

Free Will in Leibniz's Thought

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Abstract

Since the beginning of his activity, Leibniz considers the notion of free will as absurd; he holds this notion not only unnecessary to found moral responsibility but also as an impediment to the correct understanding of divine and human retribution. What prevents many readers to accept this view is Leibniz's insistence on contingency as a requisite of free actions: I argue that the possibility of 'being otherwise' in a different possible world has nothing to do with freedom, which is a perfection, but rather explains the fact that our actions can be wrong.

Keywords: Contingency, Causality, Moral responsibility, Indifference, Incommensurables.

1. The Contextualization

Leibniz starts dealing with the problem of free will in 1671, with a short treatise, now lost, described by himself as a meditation on how human freedom can coexist with divine providence, fate, damnation, God's grace, punishments and rewards (Leibniz 1923ff: II-1, 83). Forty years later, in his *Theodicy*, he will still be dealing with the same issues, but in the light of a life-long enquiry covering all the main subjects of metaphysics. Such relentless interest and constant rework depends on three main reasons:

1) the problem of free will had been at the core of the theological disputes between the rival Christian confessions since the beginning of the 16th century. Deep divisions separated Catholics, Lutherans and Calvinists, and the problem of man's freedom was probably the most controversial one: being for or against free will was an identitarian mark, which drew a precise line between the Reformed and the Catholics. Leibniz, who remained a (very warm) Lutheran throughout his whole life, was deeply engaged in the countless synods, debates and councils which tried to promote ecumenism and his public statements on the problem often oscillated according to the political needs of the moment. Yet, his position never changed: free will, he unfailingly claims, is a philosophical absurdity;

2) on the ethical and juridical level he thinks that the acceptance of free will, far from founding a sound notion of moral responsibility and of legitimate

imputation, would harm it. Quite counterintuitively (but not for those who know Hobbes and Spinoza), Leibniz thinks that guilt and merit are conceivable only within the frame of a strict causality;

3) his commitment to the advancement of science brings him to the acceptance of mechanism in the explanation of physical events. In spite of his effort to create a higher science of dynamics, he never denies that, on the phenomonic level, everything has to—and can—be explained in terms of matter, motion and necessary causality. Whatever goes beyond this realm pertains to a deeper metaphysics but does not imply the existence of free will in any way.

Leibniz uses several different terms referring to *liberum arbitrium*: according to the purpose and to the occasion, they can be more or less pejorative but all of them mean exactly the same thing: *indifferentia pura* (mere indifference), *potestas ad utrumque* (possibility to do either one of two different actions), *potentia agendi, aut non agendi, positis omnibus ad agendum requisitis, scilicet externis* (capability of acting or of non-acting once all external requisites to act are given). All theories admitting mere indifference are equally unacceptable for Leibniz, who compares them to the Epicurean physics; the incomprehensible notion of *clinamen* shows the inconsistency of any position trying to escape a strict notion of causation. Against indeterminism Leibniz argues first of all that God's prescience makes all events (past, present and future) unfailingly determined (Leibniz 2005: 144); secondly, in all true propositions the predicate is contained in the subject, which implies that all contingent futurities are fully determined (Leibniz 2005: 143). Thirdly, he claims that causal chains are permanently and contemporarily effective, so that each state of the world depends on the ones before: "that everything is produced by a strongly determined destiny is as certain as is that three times three is nine. Destiny consists in the fact that all things depend on each other like a chain; therefore everything will unfailingly happen before it happens, as everything unfailingly has happened when it has happened" (Leibniz 1875–1890: 7, 117). Therefore, he criticizes both the Socinians, who limit God's science of future actions (Leibniz 2005: 343), and Aristotle, because of his refusal of the determination of contingent futurities (Leibniz 2005: 324). Leibniz's philosophical major principle (*nihil sine ratione*) rules out any form of hazard, be it the epicurean-lucretian assumption that a body can deviate from its trajectory without any efficient cause, "one of the most impossible of chimeras" (Leibniz 2005: 310–311), or Descartes's attribution of free will to the soul. It is true that our mind can act spontaneously, but it never fails to be harmonized with the perceptions and the movements of the body. Our soul is always determined by impressions, though often imperceptible, which prevail on other ones:

one might [...] compare the soul with a force which puts forth effort on various sides simultaneously, but which acts only at the spot where action is easiest or there is least resistance. For instance, air if it is compressed too firmly in a glass vessel will break it in order to escape. It puts forth effort at every part, but finally flings itself upon the weakest. Thus do the inclinations of the soul extend over all the goods that present themselves (Leibniz 2005: 322).

