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An Examination of the Role of Evil in the World as it is Considered in the Works of  
Leibniz and Darwin

In spite of the remarkable philosophical contrast between the views of Sir Gottfried Leibniz and Charles Darwin on the role of God in the world, the writings of both men arrive at the conclusion that the world is very effectively ordered. Leibniz states in his Philosophical Writings that “it is a matter of physical necessity that God should do everything in the best way possible,” and that the present world must thus be “the best of all possible worlds.”<sup>1</sup> Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution similarly assumes, through its two fundamental principles of differential reproductive success and the survival of the fittest among individuals of a population, that what happens and/or prevails must be for the best, though this theory is not dependent upon the actions of a divine prime mover. Both Leibniz and Darwin allow for the existence of many forms of suffering at an individual level, even (and especially) in the best of all possible worlds. In doing so, both authors inherently allow for the substantive existence of evil, the role of which may best be understood by examining Leibniz’s example of a vessel voyaging down a river as a metaphor for Darwin’s theory of Natural Selection. Leibniz devotes much attention to the form of evil that is consciously perpetrated by humans, while Darwin deals strictly with the form of evil that occurs naturally. In fact, evil can be seen as a core component of both philosophies because of its tendency to catalyze progress, which

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<sup>1</sup> Leibniz, Gottfried. Ed. Parkinson, G. *Philosophical Writings*. London: Dent, 1973.

Leibniz and Darwin agree is absolutely necessary in the best of all possible worlds.

Before considering Leibniz's example of the vessel to examine the role of evil in the world, a thorough definition must be established as to what specifically constitutes evil. In the writings of Leibniz and Darwin, two distinct forms of evil emerge, both of which are well defined in The Oxford English Dictionary. The definition of the first form, "that which is morally wrong or bad; immoral; wicked," describes the sort of evil that requires conscious perpetration. "Voluntary actions" of this sort of evil, as Leibniz elaborates, "will not take place no matter what we do or whether we wish them or not, but rather through what we do and what we wish to do, which leads to them."<sup>2</sup> Leibniz would consider this form of evil to be a contingent truth, for its existence is contingent upon the free will of man, which Leibniz explains has in turn been granted exclusively to man by God: "The choice of a creature is an act which essentially involves divine predetermination, without which it is impossible for that choice to be exercised."<sup>3</sup> Man's deliberate abuse of this power of choice describes this sort of evil, embodied by morally malicious acts that cannot occur passively or spontaneously.

The second form of evil, which occurs naturally, is an effect that does not necessarily require a conscious causer. It is defined in The Oxford English dictionary as "that which is harmful; injurious," which clearly indicates that evil may also be something which is experienced through the senses. This second form of evil falls in the Leibnizian realm of necessary truths, "certain propositions which are true with absolute universality,

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<sup>2</sup> Leibniz, Gottfried. Trans, Duncan, G.M, 1890. Adapted and emended by A.C. Kibel. *Theodicy: Abridgement of the Argument*

<sup>3</sup> Leibniz, Gottfried. *Philosophical Writings*.

and which cannot be violated even by a miracle.”<sup>4</sup> This form of evil is a fundamental part of Natural Selection, which itself must be considered a necessary truth by virtue of the fact that, as explained by Darwin, its universal applicability is independent of the actions of God. Darwin states that Natural Selection “is daily and hourly scrutinizing, throughout the world, every variation, even the slightest; rejecting that which is bad, preserving and adding up all that is good; silently and insensibly working, wherever and whenever opportunity offers.”<sup>5</sup> Natural selection, as Darwin describes it, approaches an almost mathematical form of reality, and included in this reality must be evil in the form of individual suffering that is inseparable from evolutionary process. By Leibnizian standards, the existence of this naturally-occurring evil must and will be true in any world in which life exists.

Leibniz and Darwin both demonstrate in their respective writings that suffering at an individual level is necessary for the progress of a whole population. Leibniz does this most effectively by using the example of a loaded vessel traveling down a river. Upon close examination, this example can clearly be understood as a metaphor for Darwin’s theory of Natural Selection. In order to faithfully incorporate God into this example, Leibniz prefaces it with the assertion that “God is the cause of all perfections and consequentially of all realities,” and that “limitations or privations result from the original imperfections of creatures.”<sup>6</sup> Leibniz’s view that creatures are limited in their perfection is of course to be expected, for he consistently maintains throughout his work that God is

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<sup>4</sup> Leibniz, Gottfried. *Philosophical Writings*.

<sup>5</sup> Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species*. London, 1859.

<sup>6</sup> Leibniz, Gottfried. *Theodicy: Abridgement of the Argument*.

the only being in the universe that is completely perfect. With this prelude, Leibniz then introduces the notion of “a loaded vessel, which the river causes to move more or less slowly according to the weight which it carries and which interferes with its getting maximal speed out of the current.”<sup>7</sup> The load on this vessel is very much analogous to the creatures that inhabit the world, and because Leibniz describes all creatures as being naturally imperfect, to introduce any load at all onto the vessel is to inherently introduce imperfection as well. Both Leibniz and Darwin consistently agree that such imperfection is at the root of all suffering and thus of all evil in the world, though it is Darwin alone who offers a detailed explanation of how this imperfection on the part of individuals is exploited by natural process to improve the lot of an entire population.

