

Of Optimism and Wolves
By
Daniel E. White January 5, 2026

I confess. I am an optimist. I believe, for example, that Congress will wake up to the fact that the Framers, in Article I, intended the two houses as the primary branch of government since they put it first in the document. I believe that all MLB owners will come to understand that the teams they own are part of the public trust, not just means for the owners to accumulate private wealth whether fielding competitive teams or not. I believe that Travis Kelce and Taylor Swift will live happily ever after, together.

Like Einstein, “I’d rather be an optimist and a fool than a pessimist and right.” And Churchill, believing that “the pessimist sees difficulty in every opportunity [while] the optimist sees opportunity in every difficulty.”

Remember Dr. Pangloss in Voltaire’s *Candide*? “All must be for the best in this best of all possible worlds,” Pangloss proclaimed in the midst of disaster and disease. Voltaire was satirizing the writings of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, laid out in *Theodicy* (1710).

In an article published in *Psyche*, (Feb. 2025), science writer Sumit Paul-Choudhury wrote: “The original optimist, Leibniz, was mocked and misunderstood. Centuries later, his worldview can help us navigate modern life.” Paul-Choudhury used arguments first written by contemporary philosopher Jeffrey McDonoug in *A Miracle Creed* (2022).

McDonoug wrote, “Leibniz didn’t set out to explain why some people are perpetually cheerful about their prospects, but why an all-powerful, all-seeing and all-loving God allows evil to exist in the world. This ‘problem of evil’ has been debated for millennia, but it was Leibniz who first attempted to reason his way to an answer, rather than look to scripture for one.

His inspiration came from his realization, in the early 1680s, that the path taken by light through a system of prisms or mirrors always followed the ‘easiest’, or ‘optimal’, path from source to destination. Leibniz soon realized that many other phenomena followed a similar ‘principle of optimality’ – including, perhaps, the entirety of God’s creation.”

“Up until that point, it had generally been assumed that the cosmos was precisely the way it had to be. Leibniz, on the other hand, argued that God could have chosen from many laws and ingredients when making the world, but some combinations would not be internally consistent.

So, God, in His wisdom, chose the particular combination that led to a world that was both ‘simplest in hypotheses and richest in phenomena’. That might not be a *perfect* world, containing no suffering or evil, but it would be the best of all *possible* worlds. While there might be many possible ways to make a world, there’s only one *optimal* way. And this view of the world came to be known as *optimism*.”

Many pertinent questions emerge. Are there many possible universes? Scientific discovery and understanding of the cosmos suggest there are. Is a deity making the choice of which universe? Depends on whether or not one believes not in free will but in predestination. Do we believe that the world is full of possibilities? Given the nature of human activity over the

millennia, it is safe to believe that most people do. Why endeavor to do anything if all effort produces no differences?

Voltaire pilloried Leibniz. To some degree, the idea that optimism is folly is still around. Why else would we have the terms “Pollyanna” or “Pollyandy?” And there is certainly enough war, disease, disaster, and so on in our world to discourage people from believing that things can ever be better. Offering the faithful hope for a way out of despair to a place where “things are better” has been an essential role for religious traditions over the centuries. Belief in a better hereafter is a powerful expression of optimism.

Paul-Choudhury continued “...Leibnizian optimism reminds us that we cannot see or understand the whole design of the world... That doesn’t mean we should stop trying to improve the world: it means we should expect perfection to remain perpetually out of reach. That’s not such a bitter pill to swallow: a few technological fantasists aside, no one really expects utopia to arrive tomorrow, or the day after that.”

“But we can still strive for the best of all possible worlds. The key to making Leibniz’s version of optimism relevant to a secular, 21st-century worldview, is to make ‘the best of all possible worlds’ an aspiration, not a statement of belief.” (*My emphasis*)

Volumes have been and will continue to be written about the psychology of optimism. Is it trait-based, learned, unrealistic, inheritable, a function of chemistry? Or all of the above in some measure?

What is my responsibility in all this? Louise Penny offered one possibility in her mystery, *The Grey Wolf*. She wrote about a Cree chief who told his grandson that “two wolves live inside him, tearing at his insides. One of them, a grey wolf, wanted the old man to be strong and compassionate. Wise and courageous enough to be forgiving. The other, a black wolf, wanted him to be vengeful. To forget no wrong. To forgive no slight. To attack first. To be cruel and cunning and brutal to friends and enemies alike. To spare no one.”

“Hearing this from his grandfather terrified the child. He ran away. It took a few days before he dared to approach the old man again. When he did, he asked ‘which wolf will win?’

His grandfather said, ‘the one that I feed.’” Happy New Year!

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