

The Just World Fallacy and The History of Optimism

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TH 09:50A-12:50P

Honors College Seminar Room E128

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In the 1960s, social psychologist Melvin Lerner began to study what's come to be known, more or less synonymously, as the "just world hypothesis" or "just world fallacy." His contention, broadly speaking, was that those with sufficient faith in the overall justice of the world, when faced with it including otherwise inexplicable suffering, their own or that of others, may rely on the hypothesis that the sufferers, themselves or others, are ultimately responsible. His findings, now widely adopted among social psychologists, confirm that reliance on the hypothesis, deemed to be an unfortunate fallacy, is indeed a widespread phenomenon.

Fans of the history of philosophy, on the other hand, are naturally intrigued to find such a self-confidently productive line of research divorced, for all intents and purposes, from what would seem to be an obviously related debate in the eighteenth century. How is it, in other words, that the debate over the correctness of Gottfried Leibniz's "Optimism," with its famously controversial contention that *all is well in this, the best of all possible worlds*, isn't part of the story?

That it's not may reasonably be attributable to Leibniz's view not surviving the debate ultimately. What this obscures, however, is that its demise left open at the time the question of whether a more modest Optimism—which one might reasonably associate with the likes of, say, Ashley Cooper, Henry St. John, Alexander Pope, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and perhaps even Immanuel Kant—is nonetheless still available.

The seminar is designed to address the possibility of a workably more modest alternative to Leibniz's Optimism, both in the history of philosophy and in contemporary popular culture, and what impact this may have on what appears to be an otherwise uncontroversial tenet of Social Psychology, which is that the "just world hypothesis" is *both* widespread *and* a fallacy.

TRIP MCCROSSIN has been with the Philosophy Department at Rutgers for a dozen years, working in various ways on the history and philosophy of the Enlightenment, and its legacy in contemporary ethics, politics, and popular culture.