Since the universe is infinitely heterogeneous, there is always a difference, even slight, between the alternatives at the moment of the choice. Therefore, the soul always has reasons to incline toward an object more than toward another

one and never finds itself in the absolute indifference which is erroneously depicted in the famous example of Buridan's ass (Leibniz 2005: 150).

In my opinion, it was Hobbes who in particular influenced Leibniz's views on freedom, despite a remarkable difference which we will take into account later in this paper. Most scholars, however, tend to minimize, or even deny, this influence, connecting his views rather to a much wider libertarianism and even assuming his proximity to the Catholic position. In order to tackle this problem, it is necessary to look deeper into Leibniz's arguments.

2. The Ability to Do Otherwise

Since his early writings on liberty and necessity (such as *Confessio philosophi*, 1671–72), Leibniz suggests that the defense of human freedom requires an attenuation of absolute necessity. Such attenuation, nevertheless, is not a refusal of the full determination of all events and can be properly understood only through an analysis of his theory of contingency. At his time, most philosophers thought that only if we admit possibles, something which never was, never is and never will be, we will be able to avoid the danger of absolute necessity, that is Spinozism. Real freedom seems to presuppose the ability 'to do otherwise', which stems from the possibility to *be* otherwise. On this point, in his much later *Theodicy*, Leibniz explains the traditional position in a very clear way: together with understanding and spontaneity, contingency is the third requisite of a sound defense of freedom.

I have shown that freedom, *according to the definition required in the schools of theology*, consists in intelligence, which involves a clear knowledge of the object of deliberation, in spontaneity, whereby we determine, and in contingency, that is, in the exclusion of logical or metaphysical necessity. Intelligence is, as it were, the soul of freedom, and the rest is as its body and foundation (Leibniz 2005: 303; my italics).

Leibniz, however, is not a follower of the Scholastics and provides his own interpretation of contingency: his hesitation in naming it—"this indifference, this contingency, this non-necessity, if I may venture so to speak" (Leibniz 2005: 310)—is in itself a symptom of his uneasiness about the older views. First of all, he assumes that his notion of contingency "does not prevent one from having stronger inclinations towards the course one chooses; nor does it by any means require that one be absolutely and equally indifferent towards the two opposing courses" (Leibniz 2005: 310).

As well as in the *Theodicy*, in many other late writings he emphasizes the strong connection between freedom and contingency; for example, in his correspondence with Clarke, he distinguishes "liberty, contingency, spontaneity, on the one side, and absolute necessity, chance, coaction, on the other" (Leibniz 1969: 696). The rhetoric thrown against necessitarian positions, which helped him distance himself from all sort of Hobbesianism and Spinozism, actually results into the expression of libertarian views, generally refused in his private writings and hardly compatible with his own metaphysical and moral position. However, for the historian, it is not quite enough to interpret libertarianism as the disguise of a hidden theory, a stratagem conceived as a means to smooth out the religious controversies of his time (and maybe to dodge dangerous accusations). We shall therefore try to seriously take into account his recurring emphasis on the existence of alternatives as a component of human freedom; secondly, we will have to

understand whether such alternatives are implied in any effort to legitimate punishments and rewards, a goal which is indeed at the core of Leibniz's engagement with such issues. As I shall try to prove, Leibniz finds a very innovative and clever way to admit contingency without abandoning a strong determinism.

