

Evil as Privation and Leibniz's Rejection of Empty Space

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In his correspondence with Samuel Clarke, Leibniz takes issue with the idea that space might be empty. Though the issue comes up at various points in the correspondence—particularly in Leibniz's second (n. 2), third (n. 9), and fourth letters (nn. 4, 7, 8, 9)—I will be focusing on the postscript that accompanies Leibniz's fourth letter, in which he gives two significant arguments for his position. I want to suggest an inconsistency in the way Leibniz treats empty space in these arguments and the way he treats evil. Briefly, the inconsistency is this. In order to avoid the charge that God has created evil, Leibniz propounds a version of the traditional doctrine that evil is a privation, not a thing but the absence of a thing. In order to explain why the best of all possible worlds contains such privations, Leibniz maintains that these privations in fact enhance the perfection of the world, so that any world without such privations would be less perfect than at least one world with such privations. When he turns to the question of the vacuum, or empty space, however, he argues that such a thing is inconsistent with the divine wisdom, thus cannot happen, because a wise creator would have chosen to fill that space with matter. So the inconsistency I am suggesting is that in the moral realm, where the presence of evil is undeniable, Leibniz admits that perfection requires some "blank spots", some instances of the complete lack of the positive thing. Yet in the material realm, where empty space cannot be observed, he insists that perfection precludes any blank spots. My goal in what follows is to establish this inconsistency in greater depth.

1. Two Arguments against Empty Space

The first of the two arguments Leibniz gives in the postscript may be called the *perfection argument*. He explains it as follows:

"I lay it down as a principle that every perfection which God could impart to things, without derogating from their other perfections, has actually been imparted to them. Now let us fancy a whole empty space. God could have placed some matter in it without derogating in any respect from all other things; therefore he has actually placed some matter in that space; therefore, there is no space wholly empty; therefore all is full."¹

In premise-conclusion form, the argument looks like this:

The Perfection Argument

1. God creates every perfection that does not derogate from the other perfections of created things. (Principle of Perfection, hereafter PP)
2. God could fill empty space with matter without derogating from the other perfections of created things.
3. Matter is a perfection. (implied)
4. Therefore, God fills every region of space with matter. (from 1-3)
5. Hence, there is no empty space. (from 4)

¹ R. Ariew (ed.): *G. W. Leibniz and Samuel Clarke: Correspondence*, Indianapolis 2000, p. 28; GP VII, 378.

Leibniz then gives what I will call the *PSR argument*:

“I shall add another argument grounded on the necessity of a sufficient reason. It is impossible that there should be any principle to determine what proportion of matter there ought to be, out of all the possible degrees from a plenum to a vacuum, or from a vacuum to a plenum. Perhaps it will be said that one should be equal to the other, but, because matter is more perfect than a vacuum, reason requires that a geometrical proportion should be observed and that there should be as much more matter than vacuum, as the former deserves to be preferred. But then, there must be no vacuum at all, for the perfection of matter is to that of a vacuum as something to nothing.” (Ariew: p. 28; GP VII, 378)

Taking a few liberties, we may reconstruct this argument as follows:

The PSR Argument

1. The ratio r of matter to empty space must be either 0 (= no matter), 1 (= no empty space), .5 (half matter, half vacuum), or some other value between 0 and 1 (i.e., $0 < r < .5$ or $.5 < r < 1$).
2. Matter is more perfect than empty space.
3. So, it is not the case that $r = 0$. (from 2)
4. If $0 < r < .5$ or $.5 < r < 1$, then there is no sufficient reason why r has this particular value rather than some other value between 0 and 1.
5. There is always a sufficient reason why things are one way rather than another. (Principle of Sufficient Reason, hereafter PSR)
6. Therefore, it is not the case that $0 < r < .5$ or $.5 < r < 1$. (from 4, 5)
7. If matter is more perfect than empty space, then $r \neq .5$.
8. Thus, $r \neq .5$. (from 2, 7)
9. Hence, $r = 1$ (i.e., there is no empty space) (from 1, 3, 6, 8)

For my purposes, the details of these arguments will not much matter; what will matter is just that Leibniz rejects empty space because it would violate both the PP and the PSR.

