

LEIBNIZ'S HORRENDOUS AND UNTHINKABLE WORLD: A CRITIQUE OF LEIBNIZ'S 'BEST POSSIBLE WORLD' THEODICY

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In Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*, he writes in response to the presence of evil in our world, 'Whatever is, is right.'¹ Concerning our world, Pope's words encapsulate the thesis of a Leibnizian theodicy: Since God is omniscient, his character necessitates that he create the best among all possible worlds i), which means that even the evils that God has permitted are good-making features that contribute to this world being the best ii). In this paper, I reject Leibniz's thesis for several reasons. In reference to i), I briefly argue that there is no necessary connection between God's character and his creating the best among all possible worlds because there are good possible reasons—such as providing an occasion of grace for fallen humanity—for him to be motivated to create a less than optimal world (Robert Adams). Further, I challenge the idea of there being any such thing as a best possible world at all, since any possible state of affairs can always be better or worse (Plantinga). Lastly, I respond to ii) with what Marilyn Adams calls 'horrendous evils' in the world, and I argue that Leibniz's theodicy cannot account for the goodness of God if God is only maximally good to people *globally* (that is, generally in the utilitarian sense) as opposed to *individually* (that is, goodness within the context of the individual's life). Because of this argument, I conclude by endorsing the need for some kind of incommensurate good in the afterlife that engulfs the negative value of the 'horrendous evil' on an individual's life for God's goodness to be maintained.

I. OMNISCIENCE AND EVIL IN THE BEST POSSIBLE WORLD

There are two particular ideas in Leibniz's *Theodicy* I'd like to consider: i) God's omniscient character necessitates that he creates the best of all possible worlds (BPW), and ii) the evils in our world that God has permitted are a part of what makes up the BPW. On i), Leibniz explains that 'God... considered among other possible [sequences] of things'² in his 'supreme wisdom... [that] cannot but have chosen the best... since he does nothing without acting in accordance with supreme reason.'³ By God being *necessitated* to create the BPW, Leibniz scholar Michael Murray suggests that Leibniz is referring to *moral* necessity, which describes an event that 'is physically and metaphysically contingent, but nonetheless never fails to occur.'⁴ In relation to God's creation of the BPW, *moral* necessity means that he created because he has 'perceived goodness of the action... together with the attraction of [his] will toward such evident goods.'⁵ Leibniz clearly attributes this necessity to God in his *Theodicy*, as he writes that God's 'decree to create is free: God is prompted to all good... but it does not compel him... [in following the] moral necessity that the wisest should be bound to choose the best.'⁶ So in creating the BPW, God is still free in the metaphysical and physical senses, but not in the moral one.

And if God sees among the possible sequences the BPW, then His character places upon Him a *moral* necessity to actualize that world. Therefore, we can conceive of Leibniz's argument of i) roughly like this:

P1: Knowledge of an evident good attracts the will of an agent to the good (Moral necessity)

P2: Omniscient knowledge of all evident goods attracts the agent to the highest good(s).

P3: If God is omniscient, then He is morally necessitated to create the BPW in which the highest good is obtained.

P4: God is omniscient.

P5: Therefore, God is morally necessitated to create the BPW.⁷

But if God is so omniscient, then what do we make of evil? Similar to contemporary forms of soul-making theodicy,⁸ Leibniz puts some stock in the instrumental value of evils in our experience.⁹ Further, Leibniz refuses to attribute responsibility for these evils to God's causing them to exist; rather, God is 'inclined to produce as much good as possible,'¹⁰ and so he has only '*permitted* evil because it is involved in the best plan existing in the region of possibles...'¹¹ This means that though God does not approve of the inherent badness of evil, he at least approves of its instrumental value and further recognizes that God's 'goal of creating the best possible world...entails trade-offs among competing goods, some of which [have] costs in terms of human happiness.'¹² If freedom, for example, is a good-making feature of the BPW because it allows for us to have moral responsibility,¹³ then its inclusion in the world requires the tradeoff of men having the ability to misuse their freedom and bring evil in the world so that 'some vice is to be permitted'¹⁴ by God for the sake of achieving the goodness of freedom. With this, we can formulate ii) as follows:

P6: If God cannot fail to create the BPW (P5), then all events within the BPW are good-making features of it.

