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Bogusław Wolniewicz's Analysis of Pierre Bayle's Critique of Theodicy*

Abstract: According to Pierre Bayle (1696–1697), a precursor of the French Enlightenment, best known for his *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, traditional theodicy is flawed in that it uses human free will to explain the existence of moral evil. In his view, God could eliminate sin by endowing sinners with divine grace, thereby biasing their will towards good. In response to Bayle's critique of theodicy, Bogusław Wolniewicz¹ concludes that sinners must exist according to the laws of logic, and that the freedom of the human will is an obstacle that God's omnipotence cannot overcome.

Keywords: Bogusław Wolniewicz, Pierre Bayle, evil, theodicy

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¹ Bogusław Wolniewicz (1927–2017) was a Polish philosopher and respected logician who created a system of ontology of situations and an outstanding expert on Wittgenstein's philosophy. Wolniewicz is the author of a book published in English: *Logic and Metaphysics: Studies in Wittgenstein's Ontology of Facts* (Warszawa: Znak, Język, Rzeczywistość, Polskie Towarzystwo Semiotyczne, 1999). I also recommend reading the text on Bogusław Wolniewicz's life and philosophy: "A brief introduction into the life and thought of Bogusław Wolniewicz", <https://wolniewicz.org/a-brief-introduction-into-the-life-and-thought-of-boguslaw-wolniewicz/> (access: 25.03.2025)

The issue of evil has been historically linked to the concept of divine providence, particularly within the Christian tradition. Theodicy as a separate philosophical discipline was pioneered by G. W. Leibniz in his work *Theodicy. On the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*² (published in 1710). He set out to demonstrate that God's absolute omnipotence, wisdom, and goodness are not incompatible with the human experience of evil. Leibniz formed the term "theodicy" from two Greek words: *theos*, meaning God, and *dike*, meaning justice. Bogusław Wolniewicz contends – evil is a cosmic force that acts upon and through human beings.³ Consequently, he is compelled to address the fundamental problem of theodicy, namely the reconciliation of the existence of evil in the world with the existence of a Creator God. The issue was addressed by analysing the views of the French philosopher Pierre Bayle (1647–1706). The article "Critique of theodicy in Bayle"⁴ provides a detailed examination of this approach,⁵ the philosophers examination of the issue of evil in the world is informed by a critical evaluation of the validity of a critique of the source of evil in the context of Christian theology.

According to Wolniewicz, the issue of theodicy can be articulated through the following question: "Can the idea of God – as a rational being and in his knowledge, power and justice infinite – be reconciled with the image of a world in which evil exists and flourishes?"⁶ Attempts to formulate a response result in an impasse, a phenomenon that has been recognised since antiquity and first articulated by Epicurus. The supposition is posited that the omniscience of a deity is contingent upon the perception of malevolence in the universe. It is evident that a deity who acknowledges malevolence yet does not act in opposition would be regarded as an acceptor of evil. This would conse-

² <https://archive.org/details/theodicy17147gut> (access: 15.03.2025).

³ Joanna Smakulska, "Evil in Human Nature – Bogusław Wolniewicz on the Root of Evil", *Studia z Historii Filozofii* 4(13) (2022): 31–45.

⁴ Bogusław Wolniewicz, *Filozofia i wartości*, vol. 2 (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa UW, 1998), 298–315. In the following footnotes, this edition will be referred to as FiW, indicating the volume – 1, 2, or 3, and pages).

⁵ This article first appeared in *Edukacja Filozoficzna* 19 (1995). Reprinted in FiW 2, 84–108.

⁶ My own translation; further quotations from Wolniewicz's works in my English translation; FiW 2, 85.

quently negate the notion of a righteous deity. It can be posited that a God who perceives and accepts evil would not be omnipotent. Christian theodicy tacitly assumes that God is not constrained by anything other than the rules of logic, and consequently, the difficulties mentioned apply to it as well.

