

## AN APPRAISAL OF LEIBNIZ'S THEODICY AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE TO THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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### Abstract

*A variety of arguments have been offered in response to the problem of evil, and some have been used in both theodicies and defenses. This paper seeks to elucidate for the church some significant understanding about evil using Leibniz's theodicy. A philosophical approach was used in its appraisal. The paper submits that God should be seen as a cosmic judge as well as a providential Father who allows evils for the actualization of his purpose among others.*

**Keywords:** Leibniz, Theodicy, Evil, Philosophy, Church.

### Introduction

There are numerous philosophical approaches to the subject of theodicy. For instance, there is a view that evil is not an actuality in existent reality but rather, the absence of good, such as sight, health, love, or moral virtue. Some of the philosophers whose work touches theodicy are Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Gottfried Leibniz.<sup>1</sup> Of these three philosophers, this paper attempts to focus on the understanding of Leibniz's theodicy. What is Leibniz's definition of evil? And in what categories has he placed evil. How is the theodicy of Leibniz relevant to the contemporary church? These are the issues this paper; An

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/theodicy-theology>. Accessed on 21st November, 2018 @ 11:53hrs.

Appraisal of Leibniz's Theodicy and its Significance to the Contemporary Church. The paper will be concluded with the significance/relevance of Leibniz's theodicy to the contemporary church.

The goal of this paper is to elucidate for the contemporary church some significant understanding about evil using Leibniz's theodicy. In discussing this paper, the writer will begin with the biography of Leibniz, followed by his philosophy, then his theodicy in their classifications.

### **Biography of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz**

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz was born at Leipzig in 1646<sup>2</sup>, his father being a professor of moral philosophy in the university.<sup>3</sup> Leibniz studied both Greek and Scholastic philosophy, and he speaking of himself at about age thirteen said, he read Suarez with as much facility as people are accustomed to read romances.<sup>4</sup> At age fifteen, he entered the university and studied under James Thomasius. Making the acquaintance of 'modern' thinkers like Bacon, Hobbes, Gassendi, Descartes, Kepler and Galileo, he found in them examples of a 'better philosophy.'

According to his reminiscences, Leibniz debated within himself during solitary walks whether to retain the Aristotelian theory of substantial forms and final causes or to adopt mechanism. Mechanism prevailed.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the influence of his early studies of Aristotelianism and Scholasticism is obvious in his writings; and of all philosophers of the pre - Kantian 'modern' period, it was probably Leibniz who possessed the most extensive knowledge of the Scholastic. In fact, he was certainly much acquainted with them than Spinoza. And his baccalaureate thesis (1663) on the principle of individuation was written under the influence of scholasticism, though of the nominalist direction.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Sleigh says that Leibniz was actually born on July 1, 1646. And that he trained in the Law, he earned his living as a councillor, diplomat, Librarian, and historian, primarily at the court of Hanover. For details, see: R. C. Sleigh, Jr. "Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm" in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Second Edition, Vol. 8. Detroit: Gale Cengage Learning, 2005, 5405.

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: the Rationalists Descartes to Leibniz*, Vol. 4 Bedford Square: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1958, 264.

<sup>4</sup> Copleston, 264.

<sup>5</sup> Copleston, 264.

<sup>6</sup> Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, 264.

Leibniz in 1663 went to Jena, where he studied mathematics under Erhard Weigel. He then gave himself to the study of jurisprudence and took the doctorate in Law at Altdorf in 1667. He rejected the offer of university chair at Altdorf but accepted a post in the court of the Elector of Mainz, where he was later sent on a diplomatic mission to Paris in 1672. It was in Paris that Leibniz made the acquaintance of men like Malebranche and Arnauld. After visiting England in 1673 where he met Boyle and Oldenburg, he returned to Paris and remained there until 1676; his memorable final year with the discovery of the infinitesimal calculus.<sup>7</sup>

Leaving Paris for Germany, Leibniz visited Spinoza with whom he had already had correspondence and was extremely curious about his philosophy. Though the precise relations between Leibniz and Spinoza are not very clear, however, it is clear that the former's insatiable curiosity in intellectual matters produced in him a lively interest in Spinoza's doctrine.<sup>8</sup> In the view of Leibniz's diplomatic character the philosophy of Descartes leads by way of Spinozism to atheism.