P7: Evils are within the BPW.

P8: Therefore, evils are good-making features of the BPW.

This is enough exposition of Leibniz's BPW-theodicy; let's now turn to its issues.

II. GOD *MUST*? NECESSITATE *WHAT*?

In reference to i), there are two objections to consider. First, why think that there is any kind of necessity upon God to create the best possible world (P1)? Robert Adams defends the idea that '[Theists] must hold that the actual world is a good world. But [they] need not maintain that it is the best of all possible worlds...'¹⁵ Drawing from the Leibnizian idea that God makes tradeoffs when creating the BPW, Robert Adams holds that 'a perfectly good God might cause or permit a person to have less happiness than he might otherwise have had, in order to punish him, or to avoid interfering with the freedom of another...'¹⁶ Of course, Leibniz holds that these kinds of tradeoffs are altogether still good-making features of the BPW (P5); however, Robert Adams thinks that this counts significantly against a view that holds this to be the BPW

because, for example, why did God not create us with more advanced cognitive faculties or moral behavior that allows us to sin significantly less than we do in this world? One possible reason Robert Adams proposes is that our less than optimal world provides occasions for God to show his grace to us. Much of a Christian's worship is founded on thanking 'God for his existence as for an undeserved personal favor... and [expressing] surprise that God should concern Himself with [man] at all... although He could have created intrinsically better states of affairs instead.'¹⁷ But in Leibniz's BPW-theodicy, we risk losing the grandeur of God's grace toward our less than optimal characteristics.¹⁸

But then again, what is a BPW? It's not at all clear what this would look like, and so the second objection to i) is that there is no such thing as a BPW. Leibniz posits that this world is 'the City of God [that] must be the most perfect of all possible states, since it was formed... by the greatest and best of all Monarchs.'¹⁹ And further, Leibniz supposes that In this process of looking for the sole, ultimately best state of affairs, 'God... penetrates [all possible worlds]... to estimate their degrees of perfection... [to make the] choice of the best from among all possible systems...'²⁰ So there is no sense in which Leibniz is positing that there are multiple best possible worlds; rather, the 'City of God' we inhabit now is *the* penultimate, best state of affairs God could have actualized.

The problem with there being just *one* best possible state of affairs is that just about any possible world can always be worse, which is partially why comforting a grieving person by saying something like, 'It could always be worse' is usually a bad idea. Of course it could be worse! Situations can also always be better! Perhaps in possible world *W* I have a birthday party where I receive \$500 and have 10 video games for all of my friends to play. But what about possible world *W'* in which I have a birthday party where I receive \$550 and have 11 video games for all of my friends to play? It seems that 'for any possible world *W* there is a better world *W'*', in which case there just isn't any such thing as the best of all possible worlds.'²¹ So even if my first objection to P1 fails—in which case God is necessitated to create the BPW—how would it be possible for God to be necessitated to create something that cannot exist?²² This is unthinkable, much like the idea that this world full of *horrendous* suffering is the best possible world a loving God could have actualized. To this idea we will now turn.

III. 'DEAR GOD...DO YOU LOVE ME?'

But what about ii)? Are evils really good-making features of a BPW (P8)? I think not, since I find Leibniz's BPW-theodicy to be far from accounting for the presence of what Marilyn Adams calls 'horrendous evils' in our world. By 'horrendous evils,' Marilyn Adams means 'evils [that give] one reason *prima facie* to doubt whether one's life could ... be a great good to one on the whole...'²³ These are the kinds of sufferings that give an individual reason to think that the positive value of her life has been engulfed by overwhelming evil. Moreover, these evils '[cry] out not only to be engulfed, but to be made meaningful through positive and decisive defeat.'²⁴ For Adams, these evils cry out for some kind of incommensurate good that overwhelmingly outweighs the badness of the evils experienced within the context of the *individual's* life as opposed to *global*, utilitarian distribution of goodness among a wider population.²⁵ As a Christian, Marilyn Adams thinks that this good is '...the good of beatific, face-to-face intimacy with God [that] ... *would*...overcome any *prima facie* reasons the individual had to doubt whether his/her life would or could be worth living.'²⁶ Without this eschatological hope in the *afterlife* (not something that happens in this *present* life), Marilyn Adams does not think the good character of God can be maintained. Her argument goes like this:

