

# Real-Life Dialogue on Human Freedom and the Origin of Evil

G. W. Leibniz

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis . . . . indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth.

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**A:** I am often at a loss when confronted by the thought that *sin seems to me to be necessary and inevitable*. Many fine things are said on this question, and I couldn't reply well to them, but ultimately they don't satisfy me, and they soon fade away.

**B:** These things demand deep meditation. If you want to be somewhat at peace regarding them, you have to give them the attention they require.

**A:** Father Sperandio at Munich advised me to leave the question alone. I laid my doubts before him one day, and he replied with great eloquence, and so plausibly that I was reduced to silence. When he had finished he asked me 'Doesn't that appear right to you?' and I answered 'Yes'. 'Well, sir,' he said, 'rest content with this now, and for your

own peace of mind stop thinking about this matter.' But I haven't been able to follow his advice.

**B:** A mediocre mind could easily follow the advice of this Father, but not someone with a sharp intelligence like yours. I agree that there is no *need* to get tangled in such subtle questions, and I don't advise anyone to tackle them. I only say that someone who has thought hard enough to raise these difficulties for himself must be able to think hard enough to dig down to their solutions. As for Father Sperandio's advice, I don't approve of it, and it raises my suspicions about his 'eloquent' and 'plausible' speech, which he advised you to put out of your mind. It is in the nature of answers that are good and solid that they are bound to appear *more* solid the more one reflects on them, and it is a

characteristic of evasions that one should give them as little thought as possible if one wants to 'rest content' with them.

**A:** I will tell you, then, what has held me up. We all agree that God knows all things, and that the •future is •present to him just as the •past is. I couldn't move my arm now without his having foreseen it from all eternity. He knows whether I will commit a murder, a crime, or some other sin. And since his foresight is infallible [here = 'bound to be correct'], it is infallible that I will commit the sin that he has foreseen. So it is necessary that I will sin. and it is not within my power not to. So I am not free.

**B:** Indeed, sir, we are not *completely* free; only God is completely free, since he alone is independent •of everything•. Our freedom is limited in many ways: I am not free to fly like an eagle or swim like a dolphin, because my body isn't equipped for that. Something close to that can be said about our mind. Sometimes we admit that our minds haven't been free [apparently meaning 'we have been preoccupied with something']. Strictly speaking, we *never* have perfect freedom of mind. But that doesn't prevent us from having a certain degree of freedom that the lower animals don't have; it is our capacity for reasoning, and for choosing on the basis of what emerges •from our reasoning•. As for divine foreknowledge, God foresees things as they are and doesn't change their nature. Events that are chancy and contingent in themselves don't become otherwise through God's having foreseen them. So: they are assured, but they are not necessary.

**A:** Assured or infallible [= 'bound to happen']—isn't that almost the same thing?

**B:** No, there is a difference. •Consider first a case of outright absolute necessity•: it is necessary that three threes make nine; this doesn't depend on any condition, and even God •can't prevent it from holding. •Contrast that with the merely

conditional necessity that future contingencies have•. A future sin •can be prevented •and *will* be prevented• if the man does his duty, though God foresees that he won't. This sin is necessary-given-that-God-foresaw it; if we add to that the proposition that God foresaw it only because it will occur, we get something tantamount to saying: the sin will happen necessarily-given-that-it-will-happen. This is what one calls conditional necessity.

**A:** These distinctions don't remove the difficulty.

**B:** I have to admit that I don't see any difficulty. Is there something bad about accepting that God foresees everything? On the contrary, since he *does*, there is no point in being upset about it, and indeed to be so would amount to not loving God.

**A:** I am completely at peace about divine foreknowledge. But it seems to give events a certainty or necessity which, whether one takes it as conditional or as absolute, I find upsetting:

If my sin is necessary, or at least if my sin is foreseen and is bound to occur, then it's a waste of effort trying not to avoid it; the sin will occur anyway.

What displeases me is that I don't have any reply to this.

**B:** These upsetting 'consequences' don't follow! The ancient philosophers had a similarly fallacious argument, known as 'the lazy man's syllogism' because its conclusion is that we shouldn't do anything:

- If something is foreseen and bound to happen, it will happen without my effort.
- If it is not foreseen, it won't happen, whether or not it is something I can do.
- So there is no point in my bestirring myself, either way•.

I reply to this by denying something that is asserted without

proof, namely the first premise, which says that the foreseen event will happen no matter what I do. If it is foreseen that I will do it, it is also foreseen that I will do what is needed to do it; and if it won't happen because of my laziness, that laziness will also have been foreseen. A German proverb says that *death needs to have a cause*, and the same can be said about eternal death or damnation, sin, or anything else. Thus since we don't know anything about what is foreseen, we should do our part without being held up by the useless question of whether it is foreseen that we shall succeed; all the more so since God is content with our good will when it is sincere and vigorous.