In the pursuit of identifying the sources of evil in the world, it is imperative to establish a distinction between the evil of suffering, or physical evil, and the evil of sin, or moral evil. It is crucial to recognise that these two forms of evil cannot be equated.⁷ It is evident that suffering and sin are not synonymous, and thus, the considerations of theodicy must differ in these two cases. Theodicy posits that physical evil is indeed the work of God, yet it is merely apparent; it can be likened to the suffering of a patient undergoing medical treatment. Moral evil is authentic evil, yet it is acknowledged that it is not the work of the Creator. Wolniewicz's examination focuses exclusively on the latter category of evil, which he attributes to human agency. Notably, he disregards the notion of physical evil as the absence of good, deeming it to be "pure sophistry". From his perspective, evil is a genuine phenomenon. The thesis that physical evil does not possess an existential character, but is merely a lack of being, namely a lack of goodness, originated with Plato and Aristotle, and was adopted in the Platonic version by St. Augustine, and in the Aristotelian version by St. Thomas Aquinas and subsequent scholastics. In the context of Christian theology, the concept of being is fundamentally embedded in the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition. This aspect is elucidated by the eminent Polish Thomist, Mieczysław A. Krąpiec, as follows:

The theory of lack, like any other philosophical theory, supposes a specific conception of the structure of reality – of being. If we accept the justified Aristotelian concept of being composed of matter and form, as well as the Thomistic concept of being composed of essence and existence, i.e. – in the most general terms – of various factors, independently incomplete, constituting a number of assemblies of being in a substance one, of elements arranged in relations: act and potentiality, then each constituent element perfected is a potentiality, and each perfecting element is an act, called form in Aristotelian language. [...] Assuming just such

⁷ Wolniewicz also describes physical evil as bad luck/fate and moral evil as ill will; see FiW 2, 86.

a theory of being [...] the absence of a form in a subject capable of possessing it will first of all be 'named'. The 'absence of a form' [...] means as much as the 'non-existence' of such a constituent element in the subject, which belongs in some aspect to the given subject.⁸

It is precisely this approach that Wolniewicz regards as "empty sophistry". It should be noted here that this privatist theory of evil has long been criticised, especially in philosophical currents not associated with Thomism, e.g., by Max Scheler, but also within Christian philosophy and theology. The following is an example of a Catholic philosopher and theologian's perspective on the matter:

Evil, which exists realistically in things, does not always take the form of absence. Often it is a positive deformation of a structure, characteristic, for example, of cancer or infections of various kinds. Evil can also take the form of a positive action, leading more or less to the destruction of things. An individual entity at the moment of its existence is an ontic good, but later on it is often 'tainted' with evil. The secondary nature of evil relates to both the physical and moral order.⁹

It is important to note that the aim of this study is to challenge the privative theory of evil in relation to both physical and moral evil. The argument presented here is that, since moral evil always has a real dimension (of a real act or attitude), physical evil must also have at least some degree of real being, and not merely represent a negative aspect of being.

According to Wolniewicz, evil is a genuine phenomenon that manifests through human beings, specifically in their thoughts and deeds. Consequently, he prioritises the investigation of moral evil, that is to say, the evil that is embodied in human actions. In this regard, the reality of evil is empirically substantiated, and it is perceived and experienced by humans as a genuine and positive countervalue. "According to Basilian-Augustinian theodicy, the

⁸ Mieczysław A. Krąpiec, *Dlaczego zło? Rozważania filozoficzne* (Lublin: Redakcja Wydawnictw KUL, 1995), 56.

⁹ Stanisław Kowalczyk, "Zło – problem czy tajemnica? Próba syntezy aspektów filozoficznych i teologicznych", in: *Strefy współczesnej wiedzy o Bogu*, ed. Bohdan Bejze (Warszawa: Akademia Teologii Katolickiej, 1977), 474.

evil of sin is not the work of the Creator, but the work of man as a being endowed with free will and thus independent of the Creator in his actions. In order to be able to do good, man must be free. But being free, he can also do evil. Thus, the possibility of doing good entails the possibility of doing evil. Good cannot exist without evil".¹⁰ In the opinion of Wolniewicz, the derivation of moral evil from free will is not permissible. In order to demonstrate this, Wolniewicz refers to Bayle's argument.¹¹ As Bayle observes, conventional theodicy is erroneous in assuming that freedom alone can account for the existence of moral evil. While it is accurate that humans are free to act in both good and evil ways, the possibility of doing evil does not itself imply the existence of evil. Consequently, Bayle contests the assertion that the capacity to do evil necessitates its existence. He contends that those who are saved in paradise are endowed with free will yet do not sin. In mortal life, the righteous, that is to say, those who are endowed with the grace of the Holy Spirit, love God and do not do evil but good. It is further noted by Bayle that their love for God is pure and sincere, and that they are in no way compelled to do so. The conclusion to which the author arrives is as follows: it is within the power of God, without infringing upon the freedom of his creation, to incline it to goodness by endowing it with divine grace.¹²

It is the contention of Wolniewicz that Bayle's thought addresses the fundamental issue of theodicy. "The argument from freedom is based on the assumption that freedom implies the possibility of sin. This overarching assumption is itself not in doubt either with us or with Bayle".¹³ It is indeed the case that freedom implies the possibility of sin; that is to say, an individual who is free can also sin. However, the argument from freedom goes beyond

¹⁰ FiW 2, 86.