In the *Theodicy* Leibniz attributes contingency to: a) truths; b) finite substances; c) events; d) actions. It is rather obvious that contingent truths, substances and events are characterised by imperfection and limitation. A contingent truth, for example, cannot be demonstrated in an apodictic way, but only by experience or by showing that it is more reasonable than a different one. It would be quite odd that only for actions contingency should be considered a necessary requirement of freedom, which must be undeniably defined as a perfection. There are therefore good reasons to question whether contingency is seen by Leibniz, just like understanding and spontaneity, as a perfection, and one which must be attributed to God himself like the other two: "the advantage of freedom which is in the creature without doubt exists to an eminent degree in God. That must be understood in so far as it is genuinely an advantage and in so far as it presupposes no imperfection. For to be able to make a mistake and go astray is a disadvantage" (Leibniz 2005: 327). The ability to do otherwise, implied by contingency, is not a perfection; therefore, as I will try to argue, it does not explain how human actions can be free, but rather something quite different, i.e. that human actions can fail. The refusal of free will, whose definition rests on the notion of *indifference*, does not therefore imply the negation of freedom, which is a perfection both in the case of God and of human beings.

Like any other XVIIth-century philosopher, Leibniz cannot avoid considering the problem of free will not only under the viewpoint of human freedom but also under a theological aspect: it is therefore necessary to analyze the problem of whether God's actions, which are by definition free, are contingent. As Robert Adams puts it, "the view that 'God chooses what is best' is contingent must not be regarded as a thesis of Leibniz's philosophy" (Adams 1994: 42).¹ God's fundamental decree, the one which attributes a moral value to the world, is not contingent, as he claims in the *Theodicy*: "one must believe that it is not permitted to do otherwise, since it is not possible to do better" (Leibniz 2005: 197–198). What *is* contingent is the proposition that this world is the best one (Robinet 1955: 393–394). Leibniz oscillates between two different theses about the origin of the decree by which God chooses what is best: the first implies that such choice depends only on his will; the second is derived from his very essence. In the first case he assumes that, within God, there is a 'will to will', which does not imply the contingency of the decree: he simply assumes that the proposition "God wants to choose what is the most perfect" (Leibniz 1923ff: VI, 4B, 1454) is not demonstrable (Leibniz 1923ff: VI, 4B, 1454). The *regressus ad infinitum* of God's volitions, unlike in contingent propositions, does not attain identity through a progressive approximation; rather, it expresses God's spontaneity and his being *causa sui*, while the impossibility to demonstrate a contingent proposition depends on the infinity of the external conditions it implies. God's first decree, then, is the source of all that exists, contingent things included, and not a contingent action itself. In the second explanation, which affirms that God's choice is necessarily determined by his rationality, such necessity does not harm his freedom in any way, since his choice

¹ An opposite opinion in Rescher 1979: 150–152 and Curley 1976: 95–96.

conforms to a perfect rational faculty, which does not admit the ability to do otherwise.

Of course, Leibniz admits that God's choice implies a plurality of possibles: if there were no possibles before the decree, and independent from it, God's act of Creation could not be defined as good. If only *one* world were possible, his action would be the product of an impersonal and axiologically neutral being (as it happens, according to Leibniz, in Descartes's, Hobbes's and Spinoza's thought). Nothing would confer Creation a moral value, which is assured only by the fact that God excludes an infinity of (worse) possible worlds. The question entirely relies on this very point: does the existence of these 'other' possibles (the ones which God *chose* not to create) imply that his action is contingent? And that his freedom is a result of the contingency of his decree? If that were the case, as many believe, then contingency would really be a requisite of freedom even for God himself.

But there is a different option: the contingency we are dealing with pertains neither to the action nor to the agent but, rather, only to the objects of his choice: "the root of God's freedom lies in the possibility of things, i.e. contingency, by which it happens that there are innumerable things which are neither necessary nor impossible, out of which God chooses those who are the most apt to testify his glory" (Leibniz 1948: I, 298). Since God cannot be wrong, the plurality of contingent objects cannot lead him to a different choice, which would be a worse one; his action, therefore, is both free and necessary. The perfect being simply cannot choose otherwise.