Given the inherent imperfection of the cargo aboard Leibniz’s metaphorical vessel, the optimal load for this vessel must be determined so that there is a sufficient volume of cargo to make the voyage worthwhile while not being so cumbersome as to excessively impede the progress of the voyage. Since the imperfection of creatures as described by Leibniz stems from the fact that they are not themselves divine, but are rather the product of a divine being, the only way to entirely eliminate the suffering that results from this imperfection and inhibits the progress of the voyage is to remove all the cargo from the ship, or all the creatures from the world. This would, of course, be an act of futility, for there can be no purpose to a voyaging ship which carries with it no cargo or passengers. That is to say, if the voyage of Leibniz’s vessel is to be of any consequence in the universe, Leibniz himself does not deny that there must be some constant degree of

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<sup>7</sup> Leibniz, Gottfried. *Theodicy: Abridgement of the Argument*.

individual suffering along the way. To resolve the issue of exactly how much of this suffering there must be on the voyage, it will be most appropriate and productive to turn to Darwin's theory of Natural Selection.

On this issue of the optimal load for Leibniz's vessel, Darwin explains that there must be enough cargo on the ship, or creatures in the world, so as to avoid both a bottlenecking effect and excessive propagation. It turns out that the volume of cargo on Leibniz's ship of life does not remain constant, but will tend to multiply to excess. Thus there must be some mechanism that is responsible for assuring that both the quantity and quality of the cargo are consistently held at ideal levels with respect to one another. In fact, it is Darwin's theory of evolution, and more specifically the process of Natural Selection, that is responsible for determining what the ideal load of the vessel may be at all times. As described by Darwin, this process involves "the preservation of favorable variations and the rejection of injurious variations."<sup>8</sup> The most imperfectly adapted creatures are cast off of Leibniz's vessel, allowing better-adapted individuals to propagate in their place, until eventually the latter individuals multiply to the level that the original process repeats itself, and the population is again culled out. "In the survival of favored individuals or races, during the constantly recurring struggle for existence," as Darwin explains, "we see a powerful, ever-acting form of selection."<sup>9</sup> It is this selection, functioning in perpetuity, which acts as the perfect regulator of the cargo aboard Leibniz's vessel, and analogously of all the many life forms existing in the finite capacity

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<sup>8</sup> Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species*.

<sup>9</sup> Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species*.

of the world.

Notably absent from Darwin's process of Natural Selection is a conscious authority in charge of guiding it, namely God. In fact, Darwin makes it very clear that this omission is no accident: "The universe we observe," he states, "has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose... nothing but blind, pitiless indifference."<sup>10</sup> Darwin reaffirms here that Natural Selection, like basic mathematics, is not the result of conscious design or guidance, but is rather a fundamental law that exists by simple virtue of its invariable applicability. It is also "pitiless," and as Darwin describes it, is without regard for the suffering of the creatures that it casts from Leibniz's vessel of life. This clearly reflects a fundamental philosophical difference between Darwin's and Leibniz's views as to the reasoning behind the process that regulates the quantity and quality of cargo aboard the vessel and creatures in the world, for Leibniz claims that "God proposed to himself an end, which is to exercise his goodness and to choose the means best fitted to attain this end."<sup>11</sup> Yet inherent in both Leibniz's and Darwin's arguments is the idea that evil in the form of suffering is not only an inevitable consequence of the initiation of the vessel's voyage and the introduction of life in the world, but in fact has a very necessary and productive part to play. Leibniz, the far more optimistic of the two thinkers, goes so far as to acknowledge that there may actually be a greater quantity of evil than good in the world, though he accounts for this by arguing that "it is in fact very probable that the glory and perfection of the blessed are

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<sup>10</sup> Darwin, Charles. *The Descent of Man*. Appleton, New York, 1871.

<sup>11</sup> Leibniz, Gottfried. *Theodicy: Abridgement of the Argument*.

incomparably greater than the misery and 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.”<sup>12</sup> With this argument that preferentially emphasizes quality over quantity, Leibniz attempts to save face for the God to whom he attributes the creation of the world. Darwin, on the other hand, is bound by no such obligation.

Though Leibniz and Darwin maintain entirely opposing views on the role of God in the world, their respective philosophical and theoretical endeavors are mutually strengthened when considered in unison. It might well seem improbable that two thinkers with such highly contrasting views on the role of God in the world would reciprocally conclude that the world exists in an ongoing state of optimal efficiency. It would seem particularly unlikely that the theories of these men, rooted in such deeply opposing religious views, would derive their common ground from agreement on both the existence and purpose of evil in the world, and yet this is exactly what occurs with Leibniz and Darwin. In reality, the respective works of these two men are incomplete in their descriptions of the world when considered in isolation from each other- Leibniz provides a purpose to life in the absence of a scientific mechanism capable of manifesting that purpose, while Darwin identifies a natural regulatory mechanism of life without exploring the origins of that mechanism’s unfailing truth. However, when considered together, the works of Leibniz and Darwin sum to offer a panoramic lens through which the existence and continuity of life in the world may be viewed and understood.

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<sup>12</sup> Leibniz, Gottfried. *Philosophical Writings*.