P9: If God is good, then He must provide an incommensurate good to overcome the negative value of ‘horrendous evil’ in an individual’s life.

P10: God is good.

P11: Therefore, God will provide the incommensurate good.

Now one example of what Marilyn Adams would consider being a ‘horrendous evil’ is the instance of child suffering described by Ivan Karamazov, in which a group of guards beat a five-year-old girl to death while she cries ‘meek tears for dear God to protect her...’²⁷ The suffering of this child gives her reason to doubt that her existence obtaining an actual state of affairs is better than her non-existence obtaining. Perhaps God may have seen in this situation an obscure form of instrumental value by giving another person an opportunity to display ‘acts of heroism, sacrifice, and selflessness’ in bravely fighting off the guards ‘that would not [have happened] in good times,’ yet it seems obvious that these ‘[benefits] either could have been had for less or [are] not worth the cost [of the child].’²⁸ Further, we are at a loss in considering how this kind of suffering could in any way contribute to this world being the best that God could have possibly actualized. Was this instance of child suffering really among the events that God ‘has permitted...because it is involved in the best plan existing in the region of possibles[?]’²⁹ Even if God only permits this suffering as opposed to *causing* it, this still does not seem to be a good-making feature of a BPW (contra P8).

But what if God has created the BPW *globally*, such that He is maximally good to all creatures generally? Is this enough to do away with the need for P9? Maybe there is a class of the population that suffers ‘horrendous evils,’ but overall, God has produced a maximally good world for all people on balance.³⁰ For example, Leibniz questions whether or not ‘God prefers a single man in all respects to the whole of lion-kind,’ and he ends up concluding that ‘the interest of a certain number of men [may not] prevail over the consideration of a general disorder diffused through an infinite number of creatures.’³¹ This means that the BPW might not be what is best for humans since their interests could ‘be outweighed...[by] less excellent but more numerous creatures, and...harmony of the world as a whole.’³² This is a strange form of utilitarianism that Leibniz attributes to God, in which God only has to create the BPW in a *global* sense rather than an *individual* sense. By *individual*, I mean a sense in which each person can consider God’s goodness to her in her own experience without having to factor in weighing considerations among every other creature on the planet.

And of course, the problem with utilitarianism is that it fails to account for the wellbeing of the minority populations that have to endure negative events for the sake of the larger population. If God has only actualized the BPW in this *global* sense, then he ‘would not thereby be one who placed a high value on human personhood in general or individual human persons in particular,’³³ especially persons who have experienced ‘horrendous evils’ like the five-year-old girl from Ivan Karamazov’s story. Following P9, if God is actually going to be good to the five-year-old in the *individual* sense, then he must defeat the negative value of ‘horrendous evils’ she has experienced ‘by giving [her] positive meaning ... with a great enough good *within the context of [her] life*.’³⁴ It’s not enough to say that the five-year-old’s suffering contributed to God’s BPW in the *global* sense such that, though she experienced ‘horrendous evils,’ God was as good as he could be to the rest of humankind—who would be comforted by this?³⁵ We have to conclude, then, that God’s goodness requires He be good to persons *individually*, such that He provides those who have experienced ‘horrendous evils’ with an incommensurate good (i.e. beatific vision of God) that sufficiently engulfs the *prima facie* reasons to doubt the goodness of their existences.³⁶ Further, we must also reject the Leibnizian idea that God has only created

the BPW in the *global* sense—we see now that this utilitarian calculus is incompatible with God's good character.

