

A Synthesis of the Goodness of God and the Existence of Evil through G.W. Leibniz's *Theodicy*

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Abstract: Throughout history, the question about the existence of God has branched out to form numerous questions under it. One of these questions is known as the problem of evil. This study will try to prove that the goodness of God can be reconciled with the existence of evil using the works of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. Leibniz is said to be one of the top pioneers that tackled the problem of evil along with Epicurus and St. Augustine and he even coined the term “theodicy” to describe the defence of God’s omnipotence with regards to the threat of evil. The study would focus primarily on Leibniz’ *Theodicy* and how he used his doctrine of pre-established harmony and the best of all possible worlds to prove that evil is something necessary in order to live our life to the fullest. This study also aims to erase the idea of evil as something concrete and synonymous to someone’s personality. Evil is something that needs to be discussed instead of feared and if we only see it without prejudice, we could see the real reason for its creation. This study, however, is to be treated differently from the classical argument from evil for this serves only to show that there is a reason for all the evil that is happening in our lives and that reason will serve the greater good in the totality of the universe.

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The greatest questions in philosophy come from philosophy of religion. This is a quotation that I have believed since the start of my journey in philosophy. Big questions like the existence of God to lengthy debates like faith versus reason are all covered under the umbrella known as philosophical theology. Why, exactly, are the questions about the Supreme Being famous for philosophical debates? I believe that this is because—the mere fact that there are a lot of unexplained phenomenon in the world. The ancient thinkers didn’t have the technology to explain some of nature’s magic, and thus, they attributed those to the One or God. God, for them, became an

immutable force; an all-good, all powerful and infinite Being. But, of course, there were some thinkers who rejected the idea of God or any powerful being. Their main argument to counter the idea of God is the existence of an inconsistency with God’s power, wisdom and virtue. They named this inconsistency, evil.

The first philosopher who talked about evil would be the Greek philosopher, Epicurus. He formulated a question that became the foundation for all arguments regarding its existence and God’s goodness. He said:

“If God is perfectly good, He must want to abolish all evil; if He is unlimitedly powerful, He must be able to abolish all evil: but evil exists; therefore, either God is not perfectly good or He is not unlimitedly powerful.”¹

Throughout the years, philosophers have formulated their own questions based on Epicurus'. Some of these famous thinkers are St. Augustine, St. Thomas, David Hume and Charles Hartshorn. Evil was originally a subject for discussion exclusive to theology but as time went by and different schools of thought for philosophy emerged, it has been incorporated into their studies. A few examples of these would be Ethics wherein they try to reconcile evil present in man's actions; Epistemology where they study man's knowledge about evil and Rationalism in which God plays a very crucial role in the origin of evil. But even though the problem of evil has been endlessly talked about throughout time, there is still no unified solution to it. Philosophers can only discuss what their proposed solutions but there would still be no universal answer and thus, still remains problematic and even worse than before.

In the ancient times, evil was an abstract thing that almost everyone incorporated to Satan or Lucifer. This was when religion was more powerful than the State. Nowadays, however, evil has become a more concrete term. We often see movies about superheroes who are trying to save the world from the clutches of their enemies generically called, “villains”. These villains perform acts of cruelty to other people with different modes like murder, torture, or even human annihilation. These people are what the term evil refers to in today's time. Although it is agreeable that these “villains” or acts of cruelty are within the domain of evil, they are hardly all there is to it. There is no more awareness in the multitude that evil threatens

the whole existence of God, but instead, they only think about how these concrete beings of evil can threaten the existence of mankind.

But is evil really a threat to mankind? When talking about evil in its more concrete sense like murder and serial killers, no one would hesitate to say yes. But what about the abstract notion of evil? Is evil bad when it comes to the development of one's life? The answer could be otherwise. There is a famous saying, “Everything happens for a reason,” that almost summarizes the position of this paper on the matter. Evil is necessary in man's life and without it; man cannot live the best course set for him. Along with this, the origin of evil and how we can reconcile it with an all-powerful and good God would also be explained. I believe that evil is only misunderstood by man. When we are face to face with something that we cannot understand, the natural tendency would be for us to reject it and keep away from it but in the end, it might be the one that gives meaning to our life.