The existence of alternatives is not required to justify human moral responsibility as well. First of all, in order to legitimate punishments and rewards, it is not necessary to ascertain whether the agent could have done otherwise; even in the *Theodicy*, Leibniz says that responsibility can coexist with a strong determinism: "the absolute necessity of the sequence of causes would in this matter add nothing to the infallible certainty of a hypothetical necessity" (Leibniz 2005: 160), that is of a necessity depending on external causes. The whole ethical system maintains its whole meaning even if our freedom is not exempt from constriction. There are, according to Leibniz, two kinds of justice: corrective and retributive. The first one implies that the punishments are a cause which produces a change (*amendement*) in the wrongdoer; therefore it is perfectly just to correct a person who could not have acted differently, since the punishment pushes them to act in a better way. In retributive justice (the kind of action which implies a vengeance in order to satisfy the law and the punisher), as well, there is no need to ascertain whether the wrongdoer could have done otherwise, since the goal is the reversal of the advantage gained through the bad action, without any concern for the existence of alternatives.

The fundamental thesis of Leibniz's moral and juridical system asserts that the legitimacy of punishments and rewards depends on their being a necessary means to perfect the world. Contingency, that is the possibility of the opposite, does not play any role in the definition of the minimal requirements of human responsibility, as well as in the attribution of a moral value to God's actions.

On a strictly metaphysical level Leibniz proposes two main solutions to the problem of contingency; however, neither claims that it is a perfection or that it has a role in supporting the existence of free will. The first solution considers contingent things as only hypothetically necessary: they follow from this series of things "i.e. from the harmony of things or from the existence of God" (Leibniz

2003-2005: 12) and, consequently, they are necessary *in the world which God actually created*. It is therefore futile to defend free will by asserting that, in a different world, it would be possible to do otherwise. Leibniz's notion of individuation, and in particular his notion of 'complete concept', implies that the alternative does not concern the same subject, but rather a different one, which exists only in God's mind and which he decided not to create (Leibniz 1875-1890: II, 54).

The second major solution, which he had elaborated ever since *Generales inquisitiones de analysi notionum et veritatum* (1686), claims that contingent propositions cannot be demonstrated because the process of resolving the predicate in the subject is endless (Leibniz 1923ff: VI, 4A, 763). Not even God himself could demonstrate a contingent truth or the existence of a contingent being in a finite number of steps (Leibniz 1923ff: VI, 4B, 1656). There is then no way to derive free will from any of Leibniz's explanations of contingency. Moreover, as we have seen, contingency is neither sufficient nor necessary to impute responsibility to man (Mugnai 1995: 290); responsibility is guaranteed more than enough by the exercise of a conscious will, "wherever it may come from" (Leibniz 1923ff: VI, 1, 542). The foundation of free will on contingency is equally inapplicable to God, who has a perfect intuitive knowledge of the inherence of the predicate to the subject and could not, therefore, make any different connection. If we seek free will inside contingency, the problem cannot be solved. It must therefore be concluded that its very notion is excluded by the logical, ethical and ontological principles of Leibniz's philosophy. It remains then to understand why Leibniz tenaciously tries to give contingency a role in the explanation of man's actions; but, before that, we must present his views about some positions which he deems much more erroneous and dangerous than strict determinism.

