

# History of Philosophy

## 40 Leibniz on Evil

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#### Abstract:

This source provides an academic overview of **Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's** philosophical approach to **human freedom** and the **problem of evil**. The text explores how Leibniz navigates the tension between **determinism** and **indeterminism**, ultimately proposing a **teleological** system where individual actions are pre-established by nature but remains distinct from absolute necessity. Central to this discussion is the concept of the "**best of all possible worlds**," wherein God, acting under **moral necessity**, permits specific evils to achieve a greater ultimate good. By examining Leibniz's **monadology** and **theodicy**, the material illustrates a framework that aligns **metaphysical logic** with **Christian orthodoxy**, viewing history as a dynamic progress toward the **City of God**. Ultimately, the author highlights Leibniz's attempt to reconcile divine **foreknowledge** and **grace** with the existence of moral and natural imperfections.

#### Briefing Document:

Leibniz on Freedom and the Problem of Evil: A Philosophical Synthesis

Executive Summary

This briefing document analyzes Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's philosophical approach to human freedom and the existence of evil within his teleological metaphysical system. Leibniz navigates a middle ground between the mechanistic determinism of Thomas Hobbes and Benedict Spinoza and the absolute indeterminism of René Descartes.

The core of Leibniz's argument rests on the distinction between "inclination" and "necessitation." He posits that while an individual's choices are "certain" (foreknown

by God and contained within the individual's essence), they are not logically necessary. This leads to his famous "Theodicy," which argues that the current world is the "best of all possible worlds." In this framework, evil is viewed as a limited, purposeful privation of good that contributes to the ultimate perfection of the universe and the realization of the "City of God."

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## 1. The Metaphysics of Freedom

Leibniz's view of freedom is inextricably linked to his **Monadology**, a teleological system where every substance (monad) possesses an "intrinsic essence" or "pre-established potency" that is actualized over time.

### The Philosophical Spectrum

Leibniz positions his theory against two 17th-century extremes:

- **Anti-Realism/Determinism (Hobbes & Spinoza):** These thinkers rejected a realistic view of free will, suggesting that choice is merely a "confused idea" caused by external or internal causal processes.
- **Indeterminism (Descartes):** Descartes argued for a "causal vacuum" where the mind, as a separate entity from the body, remains free to assert or deny concepts regardless of physical stimuli.

### The Monadic Internal Nature

Leibniz suggests that everything a monad does is due to its inner nature, which appears "pre-programmed." This raises the central question of his philosophy: Is choice determined by nature, and can an individual modify that nature?

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## 2. Inclination vs. Necessitation

Leibniz rejects "necessitarianism"—the idea that choices are logically necessitated. He argues that causes "incline the will without compelling it."

### Key Distinctions in Choice

- **Certainty vs. Necessity:** It is "certain" that a specific effect will follow an inclination (and God foreknows this), but the opposite of that choice does not imply a logical contradiction. Therefore, it is not "necessary."
- **Resistance to Passion:** Leibniz asserts that even in the face of intense desire (e.g., great thirst), the soul can find reasons to resist, proving a "power of contrary choice."
- **State of Indifference:** Unlike Descartes' complete equilibrium, Leibniz believes we are rarely in a state of perfect indifference, but we retain the power to suspend action and reflect.

### The Role of Reflection and Reason

Borrowing from Descartes and Spinoza, Leibniz emphasizes that clarity of thought through "mature deliberation" allows an individual to see through deceptive appearances. By gaining a clearer understanding of the "Good" (God), the mind's natural inclinations are redirected toward better choices.

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### 3. Divine Foreknowledge and Individual Substance

Leibniz introduces the concept of the "perfect concept of an individual," which includes all predicates: past, present, and future.

#### The Case of Peter and Judas

Leibniz uses the biblical figures of Peter (who denied Christ) and Judas (who betrayed him) to illustrate his point:

- **Pre-existent Concepts:** Before creation, God considered infinite possible individuals. The concept of "Peter" inherently included his denial, just as "Judas" included his betrayal.
- **Divine Decree:** God does not decree that Peter *must* sin; rather, God chooses to actualize the world that contains the version of Peter who *freely* chooses to sin.
- **Divine Grace:** The actualization of these individuals also includes the intervention of divine grace, which provides the "aids" necessary for salvation (e.g., Peter's eventual restoration).