**A:** This is very good advice, and it totally squares with my own view; but it leaves untouched the great difficulty about the origin of evil. I am asking about the origin of the origins, and I am not to be fobbed off with the standard evasions such as: 'Man sins because his nature is corrupted by Adam's sin'—leaving us still with the original question, now applied to Adam himself, 'How did it come about that he sinned?' Or, more generally, how did sin come into a world created by an infinitely good and infinitely powerful God? To account for sin there must be another infinite cause capable of counterbalancing the influence of divine goodness.

**B:** I can name you such a thing.

**A:** That would make you a Manichean, accepting that there are two forces in the world, one for good and the other for evil.

**B:** You'll acquit me of this charge of Manicheism when I name this other force.

**A:** Then please name it now, sir.

**B:** It is nothingness.

**A:** Nothingness? But is nothingness infinite?

**B:** It certainly is! It is infinite, it is eternal, and it has many attributes in common with God. It includes an infinity of things, for all things that don't exist are included in nothingness, and all things that have gone out of existence have returned into nothingness.

**A:** You're joking, of course. Like a learned man who wrote a book about Nothing (Passentius, *De Nihilo*). I remember having seen it.

**B:** No, I am not joking in the slightest. The Platonists and St. Augustine himself have already shown us that the cause of good is positive, but that evil is a defect—that is, a privation or negation—and so it comes from nothingness or nonexistence.

**A:** I don't see how nothingness, which is *nothing*, can enter into the make-up of things.

**B:** . . . You would admit that all created things are limited, and that their limits . . . constitute something *negative*. For example, a circle is limited because the separation of the compass used to inscribe that circle was *not* larger. Thus the boundaries—the *non plus ultra* [Latin, 'the no-further point']—of this separation fix the circle. It is the same for all other things: they are all bounded or made imperfect by the force of the negation or nothingness that they contain, by their *lack* of an infinity of perfections which in relation to them are only a nothingness. [Here and in what follows, Leibniz's use of 'perfect' and its kin, though expressing the evaluative idea that we associate with these words, is also coloured by the fact that 'perfect' comes from Latin meaning 'thoroughly made' or 'completed'.]

**A:** Yet you would admit that everything was created good, so that God had reason to be pleased with it, as the sacred scriptures tell us. Original sin came later. And that is what puzzles me: how original sin could have come into being in things that were wholly good.

**B:** All created things had from the outset, before there was any sin, an imperfection arising from their limitation. Just as it is impossible for there to be an •infinite circle (because any circle is bounded by its circumference), so also it is impossible for there to be an •absolutely perfect created thing. When the sacred scriptures suggested that none of the ministers of God are without defects they meant this to apply even to angels—or so theologians believe. There was nothing *positively bad* in created things at the beginning, but they always lacked many perfections. When the first man turned away from the supreme good and settled for a mere created thing, thus falling into sin, what enabled this to happen was his *lack* of attention to God's commands. That is, from an imperfection that was merely privative [approximately = 'negative'] in the beginning, he fell into something positively bad.

**A:** But where does the original imperfection, the one that preceded original sin, come from?

**B:** It can be said to have arisen from the very essences or natures of created things; for the •essences of things are eternal, even though •things aren't. . . . Essences don't depend on God's •will, but on his •understanding. For example, essences or properties of numbers are eternal and unchangeable: nine is a perfect square, not because God wants it to be so but because its definition entails that it is, for it is three times three, and thus results from multiplying a number by itself. God's •understanding is the source of the essences of created things as they are in him, that is, bounded. If they are imperfect, one has only to look to their limitation or their boundaries, that is to say, their participation in nothingness.

**A:** In the light of those remarks, I agree that created things are necessarily limited, rather like the circle we spoke of

earlier. But it seems that God could have created them at least perfect enough so that they don't fall into sin.

**B:** I believe that God did create things in utter perfection, though it doesn't seem so to us when we look at *parts* of the universe. It's a little like what happens in music and painting, where dissonances and shadows do so much to enhance the rest; the accomplished maker of such works gets great benefit for the over-all perfection of the work from these particular imperfections—so much so that it's better to include them than to leave them out. So we have to believe that God wouldn't have allowed sin, or created things he knew would sin, if he hadn't known how to get from them a good incomparably greater than the resulting evil.

**A:** I would like to know what this great good is.

**B:** I can assure you *that* it is, but I can't explain it in detail. For that, I'd have to know the general harmony of the universe, whereas we know only a very small part. . . .

**A:** Yet it is strange that there are creatures who have fallen and others who have stayed upright. Where does this difference come from?

**B:** As I think I have just shown, it's the essences of things that make them different from one another; and the •particular amount and kind of• variety •that we have• was required by the •general• order of things, from which divine wisdom didn't wish to deviate. I'll give you another example, from an area you know something about—geometry.