3. Pessimistic Theology, Fatalism and Weakness of the Will

The necessity which, in Leibniz's thought, rules human actions must not be confused with the "natural necessity to sin without the succour of divine grace" (Leibniz 2005: 59) that many theologians derive from "the original corruption of the human race, coming from the first sin" (Leibniz 2005: 59). Against the harshest and most pessimistic positions of the Augustinian theology he claims that necessity is compatible with moral improvement; even more, it is necessary in order to understand it. Even Hobbes "[has] shown sufficiently that necessity would not overthrow all the rules of divine or human justice, and would not prevent altogether the exercise of this virtue" (Leibniz 2005: 161). The 'attenuation' of necessity does not imply free will or a looser notion of causation but, rather, the refusal of the idea that Adam's fault has introduced a necessity *to sin*, a position not less dangerous than Spinoza's thought. It is therefore evident that the reasons of his strong opposition to 'absolute necessity' do not lie in a more 'libertarian' view but in the exigency to admit that God acts *sub ratione boni*, not only *sub ratione perfecti*; if it were not the case, punishments would be morally wrong and God could not be distinguished from the tyrannical evil principle of the Manichaeans. Through his theory, Leibniz aims first of all at rejecting the theology of absolute omnipotence, which depicts a God whose decrees do not follow any understandable moral rule. Since Hobbes is often very close to this position, for example in his explanation of Job's book, Leibniz's opposition to his view is perfectly sincere, but does *not* concern determinism.

And how bitterly did Job expostulate with God, that being just, he should yet be afflicted with so many calamities? God himselfe with open voyce resolved this difficulty in the case of Job, and hath confirmed his Right by arguments drawn not from Jobs sinne, but from his own power [...]. Where wast thou (sayes he) when I laid the foundation of the earth, &c [...]. God by his Right might have made men subject to diseases, and death, although they had never sinned, even as he hath made the other animalls mortall, and sickly, although they cannot sinne (Hobbes 1651: Chapter 15).

A second result of his strategy is the absolute refusal of fatalism: this theory assumes that events happen because 'it is written' (in the stars, maybe) that they must happen. Leibniz claims that our actions are determined by multiple causes, one of which is precisely what we do. As well as Hobbes, he flatly denies that something happens 'no matter what we want': on the contrary, our will is a part of the causal chain which leads to this or that event. He can therefore refuse the 'lazy argument', according to which it is useless to make any effort since everything is already decided; they who behave this way forget that their laziness is exactly one of the causes that leads to their misery. The self-justification of the fatalists is a philosophical mistake and a self-fulfilling prophecy, since it neglects the role they play in their own course of life.

In Leibniz's opinion, the refusal of free will is necessary to explain responsibility: our moral choices are guaranteed by the joined presence of reason and spontaneity. Against the theorists of the inemendable corruption of man, he claims that "the fullest given use of reason" (Leibniz 2003–2005: 17) allows to constrain us 'by things'²—definitely not by a mere act of will—to recognize what is good and to push us toward it. Man's responsibility, and consequently the justice of punishments and rewards, is admissible *only* in a deterministic frame: if there were a free will, instead of a necessary connection between causes and effects, men "would not worry themselves about punishments and rewards and would not be led toward good through these means, which would consequently be useless" (Leibniz 1948: II, 483).

Freedom is therefore a conscious use of reason, or *spontaneitas rationalis* (Leibniz 1923ff: VI, 4B, 1380), and presupposes determinism: "the biggest perfection of man consists not merely in that he acts freely but still more in that he acts with reason. Better, these are both the same thing, for the less anyone's use of reason is disturbed by the impulsion of the affections, the freer one is" (Leibniz 1969: 388). They who grant us the absurd privilege of pure indifference, as if we were *entia a se*, detached from the world and free from the regular succession of causes and effects, forget that our actions would be unpredictable, thus making us become anomalies incapable of learning without any possibility to learn from the past and to amend ourselves. On this point Leibniz leans on some of his most important authors: from Lorenzo Valla, Luther and Calvin he draws the notion of a strict predeterminism, from the 'modern' Hobbes, the idea of a world where

² "O therefore foolish are we who have scorned the privileges of Nature and God, we demand unknown chimeras and are not contented by the use of reason—the true basis of freedom. Unless it happens from an irrational power we do not think ourselves to be sufficiently free, as if it were not the highest freedom to make use of one's own intellect and will in the most perfect way, and for the intellect to be constrained by things to recognize true goods, and for the will to be constrained by the intellect to embrace them" (Leibniz 2003–2005: 18; my italics).

