

Dissertation Abstract

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Leibniz and the principle of sufficient reason

Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason (PSR) is the claim that everything has an explanation. It rules out brute facts, inexplicable primitives, and purely random events. But what grounds the PSR itself? On the usual view, Leibniz grounds the PSR in purely descriptive truths. On my view, however, Leibniz grounds the PSR in this being the best of all possible worlds. God only creates the best, and a world in which the PSR is true is better than a world in which it is false. For the PSR ensures that the world has an explanatory structure, the investigation of which facilitates human happiness.

This way of grounding the PSR faces at least two problems. The first problem is that it presupposes that the PSR is a contingent principle, even though most commentators take it to be necessary. But I argue that Leibniz is indeed committed to the contingency of the PSR. I demonstrate this by showing how, for Leibniz, PSR-violating entities such as vacua, atoms, and indiscernible bodies are possible but not actual. I also argue that the contingency of the PSR does not conflict with Leibniz's other modal commitments. In particular, it does not conflict with the modal status of his principle of the identity of indiscernibles, nor with the modal status of his theory of truth.

The second problem with this way of grounding the PSR is that it seems to be circular. For the PSR cannot be grounded in God's choice of the best if God's choice of the best is itself grounded in the PSR. I argue that Leibniz avoids this problem by grounding God's choice of the best not in the PSR, but in God's aim to maintain his own happiness. A suboptimal world would compromise God's happiness, so he only creates the best. This constitutes a novel interpretation of Leibniz's view that God has created the best of all possible worlds.