

Paul Rateau. *Leibniz et le meilleur des mondes possibles*. Classiques Garnier 2015. 399 pp. \$39.00 euros (Paperback ISBN 9782812438233).

Leibniz's claim that ours is the best of all possible worlds has intrigued and puzzled philosophers for centuries. As Paul Rateau notes in the preface to this book, the claim is often caricatured and misunderstood, for example by supposing that Leibniz must hold that all is good, or that everything that happens is for the best (these being claims made later by Alexander Pope, with whose work Leibniz's has sometimes been conflated). Rateau thus seeks to explicate Leibniz's doctrine of the best possible world, to show what Leibniz understood by it, and its implications, both theoretical and practical. This is no small undertaking, as is clear from the breadth of topics Rateau covers over the course of his study.

The book contains an introduction, and then nine subsequent chapters arranged into four distinct parts. The first part is entitled 'What is the best of possible worlds?', and in it Rateau examines Leibniz's notions of possibility, compossibility, perfection, harmony, contingency, and space and time, and outlines what Leibniz means when he calls our world the best. The second part, 'Does the best exclude progress?' considers whether Leibniz's belief that our world is the best is compatible with progress, and how that progress might manifest. The third part, 'The kingdom of minds', concerns the nature of minds, their degrees of perfection, love, and activity. The final part, 'To act in the best possible world', deals principally with Leibnizian ethics, and includes a discussion of whether atheists could be virtuous, before concluding with a chapter on the fate of optimism in France.

The coverage is thus broad, but given the size of the book—a shade under 400 pages—Rateau has more than enough space at his disposal to do justice to each of the topics. And generally he does just that: his treatment of the various topics is careful and thorough, and at times very illuminating. But there are a number of exceptions. The topic of compossibility is one such example. It is well known that Leibniz holds that not all possible things are compossible; that is, that not all possible things can co-exist in one and the same world. This means that God has to choose between different collections of compossible things (i.e., different possible worlds), and as we know, Leibniz holds that God will choose the best of these. But why did Leibniz think that some possibles were impossible with others? Rateau's suggestion is that created things are necessarily finite and limited in perfection, and this essential limitedness gives rise to an opposition between certain of them: 'The beings that constitute it [this world] are not opposed to other possibles on account of what they are positively, but on account of what they are not, on account of their deficiencies and what their nature excludes' (71). He goes on to say that 'On account of what it [a creature] contains of the positive, on account of its reality, its perfection, it agrees with all the possibles, but on account of its limits, its imperfection, it excludes the possibility of being anything other than itself, or of doing otherwise than it does (even if this other possible being that it is not, and this other possible action that it does not carry out, are conceivable in another world). Perfection is the source of compatibility, imperfection of incompatibility' (72). This is an intriguing suggestion, and one which seems to imply that the more perfect a possible thing is, the greater its degree of compossibility (and vice versa), such that an angel would be compossible with more things than, say, a worm. Rateau does not appear to draw this conclusion, however, which is perhaps just as well, as it does not correspond to a view that Leibniz appears to have held. Instead, Rateau's analysis leads him to claim of possible things that 'Their compossibility means nothing other than their agreement, the agreement of their respective states. The pre-established harmony is the basis of compossibility' (72), such that, for Leibniz, '*impossible* is every creature which is not ordered to all the others, and whose states are

not precisely in agreement with theirs' (73). Rateau's claim raises various questions, not least why a creature not harmoniously ordered to other ones should thereby be impossible (i.e., not jointly creatable) with them. There is also the question of textual support; in his discussion of the topic, Rateau cites relatively few texts, and the ones that he does cite do not obviously seem to point in the direction he wishes to go. Yet there are quite a number of texts in which Leibniz discusses compossibility. For example, there is a text (letter to Arnauld, 14 July 1686) in which Leibniz suggests that compossibility is based on substances having lawful relations to each other, and another ('Definitions: being, possible, existing') in which he suggests that it involves the substances not generating a contradiction. Both appear to militate against Rateau's interpretation of compossibility, which mentions neither lawful relations nor contradictions. How does he propose to deal with these texts? Unfortunately it is impossible to say, because there is not even a mention of them here. Ultimately, then, one is left with the feeling that Rateau's interpretation is reached much too cheaply.

Nor is this an aberration. To give another example, later in the book, following a helpful discussion about Leibniz's rejection of the eternal return (128-33), Rateau asserts that Leibniz inclines towards the doctrine of universal salvation (137). The textual case for this claim is very thin—indeed, one of the texts Rateau cites (on 138 note 1) actually has Leibniz stating that he doesn't endorse the doctrine—and there are numerous texts in which Leibniz quite explicitly rejects it. But again, Rateau simply neglects to mention those, without it being clear why. Nor is there any mention—let alone discussion—of the secondary literature on this topic, some of which canvasses a much broader range of texts than does Rateau, and subjects those texts to more in-depth analysis than is to be found here. Such shortcomings are not a general feature of the book by any means, but they do undermine some of Rateau's readings. The upshot is that a reader not already familiar with the relevant primary and secondary literature is apt to get the impression that some of Rateau's conclusions are well-grounded and uncontroversial, even when they are anything but.

The book does, however, end on a high note, with an informative and rewarding final chapter concerning the reception of Leibniz's optimism in France from 1710 (the date he published the *Theodicy*) to 1765. It is popularly believed that Leibniz's claim that ours is the best of all possible worlds enjoyed a good degree of popularity until the Lisbon earthquake (1755) and Voltaire's satire, most notably in *Candide* (1759), made it unpalatable. Rateau, however, shows that this was not the case. He notes that Leibniz's doctrine initially enjoyed a warm response in France, but this quickly gave way to suspicion (largely due to concerns about the orthodoxy of Leibniz's religious beliefs), before evolving into outright hostility. This final change occurred, Rateau argues, in part because of the increasing French distaste for metaphysical systems, and in part because Leibniz's doctrine became intimately associated with other discredited systems, such as that of Spinoza. For it was claimed—for example, in an influential set of reviews of the *Theodicy* written by an anonymous Jesuit for the *Mémoires de Trévoux* in 1737—that by supposing God would inevitably choose the best of all possible worlds, Leibniz had stripped God of free will, and introduced a fated necessitarianism into his thought, à la Spinoza. Leibniz's doctrine thus came to be seen as dangerous and fundamentally anti-Christian. The perceived negative implications of Leibniz's doctrine were then built into the very definition of 'optimism' offered by the Jesuits in 1752, which described it as a 'spiritual Spinozism' (353). Such pejorative judgements shaped the thinking of Encyclopaedists d'Alambert and Diderot, both of whom saw Leibniz's doctrine of the best possible world as implying fatalism and leaving no room for free will, either God's or man's. Leibniz's doctrine had thus been

roundly—if unfairly—discredited among the French even before the Lisbon earthquake and Voltaire's satire delivered their own blows.

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