Theodicy

A theodicy is something used by philosophers to reconcile the existence of evil in the world with an all-good and all-powerful God. It has been thus named for the main reason that evil has baffled philosophers since the ancient times. One philosopher who tried to solve the problem of evil was German philosopher, Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz. He is one of the top pioneers in the field of philosophy who discussed the reconciliation of God and evil.

In his *Theodicy*, Leibniz formulates his own question regarding the problem of evil, “Si Deus est, unde malum? Si non est, unde bonum?”² [If God exists, why is there evil? If God does not exist, why is there goodness?] Leibniz, inspired by St. Augustine, uses the

Scholastic definition of God—that of a Supreme Being all-good and all-powerful. His challenge now is to reconcile that same God to the existence of things like pain, suffering and even death.

Evil, for Leibniz, is a kind of privation. Again, just like St. Augustine. He says, "...therefore like darkness, and not only ignorance but also error and malice consist formally in a certain kind of privation."³ Evil is a privation of, more specifically, goodness. This stems from the fact that men were made imperfect, therefore, it is impossible for us to possess everything. If ever God gave us everything, we would be just like Him, but there must only be one God. We cannot have many gods for it would mean that they all lack something that the other has and vice versa. This might be applicable to other religions but for a monotheistic religion like Christianity, having numerous gods is unthinkable. British philosopher and theologian, John Hick, expounds this on his book, *Evil and the God of Love*, by saying, "For the problem of evil... arises only for a religion which insists that the object of its worship is at once perfectly good and unlimitedly powerful."⁴

Leibniz does not only define evil but he also divides it into different types. He says, "Metaphysical evil consists in mere imperfection, physical evil in suffering, and moral evil in sin."⁵ By dividing it, he shows us that evil still has something more underneath its exterior unlike what most people think. Out of these three types, this study is more concerned with metaphysical evil because it is the only one that pertains to an external force outside man's power. Since it is impossible for a creature to limit himself, it must mean that imperfection is innate from the beginning and therefore, not exactly is man the cause.

In summary, Leibniz uses his theory of the best of all possible worlds to try and defend the essence of evil. He says, "...if there were not the best among all possible worlds, God would not have produced any."⁶ In this theory, Leibniz says that this world where we live right now—this reality—is the best out of all possible worlds. For example, going from point A to point B, there exists a straight path to reach your destination and no one would disagree that that is the best way because it is short and straightforward. But even though that path exists, there are still other numerous paths that you can take to get there. But there is only one best path among them. This falls under the goodness of God which will be discussed more in the next part of the paper.

The Goodness of God

Who exactly is God? In a nutshell, Christian doctrine tells us that he is the all-good and all-powerful Supreme Being that created man and the whole world. He displayed his power by creating man in his image and likeness but also showed his justice when man sinned against him. However, why did God need to allow the evil present in our lives to take control over us? Surely, an all-powerful God could create a world wherein evil would be eradicated, thus, being a better world for man to live in. Some philosophers defended not only the goodness of God when it came to evil but also the perfection of the world—and Leibniz was no exception.

Much like Nicholas Malebranche's notion that God is the first cause, Leibniz starts his defense by saying, "God is the first reason of things."⁷ Being the Creator, we cannot but attribute to God the beginning of things. This is something that Leibniz readily admits. He also says that the first cause must be intelligent for he could not have created a better world than what we live in

right now. Leibniz further states, "...all that God does... is harmonious to perfection."⁸ This is because God's goodness constrains him to always create the best. That is why, for Leibniz, everything we see around us, as it is, is perfect and the best.

In the following paragraphs, the most important arguments posited against Leibniz' theory of the goodness of God would be answered and expounded upon. These arguments range from the question about God's omnipotence to the "best of all possible worlds".