## Compatibilism

Leibniz's view is characterized as **compatibilism**: the belief that freedom is compatible with a pre-established or predetermined nature. Critics (such as Bill Hasker) argue this is merely "inner causation" and a mask for determinism, while Leibniz seeks a "fourth alternative" that avoids both the "vacuum" of Descartes and the "necessity" of the determinists.

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### 4. The Theodicy: The Problem of Evil

Leibniz's "Theodicy" is a classic defense of God's justice in the face of evil. He argues that God's actions are governed by the **Principle of Sufficient Reason**.

#### The Best of All Possible Worlds

Leibniz maintains that because God is all-wise, all-powerful, and all-good, he must have created the best possible arrangement of reality.

#### **Attribute      Role in Creation**

**All-Wise**      God knows all possible worlds and the best way to order them.

**All-Powerful** God is capable of actualizing the best world.

**All-Good**      God desires to actualize the best world.

#### The "Greater Good" Argument

Leibniz asserts that "purposeless evil" does not exist. Instead, evil is a "privation of good" that is permitted because it serves a higher purpose within the "perfection of the whole."

- **Moral vs. Metaphysical Necessity:** Metaphysically, God could have created other worlds. However, it was "morally necessary" for God to create the best one.
  - **Limitation of Evil:** Evil is limited and purposeful, whereas the Good is unlimited.
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### 5. Teleology and the City of God

Leibniz's treatment of evil is not static but dynamic and eschatological. He views history as a movement toward a specific goal (*telos*).

### The City of God on Earth

Following the Augustinian tradition, Leibniz sees nature and grace conspiring toward the "City of God." This 17th-century vision was shared by contemporaries like Francis Bacon and Thomas Hobbes, though they framed it through scientific utopias or civil societies.

### Historical Context and Influence

- **Idea of Progress:** Leibniz's optimism regarding the course of history contributed to the Enlightenment's "idea of progress."
- **Philosophy of History:** His focus on the movement of time and the actualization of nature helped transition history from a literary pursuit (*belle lettre*) to a formal philosophical discipline.
- **Theological Framework:** Leibniz's system supports a "Creation, Fall, and Redemption" framework, aiming to develop a Christian philosophical scheme that remains adequate to the scientific and metaphysical issues of his era.

## Study Guide:

### Leibniz on Freedom and the Problem of Evil: A Study Guide

This study guide explores the philosophical synthesis of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz regarding the tensions between human freedom, divine predetermination, and the existence of evil. Based on the analysis of Leibniz's *Theodicy*, *Monadology*, and *Discourse on Metaphysics*, this document examines how Leibniz navigates the "teleological metaphysic" to argue that the current universe is the best of all possible worlds.

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## Short-Answer Quiz

**Instructions:** Answer the following questions in two to three sentences based on the provided source context.

1. How does the text define the "anti-realistic" view of the will held by Thomas Hobbes and Benedict Spinoza?
2. Contrast the "causal vacuum" of Cartesian indeterminism with Leibniz's view of the will.
3. According to Leibniz, what is the difference between causes "inclining" the will and "compelling" it?
4. How does the concept of the "individual substance" or "essence" relate to an individual's future actions, such as those of Peter or Judas?
5. What is "fulguration" in the context of Leibniz's theology?
6. Explain the role of "reflection" and "mature deliberation" in achieving human freedom.
7. What are the four propositions that constitute the classic logical problem of evil?
8. How does Leibniz utilize the "greater good" argument to address the existence of evil?
9. Distinguish between "metaphysical necessity" and "moral necessity" regarding God's act of creation.
10. How does Leibniz's teleological framework incorporate the "City of God"?

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## Answer Key

1. **The Anti-Realistic View:** Hobbes and Spinoza reject a realistic view of free will, suggesting that while humans experience the sensation of making free choices, this is merely a "confused idea." In reality, choices are dictated by the same causal processes that dominate the rest of the natural world.