everything happens because of the necessary effects of God's decree, including not only physical events but also human volitions.³ We should not then be surprised to find in an early writing a definition of free will which is perfectly adherent to the views of the English philosopher: "he, who can do what he wants and can want what he finds good, has free will enough" (Leibniz 1923ff: VI, 1, 545). Freedom depends on the apparent goodness of the things and on the conditions which present themselves to our will: "to uphold the privilege of free will it is sufficient for us to be placed at a crossroads of life, so that we cannot do something unless we will and we cannot will something unless we believe it to be good" (Leibniz 2003-2005: 17). Will cannot be determined without an *objective* reason, in an erratic way: I can move my left or my right hand, but there are undoubtedly "subtle reasons" (Leibniz 2003-2005: 17) by which I will choose one of them, maybe a physical disposition or, simply, the pleasure to contradict what others predicted.

Medea's famous line "I see and approve the better course, but I follow the worse", when intended as an example of acting against the last judgment of the intellect about the goodness of the choice, is absurd: "she sees the injustice of the deed when she slaughters her own children, but still experiences pleasure from the vengeance as if this were a greater good than the crime was evil" (Leibniz 2003-2005: 18). There is then neither perversion nor weakness of the will (*akrasia*), and the bad actions are as deliberate and causally determined (though wrongly) as the good ones.

Free will is a "manifest illusion [...], a remnant of the delusional philosophy of the past [...], an easy way out that no reasonable man will ever accept" (Leibniz 1923ff: VI, 3, 150-151): there is no 'influence' through which the mind can modify the motion of the body, which follows a conservation rule concerning not only its quantity, as Descartes thinks, but also its direction:

M. Descartes wished to compromise and to make a part of the body's action dependent upon the soul. He believed in the existence of a rule of Nature to the effect, according to him, that the same quantity of movement is conserved in bodies. He deemed it not possible that the influence of the soul should violate this law of bodies, but he believed that the soul notwithstanding might have power to change the direction of the movements that are made in the body; much as a rider, though giving no force to the horse he mounts, nevertheless controls it by guiding that force in any direction he pleases. But as that is done by means of the bridle, the bit, the spurs and other material aids, it is conceivable how that can be; there are, however, no instruments such as the soul may employ for this result, nothing indeed either in the soul or in the body, that is, either in thought or in the mass, which may serve to explain this change of the one by the other. In a word, that the soul should change the quantity of force and that it should change the line of direction, both these things are equally inexplicable (Leibniz 2005: 156).

4. The Role of Contingency in Leibniz's Account of Freedom

The presence of contingency in Leibniz's theory of *human* actions must be intended quite differently than as a requisite for freedom: the possibility of the

³ Hobbes's notion of causality, as it is presented for example in the ninth chapter of *De corpore*, is reposed by Leibniz, under the name of *ratio plena*, in the *Confessio naturae contra atheistas* (Leibniz 1923ff: VI, 1, 490).

opposite is the frame in which our choices are made. It is not a property of the agent but, rather, of the object of the choice. Freedom depends on the spontaneous use of reason and it is a perfection both in God and in us. Contingency aims to explain the difference between real and only apparent reasons, that is the difference between God's and man's actions.⁴ By admitting alternatives, Leibniz aims to emphasize the confusion of the context in which the actions of finite beings take place, that is the possibility of mistake. Human actions are always contingent (given the finiteness of our understanding and the infinite complexity of the world) and sometimes free, when they come from spontaneity and a right understanding. God's decrees, on the contrary, are always free, since his intellect is flawless.

Our reason cannot escape necessity but can fail to understand it, because of the plurality of the objects our intellect has to process: when we are in front of a choice, "our soul is always carried where there is more objective reality. But if those realities are many and minute, it can be a danger for our soul and its happiness. We may call this situation *dissipatio animi*" (Leibniz 1923ff: VI, 4C, 2724). When he claims that sin depends on a lack of attention (Leibniz 1948: I, 365), he thinks of the wrong belief that we could act otherwise, given by the too many alternatives in front of us; dissipation, then, is another aspect of contingency, the most dangerous for our salvation.