The first argument is, if God were to always create the best, then wouldn't it be better if God created other gods and not something imperfect and prone to sinning like man? One thing we have to remember here is that God can create other Gods but he would not because it is not what is best. In Leibniz's words, "...therefore there must needs be different degrees in the perfection of things, and limitations also of every kind."⁹ This statement of Leibniz is closely related to his theory of the mind as a mirror. According to him, our minds perceive the city of God in one way or another. But that image is confused because we only see one side of it. Much like a pencil halfway submerged in a cup of water, we see it bent even though we know it is perfectly straight. If we look at it from the front, it would appear bent but if we look at it from above, we see that it is straight. In order to successfully perceive the city of God, all minds must come together and mirror it with their own perspectives. Another argument Leibniz uses is that, creating a multitude of unique individuals that are so similar yet so different from one another would most fittingly project the power and wisdom of God than creating one perfect man.

The second argument is if God can only create what is best, then it would question his

omnipotence because he is constrained towards what He should do. For the answer to this second argument, we have to go back to the theory of the best of all possible worlds. What exactly is this theory? For Leibniz, the world we live in is the best of all possible worlds. He says that God has an infinite number of possibles to choose from. He chose from innumerable plots and scripts to create the best world. This is because the goodness of God cannot but create the best. So everything present in the world has a purpose in the grand scheme of things. Let us now correlate this with Leibniz' defence of God's freedom. He says, "God fails not to choose the best, but he is not constrained so to do... there is no necessity in the object of God's choice, for another sequence of things is equally possible."¹⁰ In the realm of the possibles, we can find numerous possibilities of combinations that God can deem to exist. For example, you are here now, reading this paper but in the realm of the possibles, there exists a combination wherein you are drinking coffee or watching television instead of reading this. But God chose this combination for this point in time therefore, this is the best. God could've just as easily deemed to existence the reality of you drinking coffee, meaning, God was not constrained to do what He did for there were innumerable other combinations He could've created instead. What drives God into choosing the best is his goodness.

The third argument is, if the reality we live in now was the best, then that must mean God cannot change anything more in the world, but that would question his omnipotence again for he cannot have limitations. This is the main problem that faces the existence of miracles because if everything was already the best from the start, there would be no more for God to do. If we look deeply into the theory of the best of all possible worlds, we would find out that everything is already determined. God

determined everything from the start when he thought of the best combinations of all possibilities because in order to create the best path, one must foresee the indefinite future and keep going at it—which is exactly what God does. What then if everything is already determined? Leibniz writes, "...the miracles which happen in the world were also enfolded and represented as possible in this same world considered in the state of mere possibility..."¹¹ Here we see him solving the problem, once again, with the "best" theory. God included it in the best combination that he perform miracles at a specific time, at a specific place and, to specific people. He already foresaw that it was the best course to take on a certain combination. But it doesn't mean God would constantly perform miracles—for he can't—because the order of the natural world is already perfect and therefore, to interfere with it constantly would render the best to be lessened.

Another related question that would arise from this is the use of prayers and vows. If everything is already determined, there would be no more use for praying or giving yourself up to God. But Leibniz answers this by saying, "These prayers, these vows... were already before God when he formed the resolution to order things."¹² God knew that one would pray before Him and even the content of the prayer is before man ever knew about it therefore, prayers are still needed because God, technically, can and do hear them out.

The last and probably the most controversial argument that serves to tie the goodness of God and the existence of evil (which will be discussed in the next part) in relation to Him is, if everything is determined, it must mean that God also determined that the serpent would tempt Eve and she would share the forbidden fruit with Adam which resulted to the fall of

man. If this was true, wouldn't it question the goodness of God?

I believe that this is the most difficult argument to defend because it cannot be explained thoroughly and enough for people to believe. Leibniz answers:

God having resolved to permit the sin of Adam and the corruption of the human race, for reasons just but hidden, his mercy made him choose some of the corrupt mass to be freely saved by the merit of Jesus Christ, and his justice made him resolve to punish the others by the damnation that they deserve.¹³

Basically, what Leibniz says is that the fall of man was seen by God as a part of the best possible world. The reason I said earlier that I cannot explain it thoroughly is that we can never know the reason why God allowed the fall of man or why it was considered as part of the best. Because of the limitations of human knowledge, we can never perceive the divine reason for God's actions. But we can be sure that whatever He does is for the best of mankind. One more important thing we have to see here is that for Leibniz, God did not want man to fall but He could not fail in creating the best. But his goodness is then redeemed because God still wants man to be saved. That is why He sent His Son down to the earth. God wanted people to follow Jesus back to Him. Those that followed Jesus were saved while those who did not repent were punished into damnation. We have to remember though that condemning people to damnation is not a defect of goodness but, rather, an exercise of justice, specifically, divine justice.

