

# QUESTIONING GOD'S OMNIPOTENCE: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF LEIBNIZ'S THEODICY

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## Abstract

This study is a critical appraisal of Leibniz's theodicy which centers on the perennial problem of evil in Philosophy. It investigated the claim of God's omnipotence in Leibniz's best possible world theory. The problem of evil consists in the attempt to reconcile the existence of a good and powerful God with the presence of evil in the world. This study explored the question of whether or not the presence of evil in the world serves as an evidence against God's existence or any of the attributes traditionally ascribed to him by theists (all-powerful, all-loving, and all-knowing). The aim of this study was to examine Leibniz's attempt at resolving the problem of evil through his theory of the best possible world. This study focused on an investigation of Leibniz's claim to see whether or not the attribute of divine omnipotence is sustainable in the light of his theory since he claims that God allows some evil to take place so that greater good may be attained. This study sought a possible justification for the presence of evil in the world, and whether in fact evil is a "thing," and whether it has great consequences for God's existence. This study employed Criticism as its philosophical method of research. The major finding of the study is that Leibniz's solution to the problem of evil is not entirely satisfactory since it leaves room for a number of questions. The study concluded that Leibniz's position that God allows some evil to take place so that from them greater good may come about questions God's omnipotence - although God is omnibenevolent and omniscient, he is not omnipotent.

**Key Words: Theodicy, Evil, Problem, Omnipotence, Appraisal.**

## INTRODUCTION

The question of evil and human suffering is a perennial one in philosophy. This question is particularly famous because of its connection with the theme of God - a central issue in Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Religion. God's benevolence is brought to scrutiny when the presence of evil in the world is considered. In some cases, and for certain scholars, the existence of God becomes controversial in the face of so much evil in the world. Undoubtedly, the problem of evil and the question of human suffering in the world have a whole lot of implications for the existence of God, and for the traditional attributes of God. This is so because the problem of evil has always surfaced as the bone of contention between theists and philosophers. While theists, aside believing in God uphold some fundamental attributes as being essential to God's nature (such as goodness), some philosophers argue that

noticeable pain and suffering in the world is inconsistent with the nature of God as described by theists, and so, the reality of evil could even go beyond denying God and or a total dismissal of his existence. There is a problem as to how one can reconcile these two glaring contradictory facts: on the one hand that the world is put in place and sustained by a perfect being who is all-good and all-powerful, and on the other hand, that this same world is filled with so much evil. This problem therefore, is from evil: why should there be evil in a world supposedly created by a good God.

Leibniz contends that evil and suffering are necessary for the greater good. In other words, suffering and evil are necessary parts of the divine plan. These aspects of the divine plan, in the opinion of Leibniz, serve as means to greater ends such as moral growth, spiritual development, and the realization of higher goods. Leibniz contends that God in his infinite wisdom, and through the principle of sufficient reason, has chosen to create this best possible world with evil and suffering in it. In other words, there is a harmony in the world between good and evil.

Leibniz maintains the traditional attributes of God while proposing his best possible world theory. However, this raises a problem of God's omnipotence. It is difficult to rationally accept God's all-powerfulness considering Leibniz's view that he allows some evil so that greater good might come about. However, this position that God, due to his nature would not allow any evil except there is a greater good which will issue from it is quite problematic in that it shows some form of limitation of the power of God. the fact that an all-Good God would allow some evil to occur so that from it he can achieve greater good is an indication that "all-powerfulness" is wrongly attributed to him. This study concludes that the affirmation of a God who is all-good and all-knowing but not all-powerful explains the existence of evil in the world.

### **Brief Profile of Leibniz**

Leibniz was born in Leipzig on the first of July 1646. This was at the time when the thirty years war was coming to an end, the war which had ravaged the whole of central Europe at the time. One would not be surprised at the outstanding academic performance of Leibniz considering his background. He came from a Lutheran family which was part of the educated elites on both sides: his father Friedrich Leibniz was a jurist and a professor of moral philosophy at University of Leipzig and his mother Catharina Schmuck was the daughter of a professor of law. After the death of his father in 1652, he, his mother and his uncle directed his own education from then on. At an early age he was granted access to his father's library and he took time to study the volumes of ancient history and the Church Fathers.