2. Evil as Privation

On Leibniz’s view, the concept of empty space is the concept of space that does not contain matter. As such, it is the concept of a kind of privation or negation. It is not something positive but the absence of something positive, namely, matter. But this means that empty space is in an important respect like evil, which Leibniz also considers a kind of privation. Leibniz’s views on this subject are characteristically complex, and I cannot go into all the details here. But it will suffice to note the following points.²

First, although Leibniz does criticize the evil-as-privation theory in some early writings³, he begins to advocate a version of the view starting in the mid-1680s. For example, in his *Dialogue on Human Freedom and the Origin of Evil* (ca. 1695), he has the protagonist (“B”) say this:

² Here I draw heavily on the recent study of S. Newlands: “Leibniz on Privations, Limitations, and the Metaphysics of Evil”, in: *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 52/2 (2014), pp. 281–308. See also M. Latzer: “Leibniz’s Conception of Metaphysical Evil”, in: *Journal of the History of Ideas* 55/1 (1994), pp. 1–15.

³ Cf. Newlands: “Leibniz on Privations”, pp. 290–292.

“The Platonists and Saint 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 consequently, it arises from nothingness or nonbeing.”⁴

Slightly later B adds:

“There was no positive evil in created things at the beginning, but they always lacked many perfections. Thus, because of a lack of attention, the first man was able to turn away from the supreme good and be content with some created thing, and thus, he fell into sin. That is, from an imperfection that was merely privative in the beginning, he fell into a positive evil.” (Ariew/Garber, p. 114)

Leibniz also characterizes evil as privation at several points in the *Theodicy*.⁵

Second, Leibniz traces this merely privative imperfection back to Adam’s essence in the divine understanding. In response to A’s question “But where does the original imperfection antecedent to original sin come from?”, B replies:

“It can be said that it arises from the very essences or natures of created things; for the essences of things are eternal, even though things aren’t.... God’s understanding is the source of the essences of created things, such as they are in him, that is, bounded. If they are imperfect, one can only blame their limitation on their boundaries, that is to say, the extent of their participation in nothingness.” (Ariew/Garber, pp. 114-15)

Newlands aptly calls this the *Original Limitation Theory* (OLT). It can be summarized briefly as the view that any positive evil stems from a negative evil—that is, an original privation or negation, specifically a lack of perfection—that arises in turn from a limitation in the eternal essence of the thing.

Third, as to the distinction between positive and negative evil, this appears to correspond to the distinction Leibniz draws in §21 of the *Theodicy* between *metaphysical* evil, which is negative or privative, and *physical* and *moral* evil (i.e., suffering and sin, respectively), which are positive evils. There is room for debate about whether physical and moral evil are also privative in nature. Taken at face value, Leibniz would appear to be suggesting that suffering and sin are positive evils, which arise from negative evil, that is, original limitations. But at least one writer has argued that suffering and sin are also forms of metaphysical evil, which would make them privative.⁶ For my purposes, however, it is not necessary to take a position on this issue. The key point for my argument is that metaphysical evil is negative or privative in nature. Just as empty space is a privation or negation of matter, metaphysical evil is a privation or negation of perfection.

3. The Justification of Evil

Though empty space and metaphysical evil are analogous in this important respect, there is an important difference: while Leibniz denies the reality of empty space because of its privative character, he admits that metaphysical evil is a genuine feature of this world. The question therefore arises how the existence of this kind of evil can be reconciled with the goodness of God.

⁴ R. Ariew/D. Garber (eds.): *G. W. Leibniz: Philosophical Essays*, Indianapolis 1989, p. 114.

⁵ GP VI, 114–115, 120–122, 201.

⁶ Latzer: “Leibniz’s Conception”, pp. 9–10.

