forgoing something even better. Daeley does not seem to acknowledge the features of Adams' conception of grace that are in tension with Theistic Optimism.

In *Chapter 5*, Daeley considers the objection that Theistic Optimism is incompatible with God's aseity, where aseity entails God's existence is independent of everything else. Nothing outside of God contributes to why God existed in the first place, nor to why God continues to exist. I had never heard this objection to Theistic Optimism before. Daeley provides compelling textual evidence that three theologians believe that there is a tension between Theistic Optimism and divine aseity. What I could not find is any explanation that would make this objection to Theistic Optimism plausible enough to merit the careful consideration that Daeley gives it in this chapter.

Perhaps the objection from aseity is genuinely implausible (or that I'm just being dense), but it is possible that Daeley simply did not do enough to make the objection seem plausible to those who were not already familiar with it. A limitation of Daeley's text—not just in this chapter—is how little he does to make the objections to Theistic Optimism seem plausible to those who aren't already familiar with or disposed to accept those objections.

Consider again the earlier chapter 3 on divine freedom. I am sympathetic to Daeley's account of divine freedom, but he takes less than 3.5 pages (28-31) to explain and motivate the worry that proponents of libertarian freedom have about Theistic Optimism. A lot of ink has been spilt motivating the libertarian conception of freedom and its importance, especially in mainstream philosophy. Daeley doesn't do much to explain why so many philosophers are attracted to libertarian accounts of freedom or how they might respond to his account of divine freedom. In fairness, Daeley's intended audience seems to include theologians who are less likely to tolerate the philosophical minutiae. Part of what makes this philosophy book more accessible than most is that Daeley often makes judicious choices about how far to go into the philosophical weeds. The downside is that philosophers, especially those critical of Theistic Optimism, will sometimes be left feeling that the potential problems for Theistic Optimism are not explored in enough depth.

In *chapter 6*, Daeley considers arguably the most devastating objection to Leibniz's brand of Theistic Optimism, the modal collapse objection. The basic idea is that, if Theistic Optimism is correct, then possibility "collapses" into necessity. If God exists, then God exists necessarily (in every possible world). Theistic Optimism tells us that, necessarily, if God exists, then God chooses the best possible world. Hence, Theistic Optimism entails that the best possible world *must* exist. The best possible world is the *only* possible world. That's surprising. While it would be shocking (to me at least) if the best possible world did not contain my three wonderful children, even I can see that it is possible that my children not exist. But if they are in the best possible world and the best possible world is the only possible world, then there is no way things can be that doesn't involve the existence of my children.

Daeley considers some possible responses to the modal collapse worry and, if I understand him, he seems dissatisfied with all of them. That's good. All the responses he considers were dissatisfying. There is, then, at least one unanswered objection to Theistic Optimism. I appreciate that Daeley is open about the unanswered objections to the view and did not try to hide them in the closet. Every philosophical view has problems. We should all be open to a philosophical view's being true even it has an important problem.

In *chapter 7*, Daeley considers the objection that Theistic Optimism is incompatible with Christian tradition. He evaluates relevant passages from the scriptures and creeds and finds that they are compatible with Theistic Optimism after all. In *chapter 8*, Daeley considers the relation of Theistic Optimism to Theistic Compatibilism, the view that human freedom and moral responsibility is compatible with God ordaining all human actions. Daeley argues that Theistic Compatibilism is most plausible given Theistic Optimism. These two chapters may go the furthest beyond the (philosophical) literature on Theistic Optimism.

Now that we've considered what is actually in the book, I want to explain why I found the title *Why God Must Choose the Best* misleading. In recent years, a number of philosophers have offered accounts of God's ethics that entail God probably would not choose the best possible world. This includes the work of Marilyn Adams, Robert Adams, Mark Murphy, Daniel Rubio, and, well...me. I expected Daeley's account of God's ethics to address this literature and explain why Theistic Optimism provides a better account of the principles that God would act on than this other literature. But it doesn't. The discussion of *why* God must choose the best is basically an exposition of Leibniz and is completed at the end of chapter 2. Of course, as an ethicist, I want every book to talk more about ethics, especially my ethics, so let's be fair. There is an important class of objections and alternatives to Theistic Optimism in the literature that aren't addressed or acknowledged. But that's compatible with Daeley's book's being a good one overall.

And Daeley's book *is* a good one overall. That should be stressed. Yet, in my opinion, Daeley does not significantly advance the case for Theistic Optimism. This review has identified three main reasons for this. First, sometimes Daeley gives a good response to an important objection, but one that is already in Leibniz and/or the existing contemporary literature (that he cites). This includes his response to the divine freedom objection in chapter 3. Second, Daeley does not seem to make much, if any, progress on what is arguably the most serious objection to Theistic Optimism, the modal collapse objection. Third, he does not address the literature on God's ethics that runs counter to Theistic Optimism even when it directly bears on his positive proposal in chapter 4 concerning grace.

Still, Daeley's book is a very helpful resource, especially to philosophers and philosophically minded theologians who want an introduction to Theistic Optimism. It provides an intelligent discussion of a wide range of objections to Theistic Optimism and typically offers plausible responses to them. That's a genuine achievement, and one worth reading.¹

¹ Many thanks to Justin Daeley for his timely and helpful feedback on this review.