In 1661 he began his formal university education at Leipzig; his philosophical training was chiefly scholastic in nature. He has some background in Renaissance Humanism. He met Jacob Thomasius at Leipzig, who influenced him greatly. Upon reception of his baccalaureate from Leipzig, he continued his education at the University of Altdorf where in 1666 he published *Dissertation on the Art of Combinations* (*Dissertatio de arte combinatoria*). Leibniz met with Baron Johan Christian von Boineburg who helped him secure a position with the Elector of Mainz. He composed a series of works in philosophical theology. Leibniz died on November 14, 1716

### **Clarification of Key Terms**

**Omnipotence:** This refers to the quality of having unlimited or very great power. This is a long-standing attribute of God as held by adherents of religion. it is an indication of the belief

that God's power is unlimited and that God can do anything. This is one of the core beliefs of many monotheistic religions. This is a term used to express God's all-powerfulness.

**Appraisal:** This refers to the act of carrying out an assessment of something or someone. It means the act of estimating or judging the nature or value of something or someone. It is an examination that is done in order to determine the quality, success, or needs of someone or something.

**Theodicy:** This is the vindication of divine providence in view of the existence of evil. This term was coined by the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz in his 1710 work "Theodicies." In the philosophy of Religion, theodicy means an argument that attempts to resolve the problem of evil that arises when all power and all goodness are predicated of God. This term is derived from ancient Greek (*theos*) which means God and (*dike*) which means justice. According to A. Laytner, theodicy is an attempt to justify or defend God in the face of evil.

**Evil:** In simple terms, the problem of evil refers to the philosophical challenge of reconciling the existence of evil and suffering with an omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient God. It is important to understand the concept of evil while engaging in the philosophical discourse on the problem of evil. Understanding the nature of evil is an advantage in resolving the problem of evil. As Plotinus notes "those inquiring whence evil enters into being, or rather into a certain order of beings would be making the best beginning if they established first of all, what precisely evil is" (Pourtless, 8). Marcus Singer notes that though evil is often used loosely as often the generic opposite of 'morally good,' used precisely, it is the worse possible term of opprobrium available (Singer, 185). R.F. Baumeister sees evil as an intentional interpersonal harm (Baumeister, 34). In the view of Smith Ferguson, evil can be divided into two complementary, yet distinctive categories: perverse (or instrumental) evil and pure evil. Perverse evil is the performance of evil acts under the guise of moral certitude or permissance. Pure evil is the performance of evil acts for their own sake (Ferguson, 6). In any case, evil has a number of dimensions. It refers to bad or unacceptable states of affairs which cause discomfort or pain.

### **The Problem of Evil**

The problem of evil, as earlier stated, is a perennial one in philosophy. Although it may have been formulated in varying ways, the core of the problems remains the same – the difficulty of attributing "all-good" and "all-powerful" to God in the midst of evil in the world. Generally, one can think of three main propositions which are presented in the argument of the problem of evil: (i) God is omnipotent; (ii) God is good; and, (iii) Evil exists. Having these three propositions together constitutes this problem because they are mutually contradictory, even though many people hold all three of them to be true (Walker, 25). In other words, while many people do not see a problem with having all three propositions stand as true, some philosophers think that it is unreasonable to be comfortable with all three put together. Why is it so? It is so because our reason tells us that if God is omniscient he should know under what circumstances evil will occur, and since he is omnipotent he should be able to prevent it from happening, but since orthodox theism presumes his willingness by ascribing to him the attribute of being loving, then there is a problem with regards to the veracity of the claim of his existence or of his possession of some of the qualities being attributed to him, like the attribute of omnipotence.

Traditionally, orthodox theism takes some of these propositions for granted. Some scholars have identified five propositions which are taken for granted by traditional theism:

(i) God exists; (ii) God is omnipotent; (iii) God is omniscient; (iv) God is wholly good; and, (v) Evil exists. The conjunction of the above five propositions is exactly what philosophers find to be contradictory (Walker, 25). Now, the attempts to defend God in the face of evil is referred to as a theodicy.

### **A Glance at other attempts at resolving the Problem of Evil**

The ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus is often credited to be the first to state this problem clearly. He states that if God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent, then how can evil exist in a world made by God? the philosopher Plotinus equates sensible matter with primary evil or evil itself. For him, sensible matter is the part of otherness which is opposed to the things which in the full and proper sense exist, that is rational formative principles. It is a privation; evil lacks the characteristics of being. For Augustine, evil is a kind of non-being (privation). Basing his judgments on the Scriptures, he insisted that God created everything and everything is good. Evil is not a thing; hence it could not have been created. For Thomas Aquinas, God allows evil to exist in his presence so that he can create good from it. He subscribes to the theory of evil as a privation.

