The Problem of Evil and Pain

3. The Explanation of Leibniz: The Best of All Possible Worlds

Leon Bonnat “Job” 1880
The Problem of Evil and Pain

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Opening Prayer

Almighty and everlasting God, you made the universe with all its marvelous order, its atoms, worlds, and galaxies, and the infinite complexity of living creatures: Grant that, as we probe the mysteries of your creation, we may come to know you more truly, and more surely fulfill our role in your eternal purpose; in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.
Gottfried Leibniz

- Born 1646 into pious Lutheran family, near the end of the 30 Years War in Germany, which had left Germany in ruins. Died in 1716 in Hanover.
- Father was Professor of Moral Philosophy at Leipzig, Germany.
  - Father died when Gottfried was 6 years old.
- As a child, he was largely self-taught from the books in his father’s library.
- 1661-1666: studied law in at University of Leipzig. 1667: received doctorate in jurisprudence from the University of Altdorf.
Gottfried Leibniz

- Declined offer of a professorship at Altdorf.
- For most of his life, he earned a living by working for royalty as librarian, judge, minister, political advisor, historian and genealogist.
- At the same time he wrote on the side and made astonishing contributions to mathematics, science, and philosophy.
Gottfried Leibniz

Mathematics:

- Independently developed differential and integral calculus the same time as Isaac Newton, devising a superior notation ($dx$ and $\int$) that is still used today.
- Described the binary number system (base 2).
- Proposed the basis for the branch of mathematics now known as general topology.
- Proposed the basis for the modern branch of mathematics known as symbolic logic.
Gottfried Leibniz

Science:

- Developed a new classical theory of motion based on kinetic and potential energy (dynamics).
- Anticipated Einstein by arguing against Newton that space, time and motion were not absolute, but relative.
- One of the founders of modern science of geology. Proposed that the earth had a molten core.
Gottfried Leibniz

Engineering:

- Worked on design of hydraulic presses, windmills, lamps, submarines, clocks.
- Proposed a method for desalination of water.

Religion:

- Worked for the reunification of the Church:
  - Lutherans, Catholics, Calvinists, Anglicans.
Gottfried Leibniz

Philosophy:

- Posited the **Principle of Sufficient Reason:**
  - There is an adequate reason to account for the existence and nature of everything. Things don’t “just happen.”

- Developed a theory of material reality based on **monads:**
  - **Monads**: Indestructible points with soul-like qualities of perception and appetite, synchronized by God.
  - All objects of the material world are collections of **monads**.
Gottfried Leibniz

Philosophy:

- Developed a theory of Knowledge:
  - Suggested there exists an analogy between our ideas and God’s, and an identity between our logic and God’s.

- Opposed John Locke’s theory that the human mind is a “blank tablet” at birth and that we gain knowledge only through the senses.
Gottfried Leibniz

- Philosophy:
  - A question which vexed Leibniz throughout his life was the problem of evil.
  - The problem of evil was the subject of his first published book (*The Philosopher’s Confession*, 1672, age 26) and his last book (*Theodicy*, 1709, 7 years before his death).
Leibniz and the Problem of Evil
Three Versions of the **Problem of Evil**: how can we reconcile statement (1) with statements (2a), (2b), and/or (2c)?

1. An all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good and all-loving God exists.
2a. Evil exists.
2b. Extreme and horrendous evil exists.
2c. Gratuitous and pointless evil exists.
The Problem of Evil
Augustine’s Explanation

- *In our last session:* Augustine suggested this present world is not what God intended:
  - The *original sin* of Adam and Eve *corrupted* human nature.
  - The corrupted nature and the guilt of the *original sin* has been inherited by all descendants of Adam and Eve. We sin and cause *moral evil*.
  - The presence of *natural evil* in the world (hurricanes, earthquakes, disease, death) is the punishment for *original sin*.
The Problem of Evil
Leibniz’s Explanation

- Leibniz suggested:
  - God had specific good purposes that God wished to fulfill in creating the world.
  - This present world is the **best of all possible worlds** that meets God’s good purposes.
  - Evil is *tolerated* or *permitted* by God only because it is a *necessary consequence, a side-effect of creating the best possible world* that meets all of God’s good purposes.
The Problem of Evil
Leibniz’s Explanation

- Leibniz’s suggestion that this could be the “best of all possible worlds” was ridiculed by Voltaire and other Enlightenment intellectuals.
To appreciate Leibniz’s assertion that this is the “best of all possible worlds,” we must explore:

- What can an “all-powerful” God really do? What does it mean to say God is “all-powerful” or “omnipotent”?
- What kinds of good purposes might God have had in creating the universe? How might fulfilling such good purposes include the necessary consequences or side effects of evil?
Omnipotence

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Omnipotence
Can God Do Anything?

