



on Evil and Providence: the Beginning and the End

1671 – Letter to Wedderkopf (see attached)

- God is perfect and the creator of the world. He brings everything about exactly as he wants it. The world as it is follows necessarily from God's necessary perfection. I.e., God being who he is, the world couldn't be other than it is.
- In fact, God's will doesn't do anything important.
- The only 'evils' in the world are there because they make the world better, and so they aren't evil. God brings them about directly. (no permission; no privation)
- In fact, if we were aware of the good effects of our 'evil' actions, we could will the same 'evil' things we will blamelessly.
- Can be accused of Spinozism (one cause & everything's necessary)
- The early and late theodicies have in common the thesis that this is the best possible world. But isn't this obviously false?

1710 – *Theodicy*

- Still things this is the best possible world. A world without these evils is less good.
- No longer thinks everything is necessary. God wills that this (complete) world exist rather than any other not out of some absolute necessity, but because he is so good and knows that it is the best.
- There is a difference between the fact that a triangle has three sides and the fact that I sin. I have a will and can do otherwise (even if it is certain that I won't)
- God permits my sin (but doesn't bring it about himself) because it makes the world a better place.

Conclusion

- We looked at several different explanations for evil from the 17th century. None of them sacrifice divine providence to human freedom.
- We needn't accept all theodicies.
- We can respond to the problem of evil by referencing divine authority, divine orderliness, the incompetence of reason, or the thesis that this is the best of all possible worlds (combined with some theses about permission). And if we run into difficulties, perhaps we chose the wrong route.

Leibniz's Letter to Wedderkopf (R.C. Sleigh, ed. & trans. *Confessio philosophi*, Yale UP, 2005)

Fate is the decree of God or the necessity of events. *Fatal* things are those that will necessarily happen. God either does not decree concerning everything or, if he does decree concerning everything, then he is the author of absolutely everything. Both alternatives involve difficulties. For if God decrees concerning everything and things are in conflict with his decree, he will not be omnipotent. However, if he does not decree concerning everything, it seems to follow that he is not omniscient. For it seems impossible that an omniscient being suspends his judgment about anything. That we often suspend judgments comes about from ignorance. For this reason it follows that God can never be considered purely permissive. Indeed, it follows that there is no decree of God that is actually not absolute. For we suspend our judgments because of conditions and alternatives, because we have insufficiently explored the circumstances.³ But isn't this conclusion harsh? I admit it. What then? Consider Pilate, who is damned. Why? Because he lacks faith. Why does he lack it? Because he lacked the will to pay heed. Why does he lack this? Because he did not understand the necessity of the matter (the usefulness of paying heed). Why did he not understand? Because the causes of understanding were lacking. For everything must be reduced to some reason, which process cannot stop until it reaches a primary reason, or it must be admitted that something can exist without a reason for existing; but if this were admitted, the demonstration of the existence of God and of many other philosophical theorems would be destroyed.⁵ What, therefore, is the ultimate basis of the divine will? The divine intellect.⁶ For God wills those things that he perceives to be the best and, likewise, the most harmonious; and he selects them, so to speak, from the infinite number of all the possibles. What, therefore, is the ultimate basis of the divine intellect? The harmony of things. And what is the ultimate basis of the harmony of things? Nothing. For example, no reason can be given for the fact that the ratio of 2 to 4 is that of 4 to 8, not even from the divine will. This depends on the essence itself, i.e., the idea of things. For essences of things are just like numbers, and they contain the very possibility of entities, which God does not bring about, as he does existence, since these very possibilities—or ideas of things—coincide rather with God himself. However, since God is the most perfect mind, it is impossible that he is not affected by the most perfect harmony and thus must bring about the best by the very ideality of things. But this does not detract from freedom. For it is the highest form of freedom to be forced to the best by right reason; whoever desires another form of freedom is a fool. From this it follows that whatever has happened, is happening, or will happen is the best and, accordingly, necessary. But, as I said, it has a necessity that takes nothing away from freedom because it takes nothing away from the will and the use of reason. It is in no one's power to will what he is going to will, although sometimes one can do what one wills.⁸ In fact, no one wants to have this freedom of willing what he is going to will, but rather the freedom of willing the best. Therefore, why do we attribute to God what we do not want for ourselves? From this it is evident that an absolute will, not dependent on the goodness of things, is monstrous. On the contrary, there is no permissive will in an omniscient being, except insofar as God conforms himself to the ideality itself of things, i.e., to what is best. Therefore, nothing is to be considered absolutely evil, otherwise either God will not be supremely wise with respect to its comprehension or God will not be supremely powerful with respect to its elimination. There is no doubt that this was the opinion of Augustine. Sins are evil, not absolutely, not with respect to the world as a whole, not with respect to God—otherwise he would not permit them—but with respect to the sinner. God hates sins, not in the sense that he cannot bear the sight of them, as we cannot bear the sight of what we detest—otherwise he would eliminate them—but because he punishes them. Taken together with punishment or atonement, sins are good, i.e., harmonious. For there is no harmony except as a result of contraries. But these remarks are for you; I do not wish them made public. For not even the most proper remarks are understood by everyone.