

Study Guide: Problem of Evil I

LART602

Prof. Oakes

Winthrop University

Readings: *Genesis* 1-3¹

Leibniz: *Discourse on Metaphysics* [e]²

Hume: *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* Parts 10-11³

Milton: *Paradise Lost* Book V.561-802

The Problem of Evil

- The problem of evil names a class of philosophical and theological issues concerning the existence of evil. At bottom, the question is, why does evil exist? where the assumption implicit in this question is that it should not. (It is perhaps notable that the corresponding question regarding good is rarely raised and is not generally regarded as a “problem”.)
- A classic formulation of the problem of evil dates from the time of Epicurus and takes the form of an argument for atheism:
 1. The existence of evil is incompatible with the existence of God (where God is understood as supremely powerful and benevolent).
 2. Evil exists.
 3. Hence, God does not exist.
- *Theodicies* are attempts to demonstrate the “divine justice” (*theos* = god; *dike* = justice) in the face of evil – i.e., rejection of the first premise, above. Many include reference to human free will, others to God’s punishment for human sin. Other strategies for resisting the conclusion that God doesn’t exist involve the rejection of the second premise and the rejection of the possibility of understanding God.
- The problem of evil may also be entertained in a non-theistic context. In this form, the problem is not compatibility with a divine, good being, but either with the essential goodness of the cosmos or with the logic of evil itself: on one analysis, evil is “that which should not be.”

Genesis 1-3

- *Genesis* 1-3 contains (two versions of) the Judeo-Christian creating myth. In Chapter 3, we find the story of “the Fall,” i.e., the account of the origin of evil in this world. Some notable features of the account of the Fall include the following:

¹ Biblical passages may be found here: <http://www.biblegateway.com/>

² A more reader-friendly version of the Leibniz may be found here:

http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/f_leibniz.html

³ Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* may be found here:

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/4583/4583-h/4583-h.htm>. See the following link for a somewhat simplified text: <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/hd.html>

- The apparently malevolent spirit of the serpent (snake) precedes the errors of Adam and Eve, raising a question about the completeness of this account as an account of the *origin* of evil. If the intentions or motivation of the serpent are indeed evil, then the human Fall is not the origin of evil in this world.
- At 2:17, God warns Adam that eating of this tree will kill him. (This itself may be a falsehood, depending on how we interpret “die”.) If, prior to eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve lack all knowledge of good and evil, then how are Adam and Eve to understand that they are forbidden from eating of it?
- Knowledge of good and evil, arguably, constitutes a crucial element of the human maturation process. That is, adult human life involves understanding of right and wrong conduct; humans lacking this understanding – children, adolescents, the cognitively disabled – are regarded by us as immature or not fully developed. The Fall, then – i.e., the loss of human innocence – might be interpreted as the inevitable consequence of the normal process of human development.
- Also notable is the jealousy of God of his powers – knowledge of good and evil and eternal life. It is to prevent humans obtaining the latter that leads God to turn Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden.

Leibniz

- Leibniz provides a helpful summary of his account in the headings of the *Discourse*. Use these to orient yourself to the discussion.
- More specifically, the following sections will most directly pertain to our discussion of the problem of evil in the context of the issue of rational order: §§1-6, 13, 30-32, 35-37.
- While Leibniz clearly has the problem of evil in mind, his primary intent in the *Discourse on Metaphysics* is a general account of the nature of the universe as an expression of God. To the extent that this account includes a theodicy, it rests on several propositions: God himself does not cause evil; humans freely choose to do evil; God compensates for evils so as to produce a greater good; and we cannot always know how God’s wisdom in allowing evil plays out. (See §§30-31.)
- Leibniz is notorious for asserting that this is the best of all possible worlds (see, e.g., §5). His reasoning, however, is relatively straightforward. First, a perfect being can do no other than what is best, since to do less than the best is to act less than perfectly (§3). Further, God is for Leibniz a perfectly rational being, whose every action satisfies the Principle of Sufficient Reason: that the given act or state is the product of a complete, rational account. God, in other words, can do nothing for no reason, and everything he does he does for a (good) reason. Thus, if there were a better way for the world to be, then God would not have created this world with a completely sufficient reason; but since that is how God acts, it must be that this world is precisely such a world – the best possible.
- Leibniz metaphysics is a fascinating form of idealism. The world, for Leibniz, consists of innumerable many minds, each of which perceives the whole of the universe in every detail. One mind is distinguished from another by perceiving one or another detail more clearly and vividly; the differences in the perceptions of these “monads” coordinate with each other in a “pre-established harmony”, so

that when one perceives poking another in the eye, another perceives pain in its eye. Bodies and physical space are simply features of the world as perceived by these disembodied minds. In the context of Leibniz's theology, this account is thought by Leibniz to express a greater divine glory than would the simpler world of real space and physical objects.

Milton

- This passage from Milton's *Paradise Lost* recounts the fall of Lucifer which precipitates the human fall in the Garden of Eden. Lucifer's place in heaven as the highest angel before God is supplanted by God's son, Christ, to which event Lucifer reacts badly.
- Consider this account as an account of the origin of evil in the world. Is it a satisfactory account, in your judgment?
- For Aquinas' treatment of these matters, see here: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/aquinas/summa/sum071.htm>.

Chaos and Cosmos

- Our central questions remain unchanged.
- Leibniz, in particular, offers another and strong version of a rational cosmos, predicated as it is on the Principle of Sufficient Reason. Note, however, the limits that he imposes on our capacity to know order.