Leibniz's main justification for the existence of evil goes back to the original limitation theory. On his view, God considers all the possible combinations of substances, and he creates that combination which has the greatest reality or perfection. Since God is perfectly rational, he must have selected the best of these worlds for creation. Since the actual world contains metaphysical evil, the best world must contain such evil. So even though we might have thought the best world would be entirely free of imperfection, Leibniz concludes that this is not the case.

The possibles God considers for creation have essences which include their original limitations. These possibles reside in the divine understanding, and God has no control over their essence. So if the best possible combination still contains some evil, then God cannot be blamed for this. According to this line of reasoning, then, the presence of metaphysical evil in our world does not reflect poorly on God.

In §21 of the *Theodicy*, Leibniz appears to grant that some possible worlds may lack imperfections:

"[A]s this immense *Region* of truths contains all the possibilities, it is necessary that there be an infinity of possible worlds, that evil enter into many of them, and that even the best of all contain a measure thereof; it is this which has determined God to permit evil." (GP VI, 115)

In saying that evil enters into many of the possible worlds, Leibniz implies that some of them lack evil. Still, he insists that the most perfect of the possible worlds must contain at least a measure of evil.

Why would a world with evil be more perfect than all the ones that lack evil? One reason Leibniz gives is the familiar point that negative qualities are sometimes needed in order to make the whole better. For instance, parts of a painting that are ugly in isolation may make the painting as a whole more beautiful (Ariew/Garber, p. 153). Similarly, dissonance in a musical composition may serve to make the whole more pleasing. Relatedly, Leibniz notes that it is a law of delight that we need some contrast in order for certain states to be pleasant (*ibid.*). Thus, Leibniz is able to give some intuitive rationale for the presence of evil in the world that has the greatest perfection.

4. Back to Empty Space

I now come to my main point. I want to argue that Leibniz's treatment of the one kind of privation (evil) is inconsistent with his treatment of the other. As we have seen, in the postscript to his fourth letter to Clarke, he rejects empty space because, as a privation, it runs counter to both the PP and the PSR. In the case of evil, however, the existence of the thing cannot plausibly be denied. So Leibniz is instead forced to *explain* its existence. Notice, however, that the very same considerations which led him to reject empty space seem to militate against the existence of metaphysical evil.

Consider first the Perfection Argument. If it weren't manifest that evil exists, we could imagine Leibniz appealing to the PP to argue against the existence of evil, just as he argues against the existence of empty space. The argument would go something like this.

1. God creates every perfection that does not derogate from the other perfections of created things. (PP)

2. Had God created a substance with imperfections, then he could have instead created a counterpart of that substance without any imperfections, without thereby derogating from the perfections of other, compossible substances.
3. Hence, there are no substances with imperfections. (from 1, 2)
4. Thus, there is no metaphysical evil. (from 3)

Similarly, if evil were not manifest, we could imagine Leibniz appealing to the PSR to rule it out. The argument would go very much like the PSR argument against empty space. Thus:

1. The ratio r of perfection to imperfection must be either 0 (= no perfection), 1 (= no imperfection), .5 (half perfection, half imperfection), or some other value between 0 and 1 (i.e., $0 < r < .5$ or $.5 < r < 1$).
2. Perfection is more perfect than no perfection.
3. So, it is not the case that $r = 0$. (from 2)
4. If $0 < r < .5$ or $.5 < r < 1$, then there is no sufficient reason why r has this particular value rather than some other value between 0 and 1.
5. There is always a sufficient reason why things are one way rather than another. (PSR)
6. Therefore, it is not the case that $0 < r < .5$ or $.5 < r < 1$. (from 4, 5)
7. If perfection is more perfect than imperfection, then $r \neq .5$.
8. Thus, $r \neq .5$. (from 2, 7)
9. Hence, $r = 1$ (i.e., there is no imperfection) (from 1, 3, 6, 8)

If Leibniz's PSR argument for empty space is sound, then it is hard to see why this analogue would not also be sound.