What do we mean when we say God is “all-powerful” or omnipotent?

Does omnipotence mean God can do anything (“You name it, God can do it!”)?

- Can God get married?
- Can God roll over in bed?
- Can God create a rock so heavy God cannot lift it?
- Can God create something that God cannot destroy?
Omnipotence
Can God Do Anything?

- Does omnipotence mean God can do anything ("You name it, God can do it!")?
  - Can God make a square with three sides?
  - Can God change the rules of logic or arithmetic?
  - Can God change the past?
  - Can God sin?
Omnipotence
Another Definition

“All-powerful” or omnipotent means God can do any conceivable action and produce any conceivable thing or arrangement of things,

So long as the action or thing is logically possible,

So long as the action or thing is consistent with rest of the nature of God (unembodied, all-good and all-loving and all-knowing).
Omnipotence

Another Definition

- Omnipotence thus does not mean “anything goes,” and “nothing is impossible” for God.

- If Action “A” *logically* or *necessarily* results in “B” occurring, then not even God can do “A” without “B” occurring.

- If you chose to make a tire with a softer rubber that grips the road better, it *necessarily* follows that the tire will wear faster than a tire made with a hard rubber that would not grip the road as well.

- If God chose to design a tire *and* agreed to play by the same rules as human engineers (the God-given laws of physics and chemistry), God would be subject to the same trade-off of grip versus wear.
What were God’s Good Purposes in Creation?

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God’s Purposes in Creation

Is There a Best Possible World?

- God’s goodness would oblige God to create the best possible world.

- But is there a “best possible world”?
  - What if the set of possible “good” worlds is an infinite continuum of increasing goodness, so that there is no “best” world any more than there is a “highest” number?
  - Many Jesuit scholastics of Leibniz’s time believed this was the case.
  - God therefore simply arbitrarily chose to bring about one among the range of morally acceptable worlds.
Leibniz rejected the idea God’s choice of what possible world to create could be arbitrary or a “roll of the dice.”

Nothing “just happens.” There must be a sufficient reason for anything, even God’s choices (Principle of Sufficient Reason). God must have had reasons and purposes for choosing to create the world that God created.
Out of all the possible worlds that might fulfill God’s reasons and purposes for creation, God’s goodness would oblige God to actualize only the best one of the possible worlds.

But what is God trying to do in creation? What are God’s criteria for judging the “best?”
God’s Purposes in Creation

What is the “Best” World?

Leibniz suggested the following:

1. The best world is the one that maximizes the virtue of free, rational, sentient beings.

2. There are many facets to God’s goodness and splendor, and a finite created thing or creature can only mirror a limited part of that goodness and splendor. The best world is one that maximizes the mirroring of the God’s goodness and splendor in the creation through a vast variety of things and creatures.

3. The best world is one which yields the greatest variety of phenomena governed by the simplest, most elegant, most beautiful set of laws.
God’s Purposes in Creation

Evil in the “Best” Possible World

- How can there be evil in the best possible world?
- Example: consider these goals in designing the “best” tire:
  - Maximize durability.
  - Maximize traction in snow.
  - Maximize traction in rain.
  - Maximize traction on dry pavement.
- But there are tradeoffs:
  - Softer rubber maximizes traction but minimizes durability.
  - Tread design for maximal traction in rain is suboptimal for snow or dry pavement.
- One might say the final product *necessarily* must include some degree of “evil” that falls out of the trade-offs that “compromise” the design.
If Action “A” *logically* or *necessarily* results in “B” occurring, then not even God can do “A” without “B” occurring.

Evil, Leibniz suggests, was one of the *necessary consequences* or *side effects* involved in the design of a world that:

- maximizes the virtue of free, rational, sentient beings.
- maximizes the mirroring of the God’s goodness and splendor in the creation through a vast variety of things and creatures.
- yields the greatest variety of phenomena governed by the simplest, most elegant, most beautiful set of laws.
God’s Purposes in Creation
Evil in the “Best” Possible World

- God remains holy in permitting this evil because it is the necessary consequence of God performing God’s obligation to create the best possible world that fulfills God’s good purposes for creation.
References


Next Time: The Problem of Evil and Pain

The Explanation of St. Irenaeus: A World of Soul-making

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