

Philosophy 100B: The Rationalists  
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## On Perfection

We talk about social issues, political events and technological progress all the time. In other words, we wish and are witnessing our world to be a better one. Since there is a better world other than this one, it implies our world is not perfect. Is there really a more perfect world? What roles has perfection played in Descartes' and Leibniz's philosophical writings? Both philosophers considered God to be the "perfection." If that is true, how do we reconcile God's existence with issues we face daily? In this essay I attempt to analyze, examine and compare the notion of "Perfection" on both philosophers' work.

Many with philosophy background would readily put Descartes and Leibniz next to each other because they are both rationalists. However, despite of many similarities they share in their theories, they differ on issue of "perfection". Descartes, in his famous book *Meditation of First Philosophy*, started a so-call "thought experiment" to doubt everything, in order to find a "stable ground" on which science can be built. Once the meditator started to doubt everything, she soon came to recognize our world's imperfections. Had our world been perfect, the tower that looks round from a distance would still look round instead of square when we approach it. In other words, our world is not quite perfect, because we are constantly being deceived by our senses. Why is it imperfect? Is it because of the outside world or inside of us? Descartes rejects the first possibility, for a religious reason. Descartes is a Christian, thus with a strong conviction of God. It simply could not make sense for Descartes either an omnipotent being like God would create a world in which we can be deceived, or God actively deceive us.

Beginning in Meditation 4, the meditator knows nothing but herself being a “thinking thing”. Following up previous meditations, the meditator manages to recognize facts or evidences that she has been deceived, claiming she has errors in herself. At this point, she is aware something is better than herself, ultimately a supremely perfect being, a being with all the perfections. We all must agree that existence in reality is better than existence only in imagination, therefore, necessary existence is contained in the clear and distinct idea of a supremely perfect being. Since god is a perfect being, and existence is a predicate, God must have it. God must exist.

Another puzzle raises: Given God exists; then why do we still have human errors? It can not come from God -- it is merely a defect that comes from being an imperfect being (something intermediate between God and nothingness, or between supreme being and non-being). The meditator then looks closely into herself, seeking for the nature of human errors. She notices that our process of knowledge depends on two causes: the faculty of knowledge and the faculty of choice. However, the faculty of knowledge can not be a source of human errors because we need such faculty to perceive clear and distinct ideas, with which we pass our possible judgments. It does not come from the faculty of choice, either. It should be perfect since this freedom is given by God. The meditator gives out explanations, not on either of those two causes, but rather on the relationship between these two causes: (Descartes, 42) human error arises because the scope of choice is much wider than the scope of knowledge. Human have errors when our faculty of knowledge cannot “keep up” with matters perceived by our faculty of choice. In other words, human errors arise because the intellect, being finite, cannot clearly and distinctly perceive everything. As such, we are deceived. Such imperfections can be avoided. Since we can never form any stably valid knowledge on a

shaky ground, we should refrain from forming any judgment without clear and distinct perceptions.

Therefore, according to Descartes, our world is perfect, we are made perfectly. The reason why we experience deceptions is within ourselves. Simply because we are not powerful enough to judge everything that perceived by us: a part of being between “non being” and perfect being.

Though Leibniz did not share the exact same ontological proof of God, he would most likely to agree with Descartes on the issues of our world for it is perfect. However, he differs on in which way our world is perfect: our world is perfect not in the sense that it has no harm or torture, it is perfect in the sense that it is the “best of all possible worlds.”

In Blumenfeld’s study on Leibniz, he phrases as the following: “Leibniz gives the argument a distinctive twist by purporting to show that the world consists of infinitely many monads which are perfectly coordinated with one another yet are utterly incapable of interaction” (Blumenfeld). God has the freedom either to or not to create a world, by God’s omnibenevolent nature, God must have created the “best possible world.” In this best possible world, everything flows from His divine nature. Leibniz introduced the concept of “Monad”. Monads are simple substance. They are dynamic, and only differ by their inner states, namely “perceptions”. Their dynamism is due to an inner appetite, which advances them from one perception to another.

Each monad is caused by God, has contains within itself all the predicates, is self-sufficient. Moreover, monad can not be influenced by other monads because they have “no window through which anything may come in or go out (Leibniz 252)”. The monad does not only exhibit properties, it contains within all “potentially” predicates that will be display in the future. All these properties are “folded up” within the monad; they

unfold when they have sufficient reason to do so. In this sense, everything, along with its change is pre-determined. As Blumenfeld points out: It is in its pre-established harmony, by which our world is operating in according order, showing an appearance or causality. In other words, by this philosophical theory, all the cause-effect relations we perceive are but appearances of a “pre-determined harmony”. Each monad has been “programmed” or “harmonized” with one another by God, whilst in fact, no real causality exists. The cause-effect relationship we observe, has actually already been determined since the creation of monads, they can “only end through annihilation (Leibniz 251)”.

Some might readily ask: “If everything is predetermined and programmed, do we ever have freedom?” As we have previously discussed, Descartes considers we have an infinite “faculty of choice”; we are responsible for our own human errors because we form our arguments without clear and distinct perceptions. According to Wee’s study on this matter, she claims: “For Leibniz, a free act is one in which reason is exercised in choosing the best option. Thus, an act that is determined by the passions or confused perceptions is not free; one that is determined by what the intellect or reason presents as the best choice is (Wee Page#6)”. So indeed, Leibniz takes a compatibilist stand on human errors. He believes we are free agents as long as we exercise our power of reason.

Traditional skeptic point of view on human free will has been arguing on the freedom of agents depends on whether our decisions are influenced by external forces. The concept of freedom according to Leibniz focuses on more on following inward Monads are determined by eternal rather than external. In other words, each monad (simple substance) has intelligence and has been set to where to go in order to comply with the overall perfect harmony, as we have previously established: by God’s omnibenevolent nature, our world must be the “best of all possible worlds”, all monads

must have been made for the best possible outcome. Therefore, we are free in a sense that what we are made of is free from external causes. These errors, if left uncorrected, might be actually beneficial to us because they contribute to the overall perfection of our world.

One thing people in the debate of free will talk about is about punishment. Is it really fair to punish people if they do not have free will? Since we are indeed “free” in Leibnizian metaphysics, the punishments that fall upon human errors arise from various imperfections that are part of perfection. It kind of echoes with a quote from a Swedish film made back in the 1950s, Jöng said: “If everything is imperfect in this world, love is perfect in its imperfection” (Det sjunde inseglet) In this sense, perfection and imperfection are not strictly opposite; we can look at issues around us and embrace them as a part of overall perfection.

Ultimately I think our world is perfect with its imperfections inside. It might have been perceived to be imperfect because we are “imperfect” as Descartes put it. However, it is a perfect world for omnipotent God. Perhaps we look at our world from a mundane perspective rather than a divine one. But unlike Descartes, Leibniz does not deny that human understanding is in principle incapable of gaining knowledge of God’s will. Leibniz believes that God’s will in relation to contingent things is open to rational investigation. The Principle of Sufficient Reason, closely tied with the Principle of Perfection, God always freely chooses to create the best world.

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