2. **Indeterminism vs. Leibniz:** Descartes' indeterminism suggests the mind functions in a "causal vacuum" independent of physical stimuli due to mind-body dualism. Leibniz rejects this vacuum, proposing instead a teleological system where every "monad" acts according to an inner nature that is pre-programmed yet avoids absolute physical necessity.
3. **Inclination vs. Compulsion:** Leibniz argues that causes provide a "preponderance of inclination" for a specific choice but do not render that choice absolutely necessary. There remains a power of "contrary choice," meaning the soul can find reasons to resist even the strongest passions to demonstrate its own power.
4. **Individual Essence:** The perfect concept of an individual includes all predicates—past, present, and future—meaning God foreknows all free and necessary actions within that nature. However, these actions are certain but not logically necessary, as God chooses to actualize specific individuals (like Peter or Judas) from infinite possible alternatives based on his secret wisdom.
5. **Fulguration:** Fulguration is described as a continuous imparting of the "power to be" from God to nature. Rather than a one-time act of creation, it is an ongoing process where God continually preserves and produces the being of all substances.
6. **Reflection and Deliberation:** Freedom is found when the mind uses reason to rise above "deceptive appearances" and confused desires. Through mature deliberation and a clear understanding of the "apparent good," an individual can modify their natural inclinations and choose what is truly desirable.
7. **The Logical Problem of Evil:** The problem is framed by four propositions: 1) God is all-wise; 2) God is all-powerful; 3) God is altogether good; and 4) Evil exists. The logical challenge arises from the claim that the fourth proposition is incompatible with the first three.
8. **The Greater Good Argument:** Leibniz asserts that no "purposeless evil" exists; rather, evil is a limited "privation of good" allowed because it contributes to the perfection of the whole. Within his eschatological view,

these imperfections serve a larger, inclusive teleology that culminates in a supreme end.

9. **Metaphysical vs. Moral Necessity:** Metaphysically, God was free to create many different possible worlds and was not logically constrained to this one. However, it was "morally necessary" for God to create the best of all possible worlds because his nature is perfectly wise and good.
10. **The City of God:** Leibniz views the "City of God" as the *telos* or goal toward which nature and grace conspire. It represents a kingdom of God on earth, an ideal society that gives rise to the idea of historical progress and the actualization of nature through divine grace.

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### Essay Questions

**Instructions:** Use the source context to develop comprehensive arguments for the following prompts. (Answers not provided).

1. **The Spectrum of Freedom:** Analyze Leibniz's position on the spectrum between Cartesian indeterminism and Spinozistic determinism. Does his "compatibilism" successfully offer a "fourth alternative," or does it ultimately reduce to a form of inner determinism?
2. **The Best of All Possible Worlds:** Evaluate the a priori basis for Leibniz's claim that this is the best of all possible worlds. Contrast this with the satirical "Professor Pangloss" critique offered by Voltaire in *Candide*.
3. **Divine Grace and Human Agency:** Discuss the interplay between divine grace and the individual nature in the cases of Peter and Judas. How does Leibniz use the concept of "possible worlds" to maintain both divine sovereignty and human responsibility?
4. **Teleology and the Philosophy of History:** Explore how Leibniz's 17th-century metaphysical system laid the groundwork for the "idea of progress" and the "philosophy of history." How does his "dynamic" view of nature differ from a "static" deistic view?
5. **The Nature of Evil as Privation:** Examine the Augustinian influence on Leibniz regarding the definition of evil as a "privation of good." How does this

definition support his "greater good" argument and his defense of God's character (Theodicy)?

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### Glossary of Key Terms

<b>Term</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Anti-realism (of the Will)</b>	The view held by Hobbes and Spinoza that free will is an illusion and choices are entirely caused by underlying causal processes.
<b>Best of All Possible Worlds</b>	An a priori claim that God, being all-wise, all-powerful, and all-good, chose to actualize the universe that contains the greatest possible perfection.
<b>Compatibilism</b>	The philosophical position that human freedom is compatible with a pre-established or predetermined nature.
<b>Fulguration</b>	The continuous process by which God imparts existence and power to all created monads.
<b>Indeterminism</b>	The Cartesian view that the human will operates independently of physical causation, often described as a "causal vacuum."
<b>Monad</b>	The ultimate constituents of reality in Leibniz's system; individual substances with "intrinsic essences" and pre-programmed potencies.
<b>Moral Necessity</b>	The idea that God is "constrained" only by his own perfect goodness to choose the best option, as opposed to logical or metaphysical necessity.
<b>Privation</b>	The concept that evil is not a positive substance but rather a lack or "limitation" of good within the hierarchy of being.
<b>Sufficient Reason</b>	The principle that there is a reason for every contingent event, which Leibniz eventually traces back to a final cause (God) outside the sequence of events.

**Theodicy**

A vindication of divine goodness and providence in view of the existence of evil.

**Teleology**

A metaphysical framework that explains things in terms of their purpose, end goal, or *telos*.