It is quite obvious that when it comes to God, difficult questions are sure to arise. One reason is because our limited intellect can never understand the reasons for God's choices. The only thing we could do is trust His judgement

because we know that what He does only serves to benefit mankind. Leibniz expresses this simply by saying, "...*there is nothing so exalted as the wisdom of God, nothing so just as his judgement, nothing so pure as his holiness and nothing more vast than his goodness.*"⁴

The Existence of Evil

For years, the theological and the philosophical communities have communicated their differences and arguments in different aspects of man's life and his spirituality. But one of the most interesting and engaging topics that has ever faced the theological and philosophical world is the problem of evil.

Evil are, basically, bad things.¹⁵ What the world experiences are only the shallow effects of evil however, they do not really understand the true meaning of evil or even the purpose of evil. Because of this, people have always blamed God whenever something bad happened in their lives. Evil is truly a mystery for human beings but we must also understand that it is needed in the world. Evil creates a sense of balance that the world needs.

Evil has been present in every aspect of man's life. In its many forms (disease, death, etc.) evil has plagued human beings and made them doubt the goodness of their Creator. In contemporary times, the forms of evil have taken on a whole new standard from petty thieves to calculating serial killers and with this, our fear has taken on a whole new level. But what most people do not realize is that sometimes, we are scared for nothing. People doubt God's intentions because of the presence of evil which shakes their faith. Death is inevitable. From the day we were born, we knew that there was a day when we would cease to live yet why do some still take out their anger on God when their loved ones die? Not

everything that causes pain is evil. All of us do evil in our own way and yet why isn't the world in total chaos? Almost like Pandora's Box wherein out of all the evil that came out, there was something good in it, and that is hope.

As said before, Leibniz considers evil as a privation of goodness, but never the goodness of God. So in order to find the true origin of evil, he goes back on history and to the basic essence of man and his freedom. First, he examines the source of evil in man and why he does these bad things in the first place. To start off, he says, "...*it appears that man is compelled to do the good and evil that he does.*"⁶ This is closely connected to his concept of determinism. For if everything is determined, it must mean that we are committing sin in a specific point of time was "permitted" by God. Therefore, we had no choice but to do that sin. Again, this closely relates to the problem of the freedom of man which will be discussed further on the paper.

Why is man compelled to sin? Surely if God wants to save all men, He would prevent man from sinning in order to gain a place in heaven. Leibniz expresses his sentiments by saying, "*Man is exposed to a temptation to which it is known that he will succumb, thereby causing an infinitude of frightful evils.*"⁷ This statement describes the fall of man which some call the greatest sin ever committed. God told Adam and Eve that they can eat any fruit in the paradise except from the forbidden tree. With this act, they were exposed to the temptation. But at the time, they did not care much for it because they were perfectly happy. When the serpent tempted them, however, they yielded and ate the fruit. God knew they would be tempted before He even created them, but he didn't stop them in any way. And for Leibniz, this placed the whole human world into a "necessity of sinning" wherein everyone is bound to sin, even the newly born babies. With this account, it may

seem that God is the sole cause for the presence of evil.

At the core of Leibniz's defense, he reiterates that God's choices are always for the betterment of the world. No matter how painful or how many people suffer in order to achieve this, there would always be a reason for it. Often too, the evil we experience can be attributed to something that would produce goodness in the long run. This view of Leibniz is similar to the utilitarian point of view. When Leibniz says, "We know, moreover, that often an evil brings forth a good whereto one would not have attained without that evil. Often indeed two evils have made one great good,"¹⁸ his view coincides with the utilitarian point of view. Utilitarianism is a school of thought that judges by the happiness of the multitude. If an action serves to bring maximum happiness to the maximum number of people, then it is deemed good. Leibniz says that God permits evil because it becomes the cause for bigger goodness to manifest.