In the modern period, it was David Hume who re-ignited interest in the problem of evil. In his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, he corroborated the argument of Epicurus on the question of God and evil. Scholars identify the problem of evil in Hume used as an evidential argument against the existence of God. Fyodor Dostoevsky imagines God as an architect of an edifice of human destiny with the goal of making people happy in the end but having it necessarily that a little child is unavoidably tortured. This fact, for him, questions especially the love of God. Albert Camus presented rebuttals to a variety of theodicies. For him the presence of human suffering shows the meaninglessness of human life which he often calls absurdity. J.L. Mackie notes that none of the proffered solutions to the problem of evil has been able to stand to criticism, hence, the logical problem of evil still stands and God's existence is threatened. Alvin Plantinga argues that the freewill defense shows that the existence of God is compatible both logically and probabilistically with the existence of evil. Richard Swinburne argues that it is not evil to bring about bad (evil) states of affairs so long as certain conditions are satisfied. He suggested that they are satisfied in the case of the evils of this world, and so the evil of this world do not provide evidence against the existence of God. for Philip Quinn, God as an omnipotent and superlatively good moral agent, would actualize a world of unsurpassable moral goodness if he were to actualize a possible world. Eleonore Stump criticizes the arguments of Swinburne. He holds that natural evil is not justified by the value of knowledge necessary for serious exercise of freewill as Swinburne had suggested. William Hasker focused on the idea of gratuitous evil. His argument was that God would allow just those evils which are conducive to a greater good.

### **The Theodicy: Leibniz's Solution to the Problem of Evil**

Leibniz's solution to the problem of evil is principally contained in the *Theodicy* which was written in 1710. However, some earlier works of Leibniz contain "patches" of arguments and demonstrations which together serve to bolster the chief argument of the *Theodicy*. In fact, the *Theodicy* is properly to be regarded a mature synthesis of the entire Leibnizian ideas regarding the problem of evil. The term or expression "theodicy" should be understood here in two senses: first, as the book written by Leibniz. Secondly, as Leibniz's attempt to resolve the problem of evil.

Leibniz's solution to the problem of evil is expressed clearly in his effort at justifying the goodness (justice or righteousness) of God. considering the fact that in contemporary time

the problem of evil is regarded as an argument for atheism, his focus here was not to prove the existence of God since for him the existence of God was a certainty. Rather, he engages in proffering solution to the problem only because it has been taken as a drawback on the goodness of God. Consequently, his solution is expressed through his claim that this world created by God is the best possible world and through the principle of Sufficient Reason.

### **The Best Possible World**

Leibniz's solution to the problem of evil consists in the very resounding claim that this world as it is, is the best of all possible worlds. The world, tainted by evil, numerous kinds of evil, has been taken by many as argument against God's holiness. The underachiever problem actually emphasizes this point. It contends that because there are several evils in the world, the world is therefore a very poor achievement on the part of a seemingly or allegedly perfect God. consequently, God is not fit to be loved or adored since he has allowed so much evil in the world he created. In response to this manner of thinking, Leibniz composes the *Theodicy*. What does he intend to achieve?

Our end is to banish from men the false ideas that represent God to them as an absolute prince employing a despotic power, unfitted to be loved and unworthy of being loved. These notions are the more evil in relation to God inasmuch as the essence of piety is not only to fear him but also to love him above all things, and that cannot come about unless there be knowledge of his perfections capable of arousing the love which he deserves, and which makes the felicity of those that love him (Leibniz, 126).

One thing that appears quite clear from the above passage is the fact that Leibniz has the goal of restoring in men's heart the love for God. He observes that God is the first reason of things, everything else is contingent. He is the reason for the existence of the world (which is the whole assemblage of contingent things), he is necessary and eternal.

