Selections from *The Theodicy* by Leibnitz (1710), and Voltaire’s *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764)

Abridgment of the Argument Reduced to Syllogistic Form

Some intelligent persons have desired that this supplement should be made [to the Theodicy], and I have the more readily yielded to their wishes as in this way I have an opportunity to again remove certain difficulties and to make some observations which were not sufficiently emphasized in the work itself.

1. Objection. Whoever does not choose the best is lacking in power, or in knowledge, or in goodness.

   God did not choose the best in creating this world.

   Therefore God has been lacking in power, or in knowledge, or in goodness.

Answer. I deny the minor, that is, the second premise of this syllogism: and our opponent proves it by this.

Prosyllogism. Whoever makes things in which there is evil, which could have been made without any evil, or the making of which could have been omitted, does not choose the best.

   God has made a world in which there is evil; a world, I say, which could have been made without any evil, or the making of which could have been omitted altogether.

   Therefore God has not chosen the best.

Answer. I grant the minor of this prosyllogism; for it must be confessed that there is evil in the world which God has made, and that it was possible to make a world without evil, or even not to create a world at all, for its creation depended on the free will of God; but I deny the major, that is, the first of the two premises of the prosyllogism, and I might content myself with simply demanding its proof; but in order to make the matter clearer, I have wished to justify this denial by showing that the best plan is not always that which seeks to avoid evil, since it may happen that the evil be accompanied by a greater good. For example, a general of the army will prefer a great victory with a slight wound to a condition without wound and without victory. We have proved this more fully in the large work by making it clear, by instances taken from mathematics and elsewhere, that an imperfection in the part may be required for a greater perfection in the whole. In this I have followed the opinion of St. Augustine, who has said a hundred times, that God permitted evil in order to bring about good, that is, a greater good; and that of Thomas Aquinas (in libr. II sent. dist. 32, qu. I, art. 1), that the permitting of evil tends to the good of the universe. I have shown that the ancients called Adam’s fall felix culpa, a happy sin, because it had been retrieved with immense advantage by the incarnation of the Son of God, who has given to the universe something nobler than anything that ever would have been among creatures except for this. And in order to a clear understanding, I have added, following many good authors, that it was in accordance with order and the general good that God gave to certain creatures the opportunity of exercising their liberty, even when he foresaw that they would turn to evil, but which he could so well rectify; because it was not right that, in order to hinder sin, God should always act in an extraordinary manner.

To overthrow this objection, therefore, it is sufficient to show that a world with evil might be better than a world without evil; but I have gone even farther in the work, and have even proved that this universe must be in reality better than every other possible universe.

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1 prosyllogism: a string of any number of propositions forming together a sequence of syllogisms

2 Augustine of Hippo (354-430) was an early Christian theologian whose writings were very influential in the development of Western Christianity and Western philosophy, believing that the grace of Christ was indispensable to human freedom

3 Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) was an Italian Dominican friar and priest and an immensely influential philosopher and theologian. He attempted to synthesize Aristotelian philosophy with the principles of Christianity.
II. Objection. If there is more evil than good in intelligent creatures, then there is more evil than good in the whole work of God.

Now, there is more evil than good in intelligent creatures.

Therefore there is more evil than good in the whole work of God.

Answer. I deny the major and the minor of this conditional syllogism. As to the major, I do not admit it at all, because this pretended deduction from a part to the whole, from intelligent creatures to all creatures, supposes tacitly and without proof that creatures destitute of reason cannot enter into comparison nor into account with those which possess it. But why may it not be that the surplus of good in the non-intelligent creatures which fill the world, compensates for, and even incomparably surpasses, the surplus of evil in the rational creatures? It is true that the value of the latter is greater; but, in compensation, the other are beyond comparison the more numerous, and it may be that the proportion of number and of quantity surpasses that of value and of quality.

As to the minor, that is no more to be admitted; that is, it is not at all to be admitted that there is more evil than good in the intelligent creatures. There is no need even of granting that there is more evil than good in the human race, because it is possible, and in fact very probable, that the glory and the perfection of the blessed are incomparably greater than the misery and the imperfection of the damned, and that here the excellence of the total good in the smaller number exceeds the total evil in the greater number. The blessed approach the Divinity, by means of the Divine Mediator, as near as may suit these creatures, and make such progress in good as is impossible for the damned to make in evil, approach as nearly as they may to the nature of demons. God is infinite, and the devil is limited; good may and does advance ad infinitum, while evil has its bounds. It is therefore possible, and is credible, that in the comparison of the blessed and the damned, the contrary of that which I have said might happen in the comparison of intelligent and non-intelligent creatures, takes place; namely, it is possible that in the comparison of the happy and the unhappy, the proportion of degree exceeds that of number, and that in the comparison of intelligent and non-intelligent creatures, the proportion of number is greater than that of value. I have the right to suppose that a thing is possible so long as its impossibility is not proved; and indeed that which I have here advanced is more than a supposition.