Owing to Leibniz's association with the House of Hanover, he found himself involved in compiling the history of the family; the Brunswick family, but his interests and activities were manifold. Thus, in 1682 he founded at Leipzig the *Acta eruditorum*, and in 1700, he became the first president of the Society of the Sciences at Berlin, which later became the Prussian Academy.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to an interest in founding learned societies he occupied himself with the problem of uniting the Christian Confessions. First, Leibniz endeavor to find a common ground for agreement between Catholics and Protestants. Later, when he realized that the difficulties were greater than had been anticipated, he tried, though again without success, to the way for the reunion of the Calvinist and Lutheran bodies. Another of Leibniz's schemes was a plan for an alliance between Christian States, the formation of a kind of United Europe; and after having failed to interest Louis XIV of France, he addressed himself in 1711 to the Tsar Peter the great. He also endeavored to bring about an alliance between the Tsar and the Emperor, but his plans for inducting Christian monarchs to

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<sup>7</sup> Copleston, 264.

<sup>8</sup> Radoslav A. Tsanoff, *The Great Philosophers*, Second Edition. n.p.: Harper & Row Publishers, n.d.

<sup>9</sup> Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, 265.

abandon their quarrels and to join in alliance against the non-Christian world were as abortive as his schemes for the reunion of the Christian confession.

It is also important to mention that Leibniz took a considerable interest in the information about the Far East which was beginning to Percolate into Europe, and that he warmly defended the Jesuit missionaries in China in connection with the rites controversy.<sup>10</sup> He was a polymath, he discovered Calculus independently of Isaac Newton, contributed to Logic and Mechanics, and was an expert in Law and History, and in Chemistry. He founded the Academy of Berlin as mentioned earlier and corresponded with most of the distinguished philosophers and scientists of his time.<sup>11</sup>

Leibniz was one of the most distinguished men of his time, and he enjoyed the patronage of many eminent people. But the closing years of his life were embittered by neglect, and when the Elector of Hanover became George I of England in 1714, Leibniz was not chosen to accompany him to London.<sup>12</sup> His death in 1716 passed unnoticed even in the Academy which he had founded at Berlin, the French Academy being the sole learned body to do honour to his memory. During his life time, he published many articles in learned journals but only one book, *Theodicy*.<sup>13</sup>

The adventurous course of Leibniz's ideas and influence was said to have perplexed historians of philosophy in deciding where to include most suitably their discussion of his thoughts. This is because few of his philosophical writings appeared prior to Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* but Leibniz's *New Essays Concerning Human Understanding* which was intended as a criticism of Locke's theory of Knowledge did not appear until 1765 though was ready in 1704.<sup>14</sup> This is because he changed his mind in publishing his *New Essay Concerning Human Understanding* when he heard of Locke's death. Two of his masterpieces are *Discourse on Metaphysics*, written early in his philosophical career, and *Monadology* (1711), written late.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Copleston, 266.

<sup>11</sup> A. P. Martinich, Fritz Allhoff & Anand Jayprakash Vaidya, eds. *Early Modern Philosophy: Essential Readings with Commentary*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007, 229.

<sup>12</sup> Tsanoff, *The Great Philosophers*, 316.

<sup>13</sup> Martinich et al, *Early Modern Philosophy*, 229.

<sup>14</sup> Tsanoff, 315.

<sup>15</sup> Martinich et al, *Early Modern Philosophy*, 229.