Furthermore, he argues that this cause (reason) must be intelligent since the world being contingent and an infinity of other worlds being equally possible and having equal claim to existence with it, the cause of this world should have reference to all these possible worlds in order to choose one of them. The regard or relation of an existent substance to simple possibilities can be nothing other than the understanding which has the ideas of them, and to fix upon one of them (that is to choose one of them) can be nothing other than the act of the will which chooses. It is the power of the substance that renders its will efficacious. "power relates to being, wisdom or understanding to truth, and will to good. And this intelligent cause ought to be infinite in all ways, and absolutely perfect in power, in wisdom, and in goodness, since it relates to all that which is possible" (Leibniz, 127). Now, since all is connected together, there is no ground for admitting more than one. The understanding of this intelligent cause is the source of essences, its will is the origin of existences. Through these few words, Leibniz claims to have proven the existence of the only God with his perfections. God in his supreme wisdom, Leibniz continues, which is united to a goodness that is no less infinite could not but have chosen the best. For as a lesser evil is a kind of good, even so a lesser good is a kind of evil if it stands in the way of a greater good, and there would be something to correct in the actions of God if it were possible to do better. He makes an allusion to Mathematics, as he often does – it is just like in mathematics where there is no maximum or minimum, in short nothing distinguished, everything is done equally, or when that is not possible nothing at all is done, so it may be said likewise in respect of perfect wisdom, which is no less orderly than mathematics, that if there were not the best (optimum) among all possible worlds, God would not have produced any. By "world" Leibniz means the

whole succession and the whole agglomeration of all existent things, lest it be said that several worlds could have existed in different times and in different places. everything put together must be reckoned as one world or one universe. Again, even though one should fill all times and all places, it still remains true that one might have filled them in innumerable ways, and that there is an infinitude of possible worlds among which God must have chosen the best, since he does nothing without acting in accordance with supreme reason (Leibniz, 128).

### The Principle of Sufficient Reason

As stated earlier, the principle of sufficient reason (PSR) is a central principle of the philosophical system of Leibniz. Leibniz used this principle as a response to the argument of those who hold that God was not under any obligation to create the best world. Leibniz rejected this position on the basis of this principle. According to this principle, for any state of affairs, there must be a sufficient reason that explains why that state of affairs and not some other state of affairs obtains (Leibniz, 209). With regards to our world therefore, there must be some reason that explains why it, and some other world, obtains. Now, there can be no such reason if it is the case that the goodness of worlds increase *ad infinitum*. Hence, in order for the principle of sufficient reason to stand, Leibniz concludes that there can be no infinite continuum of worlds. The idea of sufficient reason is clearly expressed in his conceptual containment theory of truth as can be seen in his 1686 letter to Arnauld:

In every true affirmative proposition, whether necessary or contingent, universal or particular, the notion of the predicate is in some way included in that of the subject. *Predicatum inest subject*, otherwise I do not know what truth is ... for there must always be some foundation for the connection between the terms of a proposition, and this must be found in their concepts. This is my great principle, with which I believe all philosophers should agree, and one of whose corollaries is the commonly held axiom that nothing happens without a reason which can always be given, why the thing has happened as it did rather than in another way, even though this reason often inclines without necessitating (Leibniz, 337).

Critics may argue against this principle by stating that this principle could still stand even if there were an infinite continuum of good worlds. In this case then, God's decree that this world should be actual would be the reason. Leibniz rejects this view because in his opinion this response would only push the problem back because the principle of sufficient reason applies to free choices just as it applies to any other event or state of affairs. Hence, there is a need to provide a sufficient reason for God's choice of this world instead of some other world on the continuum of morally acceptable worlds. Leibniz observes that it seems such a sufficient reason cannot be given on the infinite continuum of good worlds view. This is so because the sufficient reason cannot be derived from some feature or fact about the world that is actually chosen, for this would raise the obvious question: why this feature in particular serve as the sufficient reason for God's choice? Leibniz concludes that the only possible answer this question would be: (a) because God arbitrarily selected that feature as the one he would favour in deciding which world to create; or (b) because that feature made that world better than its competitors. Neither of these answers is acceptable. The first is inconsistent with the principle of sufficient reason. The second is incompatible with the hypothesis at issue – that there is no best world (Leibniz, 138).