But in the second place, if I should admit that there is more evil than good in the human race, I have still good grounds for not admitting that there is more evil than good in all intelligent creatures. For there is an inconceivable number of genii, and perhaps of other rational creatures. And an opponent could not prove that in all the City of God, composed as well of genii as of rational animals without number and of an infinity of kinds, evil exceeds good. And although in order to answer an objection, there is no need of proving that a thing is, when its mere possibility suffices; yet, in this work, I have not omitted to show that it is a consequence of the supreme perfection of the Sovereign of the universe, that the kingdom of God be the most perfect of all possible states or governments, and that consequently the little evil there is, is required for the consummation of the immense good which is there found.

VIII. Objection. He who cannot fail to choose the best, is not free.

God cannot fail to choose the best.

Hence, God is not free.

Answer. I deny the major of this argument; it is rather true liberty and the most perfect, to be able to use one’s free will for the best, and to always exercise this power without ever being turned from it either by external force or by internal passions, the first of which causes slavery of the body, the second, slavery of the soul. There is nothing less servile than to be always led toward the good, and always by one’s own inclination, without any constraint and without any displeasure. And to object therefore that God had need of external things, is only a sophism. He created them freely; but having proposed to himself an end, which is to exercise his goodness, wisdom determined him to choose those means best fitted to attain this end. To call this a need is to take that term in an unusual sense which frees it from all imperfection, just as when we speak of the wrath of God.

Seneca has somewhere said that God commanded but once but that he obeys always, because he obeys the laws which he willed to prescribe to himself; semel jussit semper pareat. But he had better have said that God always commands and that he is always obeyed; for in willing, he always follows the inclination of his own nature, and all other things always follow his will. And as this will is always the same, it cannot be said that he obeys only that will which he formerly had. Nevertheless, although his will is always infallible and always tends toward the best, the evil, or the lesser good, which he rejects, does not cease to be possible in itself; otherwise the necessity of the good would be geometrical (so to speak), or metaphysical and altogether absolute; the contingency of things would be

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1 destitute of: not having
2 latter: denoting the second or second mentioned of two people or things
3 ad infinitum: to infinity; again and again in the same way; forever
destroyed, and there would be no choice. But this sort of necessity, which does not destroy the possibility of the contrary, has this name only by analogy; it becomes effective, not by the pure essence of things, but by that which is outside of them, above them,—namely, by the will of God. This necessity is called moral, because, to the sage, necessity and what ought to be are equivalent things; and when it always has its effect, as it really has in the perfect sage, that is, in God, it may be said that it is a happy necessity. The nearer creatures approach to it, the nearer they approach to perfect happiness. Also this kind of necessity is not that which we try to avoid and which destroys morality, rewards and praise. For that which it brings, does not happen whatever we may do or will, but because we will it well. And a will to which it is natural to choose well, merits praise so much the more; also it carries its reward with it, which is sovereign happiness. And as this constitution of the divine nature gives entire satisfaction to him who possesses it, it is also the best and the most desirable for the creatures who are all dependent on God. If the will of God did not have for a rule the principle of the

Voltaire - selections from his Philosophical Dictionary

ALL IS GOOD

There was a fine row in the schools, and even among people who think, when Leibniz, paraphrasing Plato, built his edifice\(^1\) of the best of possible worlds, and imagined that all was for the best. He affirmed in the north of Germany that god could make only a single world. Plato had at least left him free to make five, because there are only five regular solids: the tetrahedron or three-faced pyramid with uniform base, the cube, the hexahedron, the dodecahedron, the icosahedron. But our world is not shaped like any of Plato’s five bodies, he had allowed god a sixth manner.

That will do for Plato. Leibniz, who was certainly a better geometer than he, and a more profound metaphysician, did mankind the service of explaining that we ought to be entirely satisfied, and that god could do no more for us, that he had necessarily chosen, among all the possibilities, what was undeniably the best one.

“What will become of original sin?\(^2\)” they shouted at him. “It will become what it can,” said Leibniz and his friends; but in public he wrote that original sin was necessarily part of the best of worlds.

What! to be chased from a place of delights, where we would have lived for ever if an apple had not been eaten! What! produce in wretchedness wretched children who will suffer everything, who will make others suffer everything! What! to undergo every illness, feel every sorrow, die in pain, and for refreshment be burned in the eternity of centuries! Is this really the best lot that was available? This is not too good for us; and how can it be good for good?

Leibniz realized that these questions were unanswerable: so he wrote thick books in which he did not agree with himself.

A Lucullus\(^3\) in good health, dining well with his friends and his mistress in the house of Apollo, can say laughingly that there is no devil; but let him put his head out of the window and he will see unhappy people; let him suffer a fever and he will be unhappy himself.

