

## Response to the Problem of Evil

**1. God's Options:** When one attempts to explain why God created THIS world, rather than any other, we can either say that God had a reason for choosing to create the world this way, or He did not.

Some theologians before Leibniz opted for the second option, saying that God did not have a sufficient reason for picking this world. Leibniz, of course, could not accept this, since it violates his Principle of Sufficient Reason, which states that everything must have a cause or reason. Leibniz, therefore, stated that God DID have a reason for picking this world: This world is the BEST world.

Some theologians did not think that a best world was possible, because you could always add one more good thing to any world, no matter how large. Saying there is a "best" world is like saying there is a "highest" number. Nevertheless, Leibniz was committed to PSR.

So, for any theist, ARE these our only two options?: (1) God's choice to create this world was completely arbitrary, without reason, or (2) This is the best possible world. What do you think?

**2. The Best Of All Possible Worlds:** Leibniz envisions God as having all of the possible options of what to create laid out before Him in His mind. He calls these options "possible worlds". By "world", he means the entire creation—what we might call "universe". He states that God was morally obligated to create the BEST of all possible worlds, because the lack of goodness is a kind of evil, and, if God had created something less than the best, He would have been responsible for a kind of evil—but, God is morally perfect and therefore cannot be responsible for any sort of evil.

Leibniz then addresses several points regarding evil:

a) The world cannot contain less evil: Leibniz' opponents might argue that, surely the world could contain less evil though. Surely, one fewer broken arm, one fewer tornado, one fewer sin would be possible without upsetting God's plan for the world. But, Leibniz cannot accept this. He points out that everything is connected, and that it must be the case that, if even one single evil were removed, somehow this would affect the world in such a way that it would be less than the best. He concludes,

Thus, if the smallest evil that comes to pass in the world were missing in it, it would no longer be this world; which, with nothing omitted and all allowance made, was found the best by the Creator who chose it. (9)

b) Evil makes a greater good possible: It must be the case that the evils in the world are necessary to bring about a greater good. In our experience, it is the case that "often an evil brings forth a good whereto one would not have attained without that evil." (10)

c) The balance of good over evil is great: If it is objected that surely there is TOO MUCH evil, and that surely the balance of evil is nearly as great as the balance of good, Leibniz denies this. He points out that we tend to focus more on evils than goods, but if we take a closer look, we will see that we are usually healthy and rarely sick, etc.

d) Evil makes us appreciate the good, and become better people: Leibniz cites two more reasons that evil is necessary in order to form the best world. He notes that, "Evil often serves to make us savor good the more; sometimes too it contributes to a greater perfection in him who suffers it ..." (23)

e) Our limitations are necessary: Leibniz also notes that evil is often the result of being limited in some way. But, this couldn't be helped. There can only be one perfect being, so God could not have created other gods. It follows that everything that He creates MUST be limited in some way. (31)

f) Reason and free will are benefits: Some object that our ability to reason and act freely is the source of much destruction in the world. Couldn't God simply have created us without these things? Leibniz doesn't think so. It must be the case that a world containing beings with reason and the ability to freely abuse this gift is better than one containing no such beings. He writes,

Such is God's gift of reason to those who make ill use thereof. It is always a good in itself; but the combination of this good with the evils that proceed from its abuse is not a good with regard to those who in consequence thereof become unhappy. Yet it comes to be by concomitance, because it serves a greater good in relation to the universe. ... Thus nothing prevents us from admitting that God grants goods which turn into evil by the fault of men, this often happening to men in just punishment of the misuse they had made of God's grace. (119)

Therefore, we can only infer that reason and free will must be VERY GOOD things, since it must be the case that our possession of these gifts is worth the price of the evil that we produce by abusing them.

g) Two reminders about the bigger picture: Leibniz reminds the reader that happiness is not the only good. We tend to focus solely on our own happiness and judge that the world is not very good, while overlooking other sorts of good. For instance, diversity, having an environment that we may interact in, freedom, reason, etc. are also goods.

