

# Freedom and Possibility

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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In God everything is spontaneous.

It can hardly be doubted that in every human person there is the freedom to do what he wills to do. A volition is an attempt to act of which we are conscious. An act necessarily follows from a volition ·to do it· and the ability ·to do it·.

When all the conditions *for* willing to do something are matched by equally strong conditions *against* willing to do it, no volition occurs. Rather there is indifference [here = 'equilibrium']. Thus, even if someone accepts that all the conditions requisite for acting are in place, he won't act if ·equal· contrary conditions obtain. ·That's one way for a person to not-act on reasons that he has. Here is another·: a person may be unmoved by reasons through sheer forgetfulness, i.e. by turning his mind away from them. So it is indeed possible to be unmoved by reasons.

Unless this proposition is accepted: *There is nothing without reason.* That is: *In every ·true· proposition there is a connection between the subject and the predicate, i.e. every ·true· proposition can be proved a priori.*

There are two primary propositions: one is the principle of necessary things, that

•whatever implies a contradiction is false,

and the other is the principle of contingent things, that

•whatever is more perfect or has more reason is true. All truths of metaphysics—indeed all truths that are absolutely necessary, such as those of logic, arithmetic, geometry, and the like—rest on the •former principle, for someone who denies one of those truths can always be shown that his denial implies a contradiction. All contingent truths rest on the •latter principle. (I mean truths that are *in themselves*

contingent. They may be necessary-given-what-God-wills.)

So the principle of •contradiction is the basis for all truths about possibilities or essences, and ·all truths about· a thing's impossibility or its necessity (that is, the impossibility of its contrary). And the principle of •perfection is the basis for all truths about contingent things, that is, about what exists.

God is the only being whose existence is not contingent. The reason why some particular contingent thing x exists, and other possible things don't, shouldn't be sought in x's definition alone. If x's definition *did* explain its existence, its nonexistence would imply a contradiction; and those other things wouldn't be possible, contrary to our hypothesis. For the reason why x exists and those others don't, we must look to how x compares with the others; the reason is that x is more perfect than the others ·that are its rivals for existence·.

My over-riding thought here is a notion of possibility and necessity according to which some things •are not necessary and •don't actually exist but nevertheless •are possible. It follows from this that a reason that always brings it about that a free mind chooses one thing rather than another (whether that reason derives from the perfection of a thing, as it does in God, or from our imperfection) doesn't take away our freedom.

This also shows what distinguishes God's free actions from his necessary actions. ·Here is one example of each kind of action·. It is necessary that •God loves himself, for that can be demonstrated from the definition of God. But it can't be demonstrated ·from that definition· that •God makes whatever is most perfect, for there's nothing contradictory in the proposition that he doesn't. If there were, it wouldn't be possible for him to make something less perfect, and that is contrary to the hypothesis ·that there are non-existent possibilities·.

Moreover, this conclusion derives from the notion of existence, for only the most perfect exists. Let there be two possible things, A and B, such that necessarily one ·and only one· of them exists; and let's assume that A is more perfect than B. Then we can certainly explain why A should exist rather than B—this is a basis for us to predict which of the two will exist. Indeed, A's existing rather than B's doing so can be *demonstrated*, by which I mean that it can be *rendered certain* from the nature of the case. Now, if •being certain were the same as •being necessary then it would also be necessary for A to exist. But A's existence has merely what I call 'hypothetical necessity', ·meaning that

it is necessary that: **if** God always chooses what is most perfect, **then** A exists.

Set that alongside the proposition that

it is necessary that: A exists,

in order to be clear that they are completely different·. If it were *absolutely* and not just *hypothetically*· necessary that A exists, then B—which we have stipulated cannot exist if A exists—would ·be absolutely impossible, i.e.· would imply a contradiction, which is contrary to our stipulation ·that A and B are both possible·.

So we must hold that anything that has some degree of perfection is possible, and anything that is more perfect than its opposite actually exists—not because of its own nature but because of God's general resolve to create the more perfect. Perfection (or essence) is an urge for existence; it implies existence, not necessarily but through there not being a more perfect thing that prevents it from existing. All truths of physics are of this sort; for example, when we say that 'a body persists in the speed with which it begins', we mean '... if nothing gets in its way'.

God produces the best—not •necessarily, but because •he wills to do so. If you ask 'Does God will by necessity?'

I ask you to explain what you mean by 'necessity', spelling it out in detail so as to make clear what exactly you are asking. For example, you might be asking:

Does God will •by necessity or does he will •freely?  
that is:

Does God will •because of his nature or •because of his will?