I do not like to quote; it is usually a ticklish job: what precedes and follows the passage quoted is passed over, and one exposes oneself to a thousand quarrels. Still, I must quote Lactantius\(^4\), church father, who, in his chapter XIII, of his On the Wrath of God puts these words into the mouth of Epicurus\(^5\):

Either god wants to remove the evil from this world, and cannot, or he can, and does not want to; or he neither wants to nor can; or he wants to and can. If he wants to but cannot, this is impotence\(^6\), which is contrary to the nature of god; if he can but does not want to, this is wickedness, which is no less contrary to his nature; if he neither can nor wants to this is at once wickedness and impace; if he wants to and can (which is the only one of these possibilities fitting for god) whence then comes the evil which is on earth?

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1 edifice: a complex system of beliefs
2 original sin: the tendency to sin innate in all human beings, held to be inherited from Adam in consequence of the Fall. The concept of original sin was developed in the writings of St. Augustine.
3 Lucullus was politician of the late Roman Republic known for his military conquests
4 Lactantius (c. 240 – c. 320) was an early Christian author who became an advisor to the first Christian Roman emperor, Constantine I.
5 Epicurus (341–270 BC) was an ancient Greek philosopher and founder of Epicureanism, who believed pleasure is the greatest good
6 impotence: unable to take effective action; helpless or powerless
The argument is powerful; so that Lactantius answers it very badly, saying that god wants evil but that he has given us the wisdom with which one acquires the good. It must be admitted that this answer is quite weak in comparison with the objection, for it assumes that god could create wisdom only by producing evil; besides our wisdom is pretty ridiculous!

Bolingbroke, Shaftesbury and Pope, who embodied their ideas, do not resolve the question any better than the others: their All is good means nothing more than that all is controlled by immutable\(^1\) laws. Who does not know that? You tell us nothing new when you observe, as all little children have done, that flies are born to be eaten by spiders, spiders by swallows, swallows by shrikes, shrikes by eagles, eagles to be killed by men, men to kill one another, and to be eaten by worms, and then, all but one in a thousand, by devils.

Here we have a clear and fixed order among every kind of animal. There is order everywhere. When a stone is formed in my bladder it is by means of admirable mechanics: calculous juices pass little by little into my blood, they filter into the kidneys, pass through the ureters, deposit themselves in my bladder, and assemble there by an excellent Newtonian attraction; the stone is formed, gets bigger, I suffer pains a thousand times worse than death, by the most elegant arrangement in the world. A surgeon, having perfected the art invented by Tubalcaín, comes to thrust a sharp and cutting iron into the perineum, and takes hold of my stone with his pincers. It breaks under his efforts by a necessary mechanism; and by the same mechanism I die in frightful torments. All this is good, all this is the evident consequence of inalterable physical principles. I agree with them, and I knew it as well as you did.

If we were without feeling there would be no reason to object to this cause and effect. But this is not the point. We are inquiring whether there are any perceptible evils, and whence they come. “There are no evils,” says Pope in his fourth essay on the All is good; “or if there are particular evils, they form the common good.”

A strange general good! composed of the stone, the gout, all crimes, all suffering, death and damnation.

The fall of man is the platter we stick on all these particular diseases of the body and the soul, which are called “general health”. But Shaftesbury and Bolingbroke derided original sin; Pope does not refer to it; it is obvious that their system undermines the Christian religion at its foundations, and explains nothing at all.

Nevertheless this system has recently been approved by several theologians who readily accept contradictions. Capital! we must not begrudge anybody the consolation of reasoning as best he can about the deluge of evils by which we are inundated. It is right to allow the incurable to eat what they like. It has even been claimed that this system is consoling. “God,” says Pope, “sees perish with equal eye the hero and the sparrow, an atom or a thousand planets precipitated into ruin, the formation of a soap-bubble or a world.”

Here, I must admit, we have a pleasant consolation. Do you not find a great palliative\(^2\) in the prescription of Lord Shaftesbury, who says that god is not going to upset his eternal laws for so puny an animal as man? It must at least be admitted that this puny animal has the right to cry out humbly, and to seek to understand, in crying, why these eternal laws are not made for the well-being of every individual.

This system of All is good represents the author of nature only as a powerful and maleficent king, who does not care, so long as he carries out his plan, that it costs four or five hundred thousand men their lives, and that the others drag out their days in want and in tears.

So far from the notion of the best of possible worlds being consoling, it drives to despair the philosophers who embrace it. The problem of good and evil remains an inexplicable chaos for those who seek in good faith. It is an intellectual exercise for those who argue: they are convicts who play with their chains. As for the unthinking mass, it rather resembles fish who have been moved from a river to a reservoir. They do not suspect that they are there to be eaten in lent: nor do we know anything by our own resources about the causes of our destiny.

Let us put at the end of nearly all chapters on metaphysics the two letters used by Roman judges when they could not understand a lawsuit: N. L., non liquet, this is not clear.

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\(^{1}\) immutable: unchanging over time or unable to be changed

\(^{2}\) palliative: a treatment or remedy that relieves pain or alleviates a problem without dealing with the underlying cause