

The Principle of Sufficient Reason

Suppose that a book on the elements of geometry has always existed, each copy made from an earlier one, with no first copy. We can explain any given copy of the book in terms of the previous book from which it was copied; but this will never lead us to a complete explanation, no matter how far back we go in the series of books. For we can always ask: Why have there always been such books? Why were these books written? Why were they written in the way they were?

The different states of the world are like that series of books: each state is in a way copied from the preceding state—though here the ‘copying’ isn’t an exact transcription, but happens in accordance with certain laws of change. And so, with the world as with the books, however far back we might go into earlier and earlier states we’ll never find in them a complete explanation for why there is any world at all, and why the world is as it is.

It’s not that in the backward search we’ll reach a first state of the world, with no earlier one to explain it. So far as that is concerned, you are welcome to imagine that the world has always existed. But you are assuming only a succession of states, and no reason for the world can be found in any one of them (or in any set of them, however large); so obviously the reason for the world must be found elsewhere. That means: out of the world, i.e. out of the totality of finite things, and so in something infinite and eternal... From this it appears that even if we assume the past eternity of the world, we can’t escape the ultimate and out-of-the-world reason for things, namely God.

G. W. Leibniz 1697-8