At this point we can anticipate some objections. First, it might be objected that moral and material privations are disanalogous insofar as the metaphysical privations are included in the eternal essences of things, whereas physical privations are not. But to this it may be replied that the imperfection of void might be included in the eternal natures of things just as much as the metaphysical imperfections. How does Leibniz know that the best possible world is full of substances whose essences include limitations? Because this is the only way to reconcile God's goodness with the existence of such imperfections. But then how can we rule out that these eternal essences also include physical imperfections, some of which take the form of empty space? Perhaps, all else equal, God would have preferred to create a world without empty space, but what he finds is that the most perfect possible world contains not only metaphysical privations but various kinds of physical privation, including empty space. And so he creates a world with empty space, without this derogating in any way from his goodness and perfection.

Here it helps to note that in one of his fullest discussions of the subject, found in §30 of the *Theodicy*, he says that various physical privations are closely analogous to the original imperfections of creatures (GP VI, 120). Examples he gives are darkness, cold, and the natural inertia of matter. He considers these all privations; yet he admits that they exist. Though Leibniz does not actually say this, the justification for why God allowed these privations to exist is presumably the same as with the metaphysical privations: namely, these physical privations are encoded in the eternal essences of things. But if that

is the case, then why couldn't empty space, which is also a privation, likewise be encoded in the eternal essences of things? In such a case, a God who seeks to maximize perfection would have no choice but to create a world with empty space, just as he has no choice but to create a world with shadows, cold, and passive forces.

Perhaps the two kinds of privation—metaphysical and physical—are disanalogous in a different respect, namely, because it is essential to a created being to be finite and limited (cf. GP VI, 121), whereas it is not essential to space that it be empty. But this seems to miss the mark. The matter that fills space is not, for Leibniz, a substance, but only a phenomenon of substances. To say that there is matter filling a certain region of space is just to say that there is a certain phenomenon having its being in perceivers. But if the perceivers are essentially limited, then it may well be that some of these limitations take the form of a lack of phenomena (i.e., matter) in certain regions of space. So physical privations such as darkness and cold are indeed included in the eternal essences of the substances of this world, and the same thing could be true of empty space. (Indeed, Leibniz doesn't deny the possibility of empty space; so he presumably thinks that some possible substances entail empty space. It's just that God, in his infinite wisdom, has avoided creating any such substances.)

Here is another possible point of disanalogy. On the one hand, we might suppose, it is not easy to see why filling empty space with matter would detract from the overall perfection of the world. Why would the mere addition of matter to one region of space take anything away from other things? And if it doesn't, how could adding that matter detract from the overall perfection of the world? On the other hand, it might seem easier to see why giving substances more perfections (so to speak) would detract from the overall perfection of the world. In other words, perhaps Leibniz's painting and dissonance analogies fit better with substantial imperfections than with empty space. Here, however, there are two potential problems. First, it is not difficult to think of reasons why a world with empty space might be more perfect than one without. Many philosophers have thought that empty space is required for motion. Leibniz disagrees, of course, as he must, given that he thinks motion is compatible with the plenum. But if he is wrong about that, then we would have a reason for thinking that empty space might contribute to the greater perfection of a world. Second, in the case of evil, it is not easy to think of reasons why the presence of evil in a world would make it more perfect.

5. Conclusion

Obviously I have not been able to consider every facet of this rich topic. But this preliminary investigation suggests that Leibniz is indeed inconsistent in his treatment of empty space, on the one hand, and his treatment of metaphysical evil and other kinds of privation, on the other. In the cases where the existence of the privation cannot reasonably be denied, he makes room for its existence by noting that the best possible world consists of substances whose eternal essences include these imperfections. But in the one case of a privation that is not empirically manifest—that of empty space—he deploys the PP and the PSR to argue that there is no such space. This appears to be a glaring inconsistency. Rather than denying the existence of void, Leibniz's treatment of evil should have led him to realize that these arguments against empty space are dubious, and that the PP and PSR do not rule out empty space any more than they rule out evil, darkness, cold, or any other privations.