This is where Leibniz (and other traditional responses to suffering) loses power. On the one hand, Leibniz does not endorse the popular tradeoff of free will in the form of the Augustinian doctrine of 'original sin,' in which there is 'the damnation of unregenerate children...[and] general damnation resulting from original sin alone'³⁷ that may give the slightest idea that people who suffer *deserve* to suffer because of their own sinfulness. This would lead to troubling implications for Dostoevsky's 'five-year-old girl:' though she was torn to shreds, her sin contributed to the Fall, which contributed to sinful men, which contributed to her getting herself into that situation in the first place! Obviously, such an idea would be grossly wrong to suggest, and Leibniz acknowledges that in his rejection of 'original sin.' But on the other hand, Leibniz endorses a Miltonic sort of '*felix culpa*' concerning the Fall of man when he writes that 'God, having found already among things possible...man misusing his freedom and bringing upon himself his misfortune... could not avoid admitting him into existence, because the general [best] plan required this.'³⁸ Did it though? The Incarnation and the Cross undeniably brought about the great goods of triumph and reconciliation between God and men; nonetheless, we are left wondering just how instances of 'horrendous evil' could have in any way significantly contributed to the overall goodness of the world—whether from the perspective of the *individual* or the *global* community for that matter. Here, we should recall again Robert Adams' idea that believers may hold that the created world is good, but they're not required to hold in any way that it is the best possible.³⁹

IV. GOD LOVES FIVE-YEAR-OLDS

We return to Alexander Pope's idea that 'Whatever is, is right.'⁴⁰ Why does this need to be true? God surely could have other possible good reasons to create a less than optimal world, and it seems like there is not such a thing as a BPW because each state of affairs can always be better or worse. Further, how could such a thing be true? In light of 'horrendous evils' in the world, we have strong reasons to think that this surely cannot be the BPW (presuming there is such a thing). If there are 'horrendous evils' in the world that give individuals *prima facie* reasons to doubt the positive value of their existences, then God's goodness requires that he be good to persons *individually* through some kind of incommensurate good rather than the *global* goodness of a Leibnizian BPW-theodicy—otherwise, some five-year-olds can be kicked to the curb while the rest of the world enjoys a general dispersion of God's goodness upon them in the utilitarian sense. But God is not just a God of general goodness; on the contrary, he is even good to the five-year-old.⁴¹

Notes

1 Pope, Alexander. 'An Essay on Man: Epistle I by Alexander Pope.' *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44899/an-essay-on-man-epistle-i.

2 Leibniz, G. W. *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), p. 168.

3 Ibid, p. 128. Italics added.

4 M. Murray. 'Vindicatio Dei: Evil as a Result of God's Free Choice of the Best' in Larry M. Jorgensen and Samuel Newlands (eds.), *New Essays on Leibniz's 'Theodicy'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 153–171. p. 158.

5 Leibniz, *Theodicy*, p. 157.

6 Ibid, p. 270.

7 Thanks to Philip Morrow for helping me clarify this part of the paper.

8 For example, John Hick thinks God wants ‘humans [to] transcend their natural self-centeredness by freely developing the most desirable qualities of moral character... [the] environment...must be one in which there are obstacles to be overcome ...’ See section 4.c. of N. Trakakis, ‘The Evidential Problem of Evil’, Internet *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, www.iep.utm.edu/evil-evil/.

9 For example, he thinks that ‘Evil often serves to make us savour the good more [and] contributes to a greater perfection in him who suffers it...’ See Leibniz, *Theodicy*, p. 137.

10 Ibid, p. 138.

11 Ibid, p. 327.

12 D. Rutherford, ‘Justice and Circumstances, Theodicy as Universal Religion’ in Larry M. Jorgensen and Samuel Newlands (eds.), *New Essays on Leibniz’s ‘Theodicy’* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 71–91. p. 80.

13 ‘It is always we who produce it, good or evil, for it is our action: but there are always reasons that make us act, without impairing either our spontaneity or our freedom.’ See *Theodicy*, p. 307.