Furthermore, the fact that we focus only on one sort of good is an indication that we are not looking at the bigger picture. All that we have access to is the tiny corner of the universe of our own lives. But, even if it were the case that a single life was bad, this would not be proof that the whole was not the best possible. For, "the part of a beautiful thing is not always beautiful." (213) Every square inch of the most beautiful painting is not itself beautiful, for instance; and the painting as a whole would not be so beautiful if we removed certain brushstrokes which we deemed imperfect. In short, we commonly experience that imperfections often render the whole more beautiful and perfect. And,

when we do not see an entire work, when we only look upon scraps and fragments, it is no wonder if the good order is not evident there. ... Thus the apparent deformities of our little worlds combine to become beauties in the great world, and have nothing in them which is opposed to the oneness of an infinitely perfect universal principle: on the contrary, they increase our wonder at the wisdom of him who makes evil serve the greater good. (146-7)

## Freedom and Virtues

**1. A Closer Look At The Benefits of Evil:** Leibniz mentions free will as a great benefit. Another that is commonly cited is moral character. Let's go beyond the Leibnizian account and take a closer look at these claims:

The first claim is that free will is a VERY good thing, and whenever creatures have free will, they will inevitably abuse it to create some evil. In other words, some evil is a necessary *side-effect* of freedom.

The second claim is that a virtuous moral character is a VERY good thing, but in order to achieve virtues, some evil is necessary. One cannot become generous if no one is in need, or courageous if there is never any danger, or honest if all anyone ever speaks is truth. And so on. In other words, some evil is a necessary *means* to virtue.

**2. Objections:** There are a number of objections to this defense:

- (a) Consent: Even if it were true that we could produce a greater good by allowing people to suffer, surely it is wrong to do so without their consent.

Reply: Consider a parent. A parent DOES have this right to a certain extent. We do not think it is morally wrong to allow a child to come to SOME harm in order to shape them and make them become better people. But, if a parent may permissibly play this role to SOME extent, then consider how much more the Creator of the universe fits this role. Furthermore, it was not possible for God to gain his creatures' consent. He had to decide which system to put in place BEFORE there were any people—and it turns out that one where those people are free (with the capacity to do evil) was the best system.

- (b) The amount of evil: But, surely, there must be some LIMIT as to how much evil is worth the price of freedom and virtue. There just seems to be SO MUCH evil, that surely we could do with less without restricting our freedom or our ability to form virtues.

Reply: Perhaps there IS a limit on the amount of suffering. God knew that the best system is one that contains some evil. Otherwise, freedom and virtue would be impossible. It seems that God WOULD have to draw the line somewhere. And perhaps He HAS. It is likely the case that, if there WERE less evil in the world, atheists would STILL complain that there is TOO MUCH. The line has to be drawn somewhere, and we cannot be sure that it has NOT been drawn in the optimal place.

[Rebuttal: Is this a good reply? Consider Adolf Hitler, who had 6 million Jews exterminated. Was the preservation of Hitler's free will really worth the lives of 6 million people? Couldn't God at least restrict SOME people's freedom?]

(c) Natural evil: The atheist may be quick to notice that, perhaps free will accounts for MORAL evil (i.e., evils that are a result of human actions), but what about NATURAL evil (i.e., evils that are NOT a result of human actions)? Surely God did not need to create a world full of earthquakes, cancer, diseases, famines, and vicious animals in order to achieve the greater good of human freedom? This sort of evil seems to remain unaccounted for.

Reply: Natural evil increases our freedom, in the following two ways:

- First, by observing the pain and suffering that nature causes us, we learn how to produce evil for ourselves. The knowledge that we gain by observing the evils of nature thus increases our options to do good or evil.

[Rebuttal: What do you think of this? Couldn't God just give us very vivid DREAMS of a world filled with pain? Why do we really have to ENDURE pain? Furthermore, once again, is it really necessary to have SO MUCH pain? MILLIONS of people die each year due to starvation, earthquakes, cancer, tsunamis, hurricanes, etc. Isn't this overkill?]

- Second, the virtues account DOES account for natural evil. Those who endure evils are given options that they wouldn't otherwise have; for instance, to endure it with patience, or bemoan it with anger and regret. Likewise, those who see others enduring evils have the option to look on their troubled friends with either compassion or callousness. Thus, evil is a sort of test of our character, which could not occur if there were no evil.

[Rebuttal: Does this seem like a good reply to you? Again, do we really need to have SO MUCH evil? Is it any consolation to a child dying of starvation to say, "Cheer up! God is giving you the chance to endure this slow and painful death with patience and perseverance, and also this gives others the chance to look upon you with compassion.

Furthermore, aren't there many instances of natural evil that will never affect our character, our options, or our amount of freedom? For instance, consider all of the creatures that die of starvation or in forest fires each year that NO ONE WILL EVER KNOW ABOUT. Or, consider the millions of children who die each year of starvation BEFORE they are even capable of forming virtues or exercising their freedom. Does this sort of event refute the idea that all evil is necessary?]