My answer to *that* is of course that God can't will voluntarily. •That is, it can't be the case that whenever God wills to do something, it is because he has willed to will to do that thing; because that would involve willing to will . . . to infinity. Rather, we must say that it is God's nature that leads him to will the best. 'So he wills by necessity?' you say, •implying that I am demeaning God. I reply with St. Augustine that such necessity is blessed. 'But surely it follows from this that things exist by necessity.' How so? Because the nonexistence of what God wills to exist implies a contradiction? I deny that this proposition is absolutely true. It entails that what God doesn't will is not possible, •and I deny *that*. For things remain possible, even if God doesn't select them. Given that God doesn't will  $x$  to exist, it is still possible for  $x$  to exist, because  $x$ 's nature is such that  $x$  could exist if God were to will it to exist. •You will object: 'But God can't will it to exist.' Granted; yet  $x$  remains •possible in its nature even if it is not •possible with respect to the divine will, since we have defined as 'possible in its nature' anything that *in itself* implies no contradiction, even if its coexistence with God can in some way be said to imply a contradiction.

We'll need to use unambiguous meanings for words if we are to avoid every kind of absurd locution. •I start with the meaning I give to 'possible'. I say:

a *possible* thing is something with some essence or reality, that is, something that can be clearly understood.

For an illustrative example, let us pretend that nothing exactly pentagonal ever did or will exist in nature. A pentagon would nevertheless remain possible. However, •if we are to maintain that pentagons are possible, we should give some reason why no pentagon ever did or will exist. The reason is simply the fact that •the pentagon is incompatible with other things that got into existence ahead of it because they include more perfection, i.e. involve more reality, than •it does. •Returning to your previous line of attack, you will say: 'So •according to you it is necessary that the pentagon doesn't exist.' I agree, if what you mean is that

The proposition *No pentagon ever did or will exist* is necessary.

But what you say is false if it is understood to mean that

The timeless proposition *No pentagon exists* is necessary,

because I deny that this •timeless• proposition can be demonstrated. The pentagon is not absolutely impossible, and doesn't imply a contradiction, even if it follows from the harmony of things that a pentagon can't find a place among real things.

The following argument is valid (•its second premise is the one we have been pretending to be true•):

If a pentagon exists, it is more perfect than other things.

A pentagon is not more perfect than other things.

Therefore, a pentagon does not exist.

But the premises don't imply that it is impossible for a pentagon to exist.

This is best illustrated by analogy with imaginary roots in algebra, •such as  $\sqrt{-1}$ . For  $\sqrt{-1}$  does involve some notion, though it can't be pictured. . . . But there is a great difference between

(1) problems that are insoluble because a solution requires imaginary roots

and

(2) problems that are insoluble because of their absurdity.

An example of (2): *Find a number which multiplied by itself is 9, and which added to 5 makes 9.* Such a number implies a contradiction, for it must be both 3 and 4, implying that  $3 = 4$ , a part equals the whole. An example of (1): *Find a number  $x$  such that  $x^2 + 9 = 3x$ .* Someone trying to solve this could certainly never show that the solution would imply any such absurdity as that the whole equals its part, but he *could* show that such a number cannot be designated because the only solutions to the equation are imaginary roots.

To accompany the pentagon example, I now offer another one, in which I use 'a real line' to mean 'a line that really bounds some body'. If God had decreed that there should be no real line that was incommensurable with other real lines, it wouldn't follow that the existence of an incommensurable line implies a contradiction, even if because of the principle of perfection God couldn't have made such a line.

All this removes the difficulties about the foreknowledge of future contingents. For God, who foresees the future reasons or causes for some things to exist and others not to, has certain foreknowledge of future contingents through their causes. He formulates propositions about them that are

necessary, given that the state of the world has been settled once and for all,

that is,

necessary, given the harmony of things.

But the propositions about future contingents are not necessary in the absolute sense, as mathematical propositions are. This is the best answer to the difficulty about

how, if future contingents are not necessary, God can have foreknowledge of them.

It involves us in saying that it is possible for the imperfect rather than the more perfect to exist. You may object: 'It is impossible for something to exist that God doesn't will to exist.' I deny that something that isn't going to exist is thereby impossible in itself. So the proposition *What God doesn't will to exist doesn't exist* should be accepted as true, but its necessity should be denied.

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[Near the end of this paper Leibniz has an incomplete sentence which he probably meant to turn into something saying:] The only existential proposition that is absolutely necessary is *God exists*.

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[Early in the paper, Leibniz mentions 'indifference' or equilibrium. He wrote the following note in the margin about that:] If complete indifference is required for freedom, then there is scarcely ever a free act, since I think it hardly ever happens that everything on both sides is equal. For even if the *reasons* happen to be equal, the *passions* won't be. So why should we argue about circumstances that do not arise? I don't think examples can be found in which the will chooses—that is, where it arbitrarily breaks a deadlock by *just choosing*—because there is always some reason for choosing one alternative rather than the other.

The followers of Aquinas place freedom in the power of the will, which stands above every finite good in such a way that the will can resist it. And so, in order to have indifference of will, they seek indifference of intellect. They think that necessity is consistent with freedom in God—for example the free necessity of God's loving himself. But (they hold) with respect to creatures God does not decide with necessity. . . .