14 Ibid, p. 266.

15 R. Adams, ‘Must God Create the Best?’ *The Philosophical Review* 81 (1972), pp. 317–332. p. 317.

16 Ibid, p. 322.

17 R. Adams, ‘Must God Create the Best?’, p. 324.

18 Perhaps Leibniz could respond and say that these occasions of grace are good-making features of the BPW. This is when the vagueness of the criteria for what Leibniz considers to be the ‘best’ makes this debate difficult. By ‘best,’ does Leibniz mean that humans have most happiness? Most advanced cognitive faculties? Flourishing? This isn’t clear in *Theodicy*, and so while I am not presuming Robert Adams’ argument to be infallible, I do think the vagueness of what is ‘best’ can allow defenders of Leibniz to be an unfair moving target against this criticism.

19 Leibniz, *Theodicy*, p. 265.

20 Ibid, p. 267.

21 Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 61.

22 I presume Kant’s ‘is-ought’ principle here. For a good defense, see Bart Streumer, ‘Reasons and Impossibility’, *Philosophical Studies* 136 (2006), pp. 351–384.

23 M. Adams and S. Sutherland, ‘Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 63 (1989), pp. 297–323. p. 299.

24 Ibid.

25 Paraphrase of Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 204.

26 M. Adams, ‘Horrendous Evils’, pp. 306–7.

27 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002) p. 242.

28 T. Senor, ‘Skeptical Theism, CORNEA, and Common Sense Epistemology’ in Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*, (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), pp. 426–443. p. 428.

29 Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 327.

30 Hud Hudson advocates for a multiverse view of the GPW-theodicy to account for gratuitous evils that is not Leibnizian but still interesting nonetheless: ‘Even if a particular evil would have been gratuitous if the local environment in which it appeared were the whole of the universe, it may yet be compensated for once located in a mere portion of that whole.’ See H. Hudson, ‘Best Possible World Theodicy’ in Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*, (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), pp. 236–250. p. 246.

31 Leibniz, *Theodicy*, pp. 188–189.

32 R. Adams, ‘Justice, Happiness, and Perfection in Leibniz’s City of God’ in Larry M. Jorgensen and Samuel Newlands (eds.), *New Essays on Leibniz’s ‘Theodicy’* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 197–217. p. 200.

33 Adams, *Horrendous Evils*, p. 30.

34 Ibid, p. 31.

35 Marilyn Adams gives a moving illustration of the insufficiency of an individual’s effort to find positive meaning in her life on a global-GPW view: ‘Could the truck-driver who accidentally runs over his beloved child find consolation in the idea that this middle-known but unintended side-effect was part of the price God

accepted for a world with the best balance of moral good over moral evil He could get? [...] Would the fact that God permitted horrors because they were constitutive means to His end of global perfection...make the participant's life more tolerable, more worth living for him...?' See M. Adams, 'Horrendous Evils', p. 302.

36 Marilyn Adams moves beyond this point to endorse universalism. She writes: '...I flatter the Creator with enormous resourcefulness to enable human agency to work [sufficiently] to recognize and appropriate positive meanings sufficient to defeat its own participation in horrors. If this should mean God's causally determining some things to prevent everlasting ruin, I see this as no more an insult to our dignity than a mother's changing a baby's diaper is to the baby.' See M. Adams, *Horrendous Evils*, 30. I think Jerry Walls sufficiently refutes Adams' universalism: 'If God is willing to overrule our freedom, as she argues, we may wonder why he does not do it now in light of all the horrendous evil that results from the abuse of freedom...' See Jerry L. Walls, *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2015), p. 76. Also, God 'expresses anger and disappointment when his children fail, and he holds them accountable for their sin and rebellion...We are God's spouse, and he expects us to be faithful and to return his love.' See *Ibid*, 75.

37 Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 300.

38 *Ibid*, 290.

39 R. Adams, 'Must God Create the Best?', 317.

40 A. Pope, 'An Essay on Man.'

41 Thanks to Philip Morrow and Dennis Kinlaw, III for providing helpful comments and revisions for this paper.