



# The Best of All Possible Worlds: A Story of Philosophers, God, and Evil

By Steven Nadler

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**The Best of All Possible Worlds: A Story of Philosophers, God, and Evil** By Steven Nadler

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 all-powerful, 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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## Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The centerpiece of this intellectual history is a vicious late-17th-century debate between three unlikely combatants: Leibniz, an amateur metaphysicist and German secret agent; Malebranche, a gentle French priest and theologian; and Arnauld, an ill-tempered and opinionated monk. The differences in their positions were slight but important: at stake was the very concept of God with potential implications for the territorial wars between various Catholic Church sects. Although the three men were concentrating on questions that had long been the subject of philosophical inquiry, new scientific discoveries were beginning to challenge the power invested in church and monarchy in what became a watershed moment. Nadler (*Rembrandt's Jews*) demonstrates why the contentious discussions between the three intellectuals remain relevant: "To the extent that one believes that there is a universal rationality and objectivity to moral and other value judgments, and that the foundations of ethics have nothing to do with what God may or may not want, one has followed in certain seventeenth-century footsteps." Nadler's superb study makes for a larger space for Leibniz, Malebranche and Arnauld alongside such giants of the period as Descartes and Spinoza. (Nov.)

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Review

"Nadler has written a most interesting book. With a rather novelistic flow, it engages the personal circumstances and concepts of three Cartesians." —M. A. Bertman, *Choice*

"I can't imagine a better guide to 17th-century philosophical thought. Aimed at the general public, *The Best of All Possible Worlds*

is written simply and clearly, without condescension, flashiness or over-simplification. But it's a demanding book nonetheless, and you need to pay attention. You'll be amply rewarded if you do." —Michael Dirda, *The Washington Post*

"Nadler's superb study makes for a larger space for Leibniz, Malebranche and Arnauld alongside such giants of the period as Descartes and Spinoza." —*Publisher's Weekly*

"In a quietly elegant way, Nadler brings to life three remarkable philosophers and an intellectual world that vanished long ago but whose concerns continue to resonate. Why do good things happen to bad people? Why is the world the way it is? What or who is God? Leibniz, Arnauld, and Malebranche pursued these questions with a passion and intensity that Nadler nimbly captures." —Matthew Stewart, author of *The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World*

About the Author

**Steven Nadler** is the William H. Hay II Professor of Philosophy at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he has been teaching since 1988. His books include *Spinoza: A Life*, winner of the Koret Jewish Book Award in 2000, and *Rembrandt's Jews*, which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 2004.

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