Contingency can only be defined in a negative way: contingent truths, as we saw, cannot be demonstrated, because they depend on infinite external conditions. Contingent beings do not have in themselves the reason to exist and are marked by a creatural limitation: "quaecunque igitur veritas analyseos est incapax demonstrarique ex rationibus suis non potest, sed ex sola divina mente rationem ultimam ac certitudinem capit; Necessaria non est. Talesque sunt omnes quas voco Veritates Facti. Atque haec est *radix contingentiae*, nescio an quatenus explicata a quoquam" (Leibniz 1923ff: VI, 4A, 912).

A quite odd way to present this theory is given by Leibniz's analogy with the incommensurables: "in a certain sense, contingent truths are to necessary truths as 'blind' ratios (i.e. of incommensurable numbers) are to the proper and expressible ratios of commensurable numbers" (Leibniz 1923ff: VI, 4B, 1516). In his *Dialogue effectif* Leibniz explains that the impossibility to exactly express such numbers is an imperfection, a participation to Nothingness: "it is evident that this irregularity of incommensurable lines stems from their very essence [...] and cannot be ascribed to God; it is also evident that this incommensurability is an evil that God cannot avoid" (Leibniz 1948: I, 368). Their imperfection does not derive from God's act of creation but predates it: in God's mind there are already contingent beings, whose essence does not depend on His will.

Contingency is a condition halfway between what is determined by itself and the absolutely indetermined, i.e. Nothingness. The freedom of contingent beings is guaranteed by what, in them, comes in a necessary way from God's decree,

⁴ "Je voy qu'il y a des gens qui s'imaginent qu'on se determine quelques fois pour le parti le moins chargé, que Dieu choisit quelques fois le moindre bien tout considéré, et que l'homme choisit quelques fois sans sujet et contre toutes ses raisons, dispositions et passions; enfin qu'on choisit quelques fois sans qu'il y ait aucune raison qui determine le choix. Mais c'est ce que je tiens pour faux et absurde, puisque c'est un des plus grands principes du bon sens, que rien n'arrive jamais sans cause ou raison determinante. Ainsi lorsque Dieu choisit, c'est par la raison du meilleur; lorsque l'homme choisit, ce sera le parti qui l'aura frappé le plus" (Leibniz 1875–1890: III, 402).

while their possibility of being mistaken is the effect of their limitation. Contingency, then, is the answer to the great question “Unde malum?”. In the 1670’s Leibniz uses binary calculus as an analogy to understand the duplicity of finite beings, the 1’s being the perfection of what is necessary and the 0’s the imperfection of Nothingness. Contingency is the combination of negative and positive; as Fichant says, “la négation est [...] l’autre face, insaisissable, de la contingence, et son origine est pour nous aussi inaccessible que celle de la contingence [...]. Limitation originale des possibles, mondes possibles qui n’existent pas, tiennent lieu dans la philosophie de Leibniz de la *négativité absente*” (Fichant 1998: 119).

The question about the origin of error and of evil can be answered only by a theory of contingency: dependence from external conditions, evil, privation of perfection, participation to Nothingness, accidentality are all aspects of the ontological condition of contingent beings (Leibniz 1948: I, 362).

The negative acception of contingency is predictably left in the shadow in his polemics against atheists, materialists and conservative theologians, so much that a reader of the *Theodicy* can easily miss it. Leibniz has very good reasons to insist on the ‘coexistence’ of freedom and contingency, i.e. on the most libertarian aspects of his philosophy. The cynical way used by Hobbes to describe his own determinism, as well as the harshness of many theologians (both Reformed and Catholics—as for example Malebranche), who identify necessity with the damnation fallen on humanity after Adam’s sin, lead Leibniz toward an emphasis on less rigorous positions. Nevertheless, his whole philosophical system, with all his flaws and oscillations, points in a wholly different direction: freedom lies in the correct knowledge of good and in the determination to achieve it, without any real power to change the course of things via a magical power of the soul.

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