### The Philosophy of Gottfried W. Leibniz

Leibniz in his philosophy required God as a deity to account for the cosmic activity essential in the nature of things. Arriving at the natural idea on the existence of God, he wrote as a believer to instruct others. Also in the defense of his theology, he revised two standard proofs; the cosmological and the ontological. He pointed out a clear distinction between necessary and contingent truths. A proposition affirming the existence of anything is contingent and depends for its truth upon a proposition about some other thing. His form of cosmological argument is based on fact that a world of contingent existence does not contain in itself the ultimate cause and ground of its being, thus the final reason of things must be in a necessary substance, and the sufficient reason of all existence is God. He believed that God is not only of existences but also of essences.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, he noted that if there is a reality of eternal truths, this reality must be founded on the existence of an absolutely necessary Being. "God alone (or the necessary Being) has this prerogative that he must exist, if he is possible. And since nothing can hinder the possibility of that which has no limitations, no negation and consequently no contradiction, this alone is sufficient to establish the existence of God *a priori*."<sup>17</sup>

There are two distinct sources of the problem of contingency in Leibniz's philosophy, one theological, and the other metaphysical.<sup>18</sup> The metaphysical argument is centered on some of his theses about the nature of truth. He held that truth-value of all propositions is settled once truth-values have been assigned to the elementary propositions. That means those expressed by sentences in subject - predicate form.<sup>19</sup> The theological argument focuses on the possibility of a world if God had not choose to create it. As with every choice, there must be a sufficient reason for that choice. The reason for God's choice of a world to create must be located in God's power and his moral character.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Tsanoff, *The Great Philosophers*, 316.

<sup>17</sup> Tsanoff, 316

<sup>18</sup> Robert C. Sleigh, "Leibniz" in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*. Robert Audi ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 427.

<sup>19</sup> Sleigh, 427.

<sup>20</sup> Sleigh, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 428.

In his thought and conviction of the pre-established harmony of the monads, he opines that: the monads are the creations of God, and God's perfection is manifested in their harmonious correlation. He pursued the idea of God by both causal and teleological reasoning where he sees God the creator and also the architect or designer of the world, and He is likewise divine providence, cosmic judge, prince and "a Father to his children."<sup>21</sup>

Writing on moral philosophy, the author affirmed that Leibniz held that moral intelligence recognizes the interrelatedness of human needs and satisfactions, which also respect in others the same right to happiness which it claims for itself and pursues a course of rational philanthropy.<sup>22</sup> His interpretation of moral responsibility and freedom follows from his monadology. The activity of a monad is not causally affected by that of any monad but always expresses its own character as a unique version of the universe. The intelligent will is said to be free of any external determination; the intelligent will is determined in its own unique self-expression. Of this self-determination, man's intelligence may become progressively convinced as it matures.<sup>23</sup> Moral freedom is thus relative to self-understanding and rationality in conduct.

In Leibniz conception of values as his doctrine of substances, he emphasized the dynamic principle of activism. He said, the perfect world is eternally perfectible world, a world always in the process of creation and neither individual nor socially nor cosmically can there be an assignable limit to spiritual progress. This conviction implied the immortality of rational souls: "all the changes of matter cannot make them lose the moral qualities of their personality."<sup>24</sup>

### **The Theodicy of Gottfried W. Leibniz**

It is an attempt to solve the problem of origin and explanation of evil that Leibniz devoted his theodicy (1710). Leibniz's Theodicy was written at the request of Sophie Charlotte, whose Christian faith had been disturbed by reading the *Historical-Critical Dictionary* of Pierre Bayle (1647 - 1706).<sup>25</sup> Having been

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<sup>21</sup> Tsanoff, 317.

<sup>22</sup> Herbert Lockyer, Sr. *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986, 360.

<sup>23</sup> Lockyer, 360.

<sup>24</sup> Tsanoff, *The Great Philosophers*, 324.

<sup>25</sup> Tsanoff, 325.

embroiled in the religious conflicts of the seventeenth century which affected his father, he became skeptical and engrossed by the problem of evil which has been a fundamental problem in the Christian religion of salvation.<sup>26</sup>

Leibniz preceded such evidence with a *Discourse*, because a theodicy must evidently proceed on the assumption that reason and revelation do not contradict each other, and that the former has the ability to recognize the facts presented by the latter, whether in nature or in history.<sup>27</sup> As the aim of theodicy is to refute by reason the objections of superficial reasoners against the wisdom and goodness of God, the work necessarily demands agreement between faith and reason. It is consequently the primary object of Leibniz to show that such agreement exists, or that it must be presumed to exist as soon as a correct view of the idea and nature of reason is entertained. Reason is the 'rightful combination' of truths, which is recognized, either directly or by means of revelation and there can be no conflict between it and the truth, which God reveals.<sup>28</sup>

