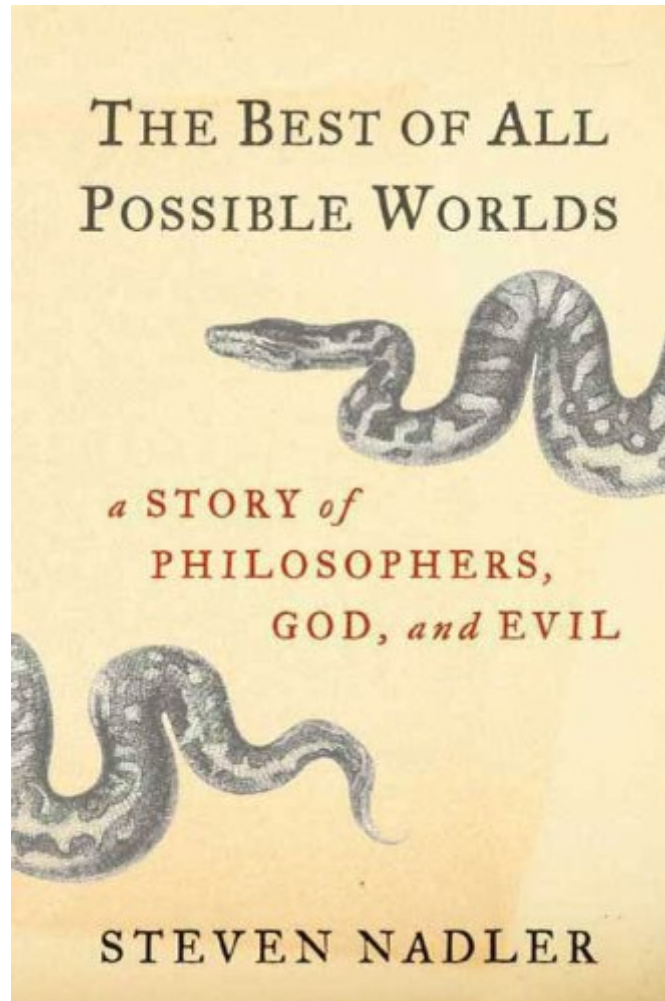


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The Best Of All Possible Worlds: A Story Of Philosophers, God, And Evil



Synopsis

In the spring of 1672, the German philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz arrived in Paris on a furtive diplomatic mission. That project was abandoned quickly, but Leibniz remained in Paris with a singular goal: to get the most out of the city's intellectual and cultural riches. He benefited, above all, from his friendships with France's two greatest philosopher-theologians of the period, Antoine Arnauld and Nicolas de Malebranche. The interactions of these three men would prove of great consequence not only for Leibniz's own philosophy but for the development of modern philosophical and religious thought. Despite their wildly different views and personalities, the three philosophers shared a single, passionate concern: resolving the problem of evil. Why is it that, in a world created by an allpowerful, all-wise, and infinitely just God, there is sin and suffering? Why do bad things happen to good people, and good things to bad people? This is the story of a clash between radically divergent worldviews. But it is also a very personal story. At its heart are the dramatic and often turbulent relationships between three brilliant and resolute individuals. In this lively and engaging book, Steven Nadler brings to life a debate that obsessed its participants, captivated European intellectuals, and continues to inform our ways of thinking about God, morality, and the world.

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Customer Reviews

Applying reason to the world's most perplexing questions -- the nature of God, the problem of evil in the world, the meaning of our own existence -- isn't easy. That hasn't stopped philosophers from pondering those conundrums from the earliest days of recorded history, however. In the 17th century, the questions were well-known, but the evolution of scientific knowledge was starting to transform the ways in which they were addressed. Meanwhile, the conclusions philosophers reached could literally result in matters of life and death in the midst of a violent century where the conflict between Catholic and Protestant theologians reached a violent climax. Writing about philosophical concepts is, perhaps, even less simple; perhaps that is one reason that much of such work has been penned by scholars and directed at other scholars. Thankfully, Steven Nadler, already the author of several books devoted to Spinoza and other 17th century thinkers, has decided to target this book at a more general audience, and succeeds in making it just accessible enough (although it remains a challenging read). The focus of the book is the effort by German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz to tackle one of those key questions: why does a world designed by God contain so much apparently random evil and misfortune? Why do virtuous and pious people fall victim to these woes? In the final decades of pre-Enlightenment philosophy, such theological quandaries established a framework for moral reasoning that exists to this day. And Leibniz's reasoning that God had indeed created the best of all possible worlds (if not the world that best suited each of its inhabitants) was one that shook up the 17th century philosophical landscape.

The Best of All Possible Worlds: A Story of Philosophers, God, and Evil (2008) by philosopher Steven Nadler is a discerning account of the philosophical problems that plagued philosophers during the 17th century including the problem of God, the problem of evil, and the notion that this world is the best of all possible worlds. In particular, this book focuses on the debates between three important philosophers - the Catholic priest Malebranche, the Jansenist Arnauld, and the Lutheran polymath Leibniz (also a discoverer of the calculus). The book also relates the thoughts of these individuals to the philosophies of the medieval Scholastics (e.g. St. Thomas Aquinas, et al), the rise of Cartesianism, and the philosophical difficulties raised by Spinoza. In particular, the character of Leibniz is important because not only did he seek to promote an ecumenism between the Protestant and Catholic churches, but also for his notion that this world was the best of all possible worlds

chosen by God. Nadler maintains that the issues raised by these philosophers were important in that they all sought to take up the "challenge of getting God right". In particular, the problem of evil was the most important issue of the day, and in their efforts to understand this problem it became necessary to question the nature of God and his agency. This book includes the following chapters: Leibniz in Paris - begins with the history of France following the Thirty Years War and the conflicts between Catholics and Hugonots in France and explains how Leibniz came to be taken up with the French intellectual scene. Leibniz was a man of a great many interests and a genius of the highest order.

This is a brilliant book, drawn from Nadler's extensive works on Spinoza, Malebranche, and so on. It is a model of what a book like this should be: thematically tight, beautifully written, and something that enables the reader to plunge into what seems to be a horribly esoteric subject (possible worlds is a hot topic in many areas). Like "The Courtier and the Heretic" it is one of a few books that weaves together philosophy and personal history in a very readable way. It is true that the reader needs to have some background in the period (some familiarity on a basic level with Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz; as well as some basic acquaintance with Lutheran/Catholic debates over the status of transubstantiation), but not a huge amount (in fact, one of the benefits of a background in the period is to increase one's appreciation of how Nadler is able to condense and describe the most difficult philosophy in such deft ways (the three or four pages on Spinoza are a marvel of compression)). While the book's main theme is possible worlds, it very quickly escalates into the nature of rationality, the ontological status of ethical rules, the nature of evil (the theodicy problem) and so on. Every turn of the argument, which appears on the surface to be about obscure 17th century discussions of faith and grace, raises a raft of contemporary questions. This period (the 1670s-1710s) is generally understudied (though it has revived over the past few years with the controversy over Jonathan Israel's work on the Radical Enlightenment). Paul Hazard's masterpiece, the European Mind, from a long time ago covers this terrain (supplemented more recently by Margaret Jacob, and at least the first volume of Israel's trilogy, Radical Enlightenment).

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