**A:** That science does indeed give us a way of thinking about things, and shows what the human mind can do if it is led in an orderly way. But I don't see how it can yield anything relevant to our present topic. So I am waiting eagerly.

**B:** Geometers draw a great distinction between commensurable and incommensurable •pairs of• lines. [The next two sentences slightly expand Leibniz's very compressed formulation.] They

call two lines ‘commensurable’ with one another when they can both be described in terms of a common measure  $M$ , each having a length of so many  $M$ s or such and such a fraction of an  $M$ . But when two lines can’t be expressed by whole numbers or by fractions of numbers of a single measure, they are said to be ‘incommensurable’ with one another. A 9-foot line and a 10-foot line would be commensurable, because they have a common measure, the foot. And a 10-foot line would be commensurable with a 9.2-foot line, because 0.2 of a foot would be the common measure, being contained 50 times in one of the lines and 46 times in the other.

**A:** That is easy to understand, but incommensurables are a little harder.

**B:** Here is an example:  $\sqrt{2}$  is incommensurable with 1. This number is called a ‘surd’, because it can’t be expressed exactly either by whole numbers or by fractions. You will never find a whole number or any fraction at all which when multiplied by itself produces 2. Try it and you will see!

**A:** But I was expecting incommensurable lines, rather than incommensurable numbers.

**B:** Here you are, then, corresponding to  $\sqrt{2}$ : the diagonal of a perfect square, which has been known for centuries to be incommensurable with the side of its square. Let ABCD be a perfect square. . . . I claim that its diagonal AC is incommensurable with any of its sides, for example, with AB.

[**A** asks for the proof this, and **B** supplies it, showing that it follows from the incommensurability of  $\sqrt{2}$  with 1.]

**A:** Now that *is* surprising. Couldn’t *God* find a number capable of expressing exactly  $\sqrt{2}$  or the length of the diagonal of a square?

**B:** God can’t find absurd things. It would be like asking God to tell us, without mentioning fractions (i.e. without saying

‘one and a half’ or the like), how to divide three coins into two equal parts.

**A:** You are right; that would be asking for absurdities unworthy of God; or rather, it would be not asking anything, or not knowing what one was asking for. I see the necessity of what you say about incommensurables, though our imagination can’t get hold of it. This has something to teach us about what we •can do and about what we •can’t, both at once. It’s a considerable thing to •know *that* incommensurables exist, but we can’t claim to •understand fully *why* they exist. However, what can you get from this splendid geometrical line of thought that has a bearing on our question?

**B:** Here it is. If the order of things or divine wisdom demanded that God produce perfect squares, and he decided to meet the demand, he couldn’t avoid producing incommensurable lines, even though they have the imperfection of not being able to be expressed exactly—isn’t that right? For a square has to have a diagonal, which is the distance between its opposite angles. Now, let us compare •commensurable lines with •minds who stay upright in their purity, and •incommensurable ones with •less regulated minds who eventually fall into sin. It is evident that the irregularity of incommensurable lines arises from the very essence of the squares, and mustn’t be blamed on God; it is evident that this incommensurability is not ‘a bad thing that God couldn’t avoid producing’. God *could* have avoided producing it by not creating figures and continuous quantities, but only numbers or discrete quantities. But •that wouldn’t have been the avoidance of ‘something bad’, because• the imperfection of incommensurables has been made up for by even greater advantages: it was better to allow incommensurables to occur so as not to deprive the universe of all figures. It is the same with minds that are less firm about staying upright:

their original imperfection arises from their essence which is limited according to their degree [= 'their moral rank'?). Their sin is grounded in their essence, though it doesn't result from their essence as a necessary consequence; it is something accidental or contingent, and arises from their will; and God's infinite wisdom enables him to derive from the bad of this sin an incommensurably greater good. That is what led him not to exclude those creatures from existence, and not to prevent them from sinning. He *could* have done so, through his absolute power, but that would have overturned the order of things that his infinite wisdom had chosen.

**A:** These are exciting thoughts—ones that shed new light on this matter.

**B:** It could all be explained in terms quite different from mine, I think. But it doesn't take much thought, I believe, to see that my account is basically right. It fits with St. Paul, St. Augustine, and in part with Luther's excellent work on

the bondage of the will. That's an extremely good work, in my opinion, if one tones down some extravagant expressions. Ever since my adolescence it has seemed to me to be the finest and most solid book he left to us.

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[The foregoing dialogue is based on a real conversation; it was Leibniz who gave it the title, including 'real-life' (*effectif*). Here is part of a letter he wrote to Baron Dobrzensky on 26 January 1695:]

I told you yesterday, sir, that according to the ancients *every sin is its own punishment*. Here is an example of that: your curiosity is punished by my incommensurables, which have followed you home! It seemed to me a good idea to put our dialogue into writing. However, you can free yourself of this nuisance if you wish, for it is absolutely up to you whether you read it or not, or whether you let anyone else read it (I haven't shown it to anyone).