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Leibniz's Evil

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In *The Monadology*, Leibniz argues that the world around us is filled with simple substances called Monads. While these monads undergo changes, they are ultimately created, controlled, and destroyed by God. However, this proposition seems to lead to the problem that God is responsible for the evil in our world. In this essay, I will show that God is indeed the source of evil for Leibniz. I will also respond to any justification Leibniz may rebut to my argument.

“[M]onads are the true atoms of nature,” Leibniz writes in §3 of *The Monadology* (Savile 227). These monads “can only begin by way of Creation” (§6) and have “within themselves a certain perfection” (§18). This means that God created the content of our universe and incorporated a degree of divine quality into its existence. Leibniz agrees with this conclusion by saying that it “follows that the perfections that created things have are due to God’s influence” (§42). But if God created the universe and stamped his creation with a seal of perfection, then we have to wonder why monads can combine into bullets and kill people or why a disease may waste a human body.

It may be answered that these things happen by accident, but Leibniz leaves no room for accidents in his universe. “Every present state of a simple substance is the natural outcome of its preceding state,” Leibniz explains (§22). Like a gigantic domino race, monads unwind on an already created path they are destined to follow. Our current situation is a sum of everything that has happened to us so far. But in the current moment, we do not only have a historical path to reflect upon, we also have a future path already laid out for us. Leibniz explains this in the last fragment of §22: “just as every present state of a simple substance is the natural outcome of its preceding state, so the present is pregnant with the future” (§22). In a letter to Arnaud, Leibniz verifies my conclusion by

expressively stating that “everything happens to each substance as a consequence of the first state God gave to it in creating it ...” (Ariew 218). This passage shows that the course of our domino race was indeed already laid out by God in its initial creation. Whatever happens to us was meant to happen.

While this may comfort us in our daily ups and downs, it will hardly suffice to an inquiring mind as an acceptable answer for murder or disease. If we follow a pre-established path in life then it seems as if we have no need to ever use our reason and judgment. Yet, it is reason and judgement that seem to set us humans apart from animals and plants. In fact, even Leibniz says that “it is knowledge of necessary and eternal truths that distinguishes us from mere animals and which gives us reason and the sciences ... this is what is called our rational soul or mind” (§29).

I am uncertain how Leibniz defends his argument that our rational souls can affect God’s created path, but for the purpose of this essay we will assume that he does. In this case, one could blame the evil in our world to misguided or rebellious minds that seem to have lost their way. However, Leibniz denies us such an easy solution since monads cannot cause any changes except for within themselves. “External causes can have no influence on [the] inner constitution [of monads],” he claims in §11 (Savile 228). Expanding on this thought, there is no way “of explaining how monads could be internally changed or altered by any other created beings.... so neither substances nor accidents can enter monads from without” (§7). Since monads cannot affect each other, we are forced to look at what changes them internally.

“I take it for granted that every created thing is subject to change,” Leibniz says before assuming that such change is continuous in each monad (§10). “The natural

changes that come about in monads derive from an internal principle „ [called] active force. That force is nothing but the principle of change” (§11). In other words, after God’s initial creation, monads are destined to change continuously through their own force.

Looking back over the first part of this essay, I have tried to establish three different premises. First, God created us. Second, God’s creation contains a pre-established path that we are destined to follow continuously. And third, no outside force can influence us our path. Thus, it seems we are left with no other explanation but to attribute the evil in our world to God as well.

Unfortunately, Leibniz doesn’t give us much information about sin in *The Monadology*. He indicates that “there shall be no good deed without its reward, no wicked one without its punishment,” but he does little to explain or justify their existence. There is only one short section in which he analyzes that “imperfections [of created things] are due to their own natures, incapable as they are of being without limits. The original imperfection that belongs to created things is manifest in the natural inertia of bodies” (§42). Regrettable, Leibniz doesn’t interpret this statement any further, and I am left to wonder what he means by that.

On the one hand, it might indicate that God didn’t create the entire universe. God might have created a spiritual universe and is operating within an already existing natural environment. In this environment, our natural bodies are susceptible to sin and we have to use our mind to choose the right path. However, I don’t think this was Leibniz’ intention as it would bind God’s power to the intellectual realm.

On the other hand, I think Leibniz is trying to indicate that God created the natural world with its imperfections. When God created human beings, their nature could not be perfect. Leibniz gives further evidence for this point of view his essay *Theodicy: Abridgement of the Argument Reduced To Syllogistic Form*". In Objection V, he tries to refute the very case of my essay: "Whoever produces all that is real in a thing, is its cause. God produces all that is real in sin. Hence, God is the cause of sin" (Theodicy 5). Leibniz claims that "God is the cause of all perfections" and that "limitations . . . result from the original imperfection of creatures" (Theodicy 5). Furthermore, he explains that "if God had wished to do more, he would have had to make either other natures for creatures or other miracles to change their natures, things which the best plan could not admit" (Theodicy 5). This is finally a solid justification for the presence of sin in the world. Leibniz goes even further and specifies that "even the best plan of the universe could not receive more good, and could not be exempt from certain evils, which however are to result in a greater good. There are certain disorders in the parts which marvelously enhance the beauty of the whole; just as certain dissonances, when properly used, render harmony more beautiful" (Theodicy 5).

While I agree with Leibniz, and admire him for his eloquent justification of evil, he still has not successfully rebutted that God is the cause of evil. To make matters worse, Leibniz has actually supported that God is the cause of evil by warranting the existence of evil in our world. If God has created an imperfect natural world with weak-willed sinners then he is still their creator. Even if evil exists to "result in a greater good", God is still the creator and the cause of evil (Theodicy 5).

Thus, I think I have successfully sustained my thesis that God causes evil and sin in *the Monadology*. Leibniz's attempt to alleviate God from this burden by placing an imperfect natural creature between God and the world fails because God is still the ultimate creator of this natural world of good and evil.

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