¹¹ See: *ibidem*, 90–91. Bayle takes up the critique in his *Słownik historyczno-krytyczny* (1695–1697) [Fr. orig. *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1696–1697), Eng. *Historical and Critical Dictionary*].

¹² Wolniewicz quotes, among others, the following passage from Bayle's *Dictionary*: "Does it not mean [...] that, without violating the freedom of his creature, God can inevitably direct it towards the good? Thus sin is by no means due to the fact that the Creator could not prevent it without depriving His creature of free will. It is therefore necessary to look for another cause. It is also difficult to comprehend how the Fathers of the Church could fail to see the weakness of their replication and their opponents fail to make use of it"; FiW 2, 91.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

this assumption by claiming that freedom implies the actual occurrence of sin. This is a fallacy because it is incompatible with the law of logic: although actuality implies possibility (what is actual is possible), possibility does not imply actuality (it does not follow from the fact that something is possible that it is actual). “After all, the fact that I might have stolen does not mean that I did”.¹⁴ Bayle employs the example of the saved who are free yet do not sin to illustrate this problem, thereby demonstrating that in this case the implication “he who is free sins” is not applicable. Conversely, Wolniewicz observes that the reverse of this implication is also true, i.e., he who is not free will not sin.¹⁵ It is also a legitimate thesis that only he who could not have sinned does sin. Consequently, no individual is compelled to sin, despite the fact that all individuals possess the capacity to do so.¹⁶

However, Wolniewicz contests the assertion that Bayle’s critique assails the entire argument from freedom, contending that it merely challenges one of its premises. This premise posits that the possibility of evil implies its actual existence. It is noteworthy that the prevailing understanding of possibility, as it is commonly conceived, in fact excludes the truth of this premise. Nevertheless, this implication will be demonstrated to be valid when the particular nature of evil is taken into consideration. Wolniewicz posits that “evil has such causal force, such plenitude, that its very possibility causes its actual appearance. In this particular case, the rule of inference *a posse ad esse*, although generally wrong, is therefore valid. Evil arises spontaneously and spreads everywhere like dammed up water: open the sluice gates – and it flows. Where there is the possibility of evil, there is also evil itself”.¹⁷ Evil is thus characterised by a unique sense of fullness and flowability. Wolniewicz posits that the assertion concerning the existence of the good, namely that its existence is a premise for its own existence, has not yet been advanced. This observation highlights the fundamental disparity in the dynamics of good and evil in a global context. “This asymmetry indicates that goodness has a smaller dynamic than evil. This is a phenomenon that has been pointed out

¹⁴ Ibidem, 90–91.

¹⁵ See: ibidem, 94.

¹⁶ See: ibidem, 95.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

many times and from many sides".¹⁸ Among those who recognised this larger dynamic of evil, Wolniewicz cites Saint John,¹⁹ Seneca,²⁰ eighteenth-century American theologian Jonathan Edwards,²¹ and Kant.²²

In the corpus of contemporary thought, it is Stanisław Lem who most explicitly articulates the concept of an imbalance between good and evil.²³ Notwithstanding the primacy of concern for physical evil, Wolniewicz acknowledges that his standpoint emphatically conveys the asymmetry of good and evil. In doing so, Wolniewicz accentuates the linkage between the two types of evil, as "all moral evil feeds on suffering".²⁴ Lem's argument posits that the fundamental nature of the universe is such that it is remarkably more conducive to destruction than to creation, that it is more facile to inflict suffering than to bring joy, that it is more straightforward to extinguish than to resurrect, and that it is more facile to shatter any entity into innumerable fragments, yet that it is remarkably more arduous to recreate, as elucidated by the second law of thermodynamics, which is intrinsic to the very essence of the universe. The words of Lem are significant: "Even God throws his hands up in despair".²⁵ As Wolniewicz observes, a comparable notion was articulated by the Manichaeans, albeit in a divergent manner. Within their imagery, the

¹⁸ Ibidem, 96.