In a bid to strengthen his cosmic reassurance in his theodicy, Leibniz undertook a closer analysis of the nature of evil and discovered three kinds of evil, namely.<sup>29</sup> The first is physical evil which he sees as suffering. On his account of this kind of evil, he claims that it is reflected in his optimistic temper. The second kind of evil according to Leibniz, is moral evil. This he considers as sin. He claims that the bodily frailties and ailments are not as common or grievous as complaining men believe, and a great part of them can be blamed on our sin. The gravity of sin must be a central conviction in any Christian theodicy.<sup>30</sup> And finally, the third which he called metaphysical evil is the imperfect character of finite being. For a little more on metaphysical evil, Leibniz began his discourse with the standard definition of God. God he argues, is "an absolutely perfect being."<sup>31</sup> In an

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<sup>26</sup> Tsanoff, 325.

<sup>27</sup> John McClintock, and James Strong, *McClintock and Strong Encyclopedia*. in Twelve Volumes. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 2006.

<sup>28</sup> McClintock and Strong.

<sup>29</sup> An online Britannica concurring with Tsanoff also affirmed that in Leibniz's thought, there are three forms of evil in the world: moral evil, physical evil, and metaphysical evil. "He using Augustine's analogy of a picture with dark patches, Leibniz argues that it is best to have a world of rich variety and 'Plenitude.' In this view, God chose which world to create from a infinite number of possible worlds that were present as ideas in his mind." It meant since he wills what is best, the world he created has the greatest possible number of compatible perfections; it is the best of all possible worlds. Check: <https://www.britannica.com/theodicy-theology>. Accessed on 21st November, 2018 @ 11:53hrs. (cf. Tsanoff, *The Great Philosophers*, 327)

<sup>30</sup> Tsanoff, 327.

<sup>31</sup> Martinich, et al, *Early Modern Philosophy*, 229.

attempt to explore the consequence of this definition, he used investigation in finding what perfection is, and how many kind of perfection there are.<sup>32</sup> He found two kinds of perfections, namely, omnipotence and omniscience. By these two, he argues that since there is no contradiction, it then follows that “from the omnipotence and omniscience that whatever God makes is perfect in the highest degree.<sup>33</sup> By implication, Leibniz tends to affirmed that God being an absolute being (bearing in mind his omnipotence and omniscience) creates the best of all possible world evil or no evil.

Because a real factor in human nature is antagonistic to the perfect Creator, he had to concede to Bayle’s dualistic view. In Leibniz, reaffirmation of God’s condemnation of sin, he finally reduced it to a variety of metaphysical evil, the imperfection of finite being. This is the moral ambiguity of his theodicy.<sup>34</sup>

In dealing with the ultimate problem of Theodicy, Leibniz exposed two sources of likely errors, both due to defective breadth of outlook. The first is that man “should not judge the divine plan with our brief span of experience, and condemn it because of blind impatience; nor should we draw conclusions about the vast universe from meager range of our life on earth. God’s justice operates on an infinite scale, eternal and cosmic.”<sup>35</sup> The second source of error in theodicy according to Leibniz arises “from a one-sided interpretation of God’s nature, a preoccupation with one attribute of divine perfection.”<sup>36</sup> He insisted on the principle of the ‘compossibility’ of God’s attribute, infinite wisdom, infinite goodness, infinite power, all creatively active in perfect harmony. God’s goodness and love will the creation of all possible good.

Explaining further, Leibniz opines that when the skeptic asks, why should there be any evil in the world, he fails to learn from God’s wisdom, because no created world could be without some imperfections, and for these are the marks of finite existence. Absolute perfection is for God alone.

Summarily, Leibniz believe that if the physical and moral evil are explain ultimately as metaphysical evils, imperfections essential to finite beings, humans

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<sup>32</sup> Martinich, 229.