### **Leibniz's Theodicy and the Question of God's Omnipotence**

Although Leibniz's work in the *Theodicy* is as fascinating as it is compelling, it is not without some basic weaknesses. One may rationally hold on to the divine attributes of omnibenevolence and omniscience, it is quite difficult to maintain that God is indeed all-powerful considering the kind of world man finds himself in and the idea of God that theists always put forth. There is an obvious conflict between the qualities of omnibenevolence and omnipotence. In fact, it is precisely due to the attribute of benevolence that God's omnipotence is brought into question. Leibniz's solution does not seem to have satisfactorily answered the question of evil. This is because the conclusion of Leibniz still leaves room for a very important question with regards to God's omnipotence.

In his response to the Socinians, Leibniz affirms that it is God's omnipotence which makes him able to create the best possible world. Now, the concept of omnipotence leaves no room for inadequacies or insufficiencies. Neither does it leave room for excuses or limitations. Omnipotence is an absolute concept. The ordinary understanding of this term is quite in line with what many theists think when they use it with regards to God. The general conception of this term immediately gives one an impression of boundlessness. That is, there is no limit to what an omnipotent being can do. Hence, if an omnipotent being has a specific nature, it is rational to expect that this omnipotent being would act boundlessly in accordance with this nature.

However, Leibniz maintains that in some occasions God condones some evil in order that good, or greater good might come from them. This is an indication of limitation of the power of God. In other words, his omnipotence should provide him the option to create good without evil and to create greater good without needing the cooperation or support of lesser evil. Does this not seem to suggest that there is a limit to what an omnipotent being can do? Or does omnipotence refer to something else rather than the "all-powerfulness" that theists often ascribe to God? By submitting to the seeming necessity of allowing some evil to occur so that some greater good (which is his own motive) will follow is a subjection to domain of boundaries or helplessness. It appears that God is in such a position that sometimes human beings find themselves – a position in which you have to allow something you do not want, or pass through some experience you do not like or approve of just so you can achieve another goal which is your original intention. In order to address this challenge, this study maintains that the all-good and all-knowing God is not all-powerful, and this does not deny him his right as creator and sustainer of the world.

### **Evaluation**

Leibniz tends to justify the presence of evil in the world by considering it as a necessary part of the Best Possible World. This justification may not be satisfactory in equal proportion to everyone. The theist may find it meaningful. But whether he would continue to find it meaningful when confronted with the harsh realities of life remains to be seen. The atheist may see no sense in this justification. This does not in any way exempt him from rational puzzle faced by the human mind when suffering is involved. The philosopher may find the submission unsatisfactory for several reasons. One reason may be that the very existence of a God is still a matter of controversy for him. Another reason would be that even if there were a God, Leibniz's reason of universal harmony is not satisfying because it would seem to human reason that an infinitely powerful God should be able to bring about a universal harmony without allowing evil and suffering. Not only does this fact question God's power, it also questions his goodness. If he is indeed infinitely good, he should find a way to prioritize the happiness of his creatures by excluding evil and suffering from the pre-established universal harmony. Furthermore, the existence of evil and suffering in the world continue to

have unwelcome consequences with regards to God's existence, or the belief in God. Human rationality will continue to probe and doubt, at least to some extent, the credibility of the claim of God's existence in the world that is pervaded by so much pain and suffering.

### **Conclusion**

The theodicy of Leibniz is undoubtedly a worthwhile enterprise. It is significant to take note of the fact that his philosophical training was chiefly scholastic in nature. This fact is obviously expressed in style and in the subjects with which he concerned himself. One should not overlook the period in which Leibniz undertook this project. It was a time when the Church was still yielding a lot of power and the internal conflicts in the Church were actually matters of general concern. His efforts were therefore timely and helpful. The best possible world theory and the principle of sufficient reason are key expressions of Leibniz's rationalist orientation. He was keen to show the powers of the human reason and what it is capable of achieving.

Human suffering is not arbitrary after all. God is not a despotic king who dispenses goods and evils arbitrarily, who damns and saves without any reason. God acts in accordance with supreme reason and so anything he allows to take place in the world, he allows for a reason. So, human suffering, in all its dimensions, take place with a sufficient reason for their occurrence. God, due to his nature, would not allow any evil except there is a greater good which will issue from it. However, this position that God, due to his nature would not allow any evil except there is a greater good which will issue from it is quite problematic in that it shows some form of limitation of the power of God. the fact that an all-Good God would allow some evil to occur so that from it he can achieve greater good is an indication that "all-powerfulness" is wrongly attributed to him. This study concludes therefore, that the affirmation of a God who is all-good and all-knowing but not all-powerful explains the existence of evil in the world.

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