¹⁹ His phrase is: "the whole [...] world lies in the power of the Evil One"; 1 J; 5, 19.

²⁰ Wolniewicz quotes, in his own translation, the following Seneca thought from his work *On Anger*: "It is necessary to make unceasing efforts against evil, which spreads and multiplies – not that it should disappear, but that it should not prevail"; FiW 2, 96.

²¹ Wolniewicz refers to his work: *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin* of 1758, which was reissued in 1970 under the title *Original Sin* (New Haven: Yale University Press); see FiW 2, 96. In a brief note to his own translation of Kant's consideration of radical evil, Wolniewicz refers to those theses of Edwards in which he emphasises that the wickedness of the human race is widespread and constant, and the cause of ill will lies in the very nature of man; see FiW 2, 363.

²² Wolniewicz refers to his translation of a passage from Kant's work *Religia w obrębie samego rozumu*, entitled *O obecności złego pierwiastka obok dobrego, czyli zło radykalne*, see: FiW 2. 343–361.

²³ Wolniewicz refers to the interview: Stanisław Bereś, "Rozmowy z Lemem (5)", *Odra* 10 (1985); see FiW 2, 96–97.

²⁴ FiW 2, 97.

²⁵ Ibidem.

juxtaposition of the static or passive nature of Good with the dynamic and active nature of Evil is particularly salient.²⁶

The philosopher posits that the implication “if people have the capacity to do evil, then people do evil” can be reasonably justified as an expression of the nature of evil and the world containing it. However, this raises new and even more difficult problems for the justification of God. The issue of the origin of evil in the world is transformed into a concern for the greater dynamics of evil rather than good. Formulating the inquiry in this manner results in the argument from liberty being rendered invalid, as no evident correlation can be identified between the pervasiveness of evil and the autonomy of the human will. The second problem pertains to the purpose of creating a world in which the tendency towards evil is dominant, a tendency that is woven into the very fabric of the world’s construction. Christian theodicy is predicated on the premise that divine power is constrained solely by the dictates of logic, with the objective being to demonstrate that it is logic itself that renders the creation of a world in which finite beings are endowed with freedom, yet moral evil remains conspicuously absent and improbable. In the context of theodicy, such a world is considered to be contradictory. However, Bayle’s critique challenges this assertion by proposing the concept of divine grace being bestowed upon humans without compromising their freedom.

Wolniewicz’s position is that the notion of possibility is pivotal to the rejection of Bayle’s critique. This notion will be applied to the argument from freedom. Freedom can be understood as a form of possibility, yet this possibility

²⁶ Wolniewicz quotes a passage from the classic work of Hans Jonas: “At any rate, the two realms as such exist side by side completely unconnected, and the Light, far from considering the existence of Darkness as a challenge, wants nothing but the separateness and has neither benevolent nor ambitious tendency to enlighten its opposite. For the Darkness is what it is destined to be, and left to itself it fulfills its nature as the Light fulfills its own. This self-sufficiency of the Light, which wishes to shine only for itself and not also for what is devoid of it, and which by its own counsels could last untempted through the eternities, demonstrates the profound difference of Manichaeism from Christian sentiment [...]. There is an aristocratic element, preserving something of the original spirit of Iranian religion, in Mani’s belief in the inner changelessness of the Light, which in its self-content furnishes no motive of becoming and can accept as the natural state of things the profound split of being with the existence of a Darkness raging within itself, so long as it only rages within itself”. Hans Jonas, *Gnostic Religion* (Boston, 1958), 211–212. Quoted in: *FiW* 2, 97–98.