How exactly can something negative give rise to something positive? There are actually a lot of examples for this kind of combination. But Leibniz best expresses this in the following statement:

A little acid, sharpness or bitterness is often more pleasing than sugar; shadows enhance colours; and even a dissonance in the right place gives relief to harmony. We wish to be terrified by rope-dancers on the point of falling and we wish that tragedies shall weigh-nigh cause us to weep. Do men relish health enough, or thank God enough for it, without having ever been sick?¹⁹

Most people do allow evil in their lives. Why do we watch tragic movies wherein people die? Because we appreciate the feelings and sentiments that the characters feel and we relate

to them. Why do we like bungee jumping or rock climbing wherein our lives are put on the line? Because we want to feel that thrill or that adrenaline rush that comes with it. Why do we put salt on something that is too sweet for us? Because we do not want to taste something sweet but instead, something that pleases our taste buds. What's more important however is learning through our mistakes. For example, if a lazy student failed an important test, this would cause him to change and start studying in fear of failing the subject. If he passed instead, his attitude would not change and he'll be the same lazy student throughout his school life. One example that Leibniz reiterates is the state of sickness. When we are healthy, we become carefree with our lives but once we feel pain or fall ill, we start to miss that healthy state we had immediately. We start to appreciate our health once we feel pain and we cannot do anything we could normally do before. The pain we feel, that most people deem evil, is actually the one that keeps us alive. For upon touching a frying pan on the stove, we immediately feel the pain of heat but if we didn't feel it, we could never know that our hand is in danger of getting burned. The same goes for the body—if you do not feel the pain of a stomach ache, you may never know that your appendix is about to burst or that you had food poisoning. For Leibniz, it is quite obvious that all these evils that people abhor are actually the ones that preserve our lives.

The world would not be better had there been no evil in it. The fact that evil is existent must mean that evil is the best purpose for us and that there is a reason for its existence. Benedict Spinoza, a Jewish-Dutch philosopher, said that evil is just an illusion. This is because we humans are ignorant of what's going on in the world. He said that if we looked at the world without prejudice, we would see that there is no evil because everything happens for a reason.

Although Leibniz and Spinoza may disagree most of the time, they are still both rationalists and, therefore, have the same thinking. Leibniz says, “God being inclined to produce as much good as possible, and having all the knowledge and all the power necessary for that, it is impossible that in him there be fault or guilt or sin; and when he permits evil, it is wisdom, and it is virtue.”²⁰

Conclusion

The goodness of God does not diminish in any way because of the existence of evil. This is because of the mere fact that He is all-good means that there must be a reason why He would allow evil in the world. There is no doubt that those reasons are for the sake of the whole human world. Though He might have permitted the fall of the first parents, He still wants all men to be saved—clearly shown by Him sending His only son, Jesus Christ. Of course, it was possible that there be a world without evil but then again, it wouldn’t be perfect for us. We might never know the reasons of God for allowing evil but it doesn’t matter because we just need to trust in Him. Even Leibniz says, “...that we may not have cause to vaunt ourselves, it is necessary that we be ignorant of the reasons for God’s choice.”²¹ A limited mind can never achieve the intellect of something as infinitely intelligent as God. The only thing we can do is to live our lives as before and be enlightened by the fact that there is nothing bad that happens without a reason. Because in the end, our lives are only so long and is only borrowed, that is why we have to live as we are and not worry about the future because God has already determined it into the best way he can.

² Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy* (United States: New Haven Yale University Press, 1952), 135.

³ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁴ Hick. *Evil and the God of Love*, 4.

⁵ Leibniz. *Theodicy*, 136.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁷ Leibniz. *Theodicy* 128.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁹ Leibniz. *Theodicy*, 142.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹¹ Leibniz. *Theodicy*, 152.

¹² Leibniz. *Theodicy*, 152.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁴ Leibniz. *Theodicy*, 181.

¹⁵ Peter van Inwagen. *The Problem of Evil*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 12.

¹⁶ Leibniz. *Theodicy*, 124.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁸ Leibniz. *Theodicy*, 129.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 130.

²⁰ Leibniz. *Theodicy*, 138.

²¹ Leibniz. *Theodicy*, 180.

¹ John Hick. *Evil and the God of Love* (Great Britain: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1996), 5.

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