<sup>33</sup> Martinich, et al, *Early Modern Philosophy*, 229.

<sup>34</sup> Tsanoff, *The Great Philosophers*, 327.

<sup>35</sup> Tsanoff, 327

<sup>36</sup> Tsanoff, 327

will see them as obviously natural conditions in created world and they will have no reasonable complaint against God.

### **The Significance of Leibniz's Theodicy to the Contemporary Church**

Sequel to the foregoing discussion, this writer finds it germane at this point, to draw for the contemporary church, some significance from the theodicy of Leibniz. Hence, the following:

To begin, the church must come to terms with the understanding of evil. Evil is a force that opposes God and His work of righteousness in the world (Rom. 7:8 – 19). The word is also used for any disturbance to the harmonious order of the universe, such as disease (Ps. 41:8). But the Bible makes it plain that even these so-called "physical evils" are the result of a far more serious moral and spiritual evil that began with the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3).<sup>37</sup>

Secondly, evil being a discord or disturbance in the order of the universe may not necessarily be penalty for sin, but can be use of God to foster a greater good for humanity. Just as Leibnitz divides it into: metaphysical evil, i.e., imperfection; physical evil, i.e., suffering; and moral evil, i.e., sin. The distinction into natural and moral evil is the only one now generally recognized.<sup>38</sup> The church should therefore have this understanding that:

Natural evil is whatever destroys or any way disturbs the perfection of natural beings, such as blindness, diseases, death, etc. But as all that people call natural evil is not the penalty of sin, nor, as some have supposed, only the penalty of it, such disturbance is not necessarily an evil, inasmuch as it may be counterpoised, in the whole, with an equal if not greater good, as in the afflictions and sufferings of good men. When such disturbance occurs as the penalty of transgression, it is the necessary consequence of moral evil.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Lockyer, *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 360.

<sup>38</sup> McClintock and Strong.

<sup>39</sup> McClintock and Strong.

More also, moral evil is the disagreement between the actions of a moral agent and the rule of those actions, whatever it be. Applied to choice, or acting contrary to the revealed law of God, it is termed wickedness or sin. Applied to an act contrary to a mere rule of fitness, it is called a fault.<sup>40</sup> On evil, and its relations to the government of God, the church should know that sin or wickedness of man could bring about evil in relation God's government as it is today.

With the two exposed angles of errors mentioned by Leibniz in dealing with the ultimate problem of Theodicy, this writer submits just as he puts it that the church "should not judge the divine plan with our brief span of experience, and condemn it because of blind impatience; nor should we draw conclusions about the vast universe from meager range of our life on earth. God's justice operates on an infinite scale, eternal and cosmic."<sup>41</sup>

And the second source of error in understanding and explaining theodicy according to Leibniz arises "from a one-sided interpretation of God's nature, a preoccupation with one attribute of divine perfection."<sup>42</sup> Just as he insisted on the principle of the 'compossibility' of God's attribute, infinite wisdom, infinite goodness, infinite power, all creatively active in perfect harmony. God's goodness and love will the creation of all possible good. This is what should matter to the church when seeking answers to the challenge and problem of evil in today's world.

## **Conclusion**

From this research, it was discovered that the early life and exposures of Leibniz formed some basis of his philosophical arguments. But as he continue to study in his quest to achieve his aspiration of reconciling the political and religious enmities in Europe, and seeking to unite spiritual energies of western civilization to a higher level of peace and Christian culture, he discovered a plausible answer to the subject of theodicy with his two sources of errors to understand theodicy.

At first, he established the existence of God in his philosophy and the reality of evil. Then, he affirmed that God should be seen in the light of being a divine providential Father to his children, and a cosmic judge. When God is seen as mentioned, and evil in whatever form, could be traced to human frailty in one

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<sup>40</sup> McClintock and Strong.

<sup>41</sup> Tsanoff, 327

<sup>42</sup> Tsanoff, 327

way or the other, the church (including Christians) should therefore not hold God responsible for any form of evil. God is real, so is evil. But evil manifests as a preoccupation of divine plan of perfect harmony.

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