can be interpreted in various ways. Bayle appears to advocate a conventional understanding of possibility, that is, one which does not presuppose any facticity. However, possibility can also be conceived "non-standardly". Wolniewicz points to Diodorus Kronos (4th century BC), who proclaimed that "only what is or will be is possible". This understanding of possibility is referred to as "Diodorus", while the contemporary philosopher and logician Georg Henrik von Wright (1916–2003) refers to it as prospective, as the adjudication of a possibility always refers to the future. This non-standard understanding of possibility is predicated on a present or future fact. Consequently, the expression "may sin" is to be interpreted as "has sinned or will sin". In this passage, Von Wright also alludes to the analogous "Diodorus" metaphysical "principle of Fullness", asserting that all that is conceivable will ultimately transpire. In accordance with the aforementioned principle, that which never occurs is not feasible. Conversely, the absence of sin would render the concept of free will impossible, thereby contradicting the fundamental premise of theodicy, which posits that those who possess free will are capable of sin. Nonetheless, Bayle's critique remains pertinent, as stipulated by the doctrine of the Full, which posits that those who are saved and possess freedom must inevitably commit sin. In this context, Wolniewicz proffers his own interpretation of possibility, which occupies a median position between the prevailing standard and the "Diodorus" interpretation. The author designates this phenomenon as "pseudo-Diode" and proceeds to provide a detailed characterisation of the same: "If something can happen, then something similar has actually already happened or will happen".²⁷ Any not imagery possibility, and therefore sin, must somehow make its presence known in the world. If anyone can sin, this means that there must be someone who has actually sinned or will sin. The concept of possibility is inherently linked to that of freedom. The existence of evil is predicated on the existence of freedom, and as such, it is inevitable that there will always be individuals who transgress. So there will always be someone who sins, but this necessity does not affect anyone personally.

It is therefore posited that humankind is endowed with the capacity for moral transgression. The correlation between the potential for malevolence

²⁷ FiW 2, 101.

and human nature is predicated on the conceptual framework of “identity of natures” and the principle of predication. The concept of nature’s identity, as articulated by Wolniewicz, can be encapsulated as follows: “Two objects are of the same nature when they have the same potentialities. [...] if two objects are of the same nature, then whatever can be sensibly (though not necessarily truthfully) said about one can be equally sensibly (though not necessarily truthfully) said about the other”.²⁸ The principle of predication applies to objects of the same nature. Bayle, in criticising theodicy, points to the saved and the unsaved. However, they are not of the same nature as sinful mortal men; hence, the latter differ from the former in their capacities. Wolniewicz challenges this by highlighting that such an objection is misplaced, while the fundamental tenet of theodicy itself refers not only to the saved but also to the damned, including the immortal. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that a world without sin is unthinkable, as evidenced by the fact that hell is not empty. The condemned are defined as “hardened” sinners who perpetrate continual sin. The absence of remorse on the part of the subjects is indicative of a hell that is characterised by intense, impotent hatred.²⁹ Hell, on the other hand, is not something “like a prison of torture, with a merciful God in the role of torturer”.³⁰ Wolniewicz firmly rejects the notion that hell is populated by sinners who, after a time, have realised their mistakes, which they can no longer rectify. “They regret nothing – except that they did not win. No one stays in hell against their will”.³¹ Despite the fact that Wolniewicz does not define them in this particular context, it is evident that he is referring to those who are of the “evil seed”, that is to say, those who possess a devilish will.

Considering the question of theodicy, among other things, Bayle concluded that a rational explanation of evil is impossible.³² Bayle’s criticism on theodicy in his *An Historical and Critical Dictionary* does not endorse the entire

²⁸ Ibidem, 103–104.

²⁹ See: ibidem, 106–107.

³⁰ Ibidem, 107.

³¹ Ibidem. Wolniewicz refers here to Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI: “Christ’s heaven is based on the freedom to allow the damned to want their own damnation”; Joseph Ratzinger, *Śmierć i życie wieczne* (Warszawa, 1986), 237.

³² See: “Pierre Bayle”, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2010/entries/bayle/#ProEvi> (access: 20.03.2025).

argument from freedom, but only one of its premises: that the possibility of evil implies its actual existence. Wolniewicz's rationalist standpoint is evidenced by his adherence to the principle of logical correctness in his evaluation of considerations. The philosopher proposes a modified understanding of possibility, together with an indication of the particular nature of evil in the world: its enormous dynamism and plenitude. According to the laws of logic, sinners must exist. Wolniewicz's analysis of the issue of theodicy is founded on the premise of the innateness of human character and the delineation of possibility in a manner that deviates from the prevailing definition. This deviation is explicitly articulated. Adopting this standpoint, Wolniewicz methodically progresses through a series of logical justifications, culminating in the assertion of the indispensability of evil within the realm of human experience. Sinners must exist according to the laws of logic, the freedom of the human will is a barrier that the omnipotence of God cannot transcend.³³ Evil is thus necessarily inherent in the context of the world, but in justifying this necessity Wolniewicz does not address the question of reconciling the goodness of God with the evil of the world, as classical theodicy did, but shows that a world without evil would be an illogical world.

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³³ See: FiW 2, 107–108.

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