

Leibniz on essence and existence

Philipp Blum, Leibniz in Ligerz, June 28, 2018

The problem of contingency

Two crucial ingredients: containment-theory of truth; complete-concept notion of individuals.

Pro-contingency motivation: free will; counter-contingency motivation: universal demonstrability of truth claims.

Couturat, Leibniz's Logic, 1901: 'infinite analysis' analysis of contingency.

Russell, Critical Exposition, 1900: existence-based reading of contingency. Couturat's objection to Russell: Russell confuses Leibniz with Kant, claiming the syntheticity of the existence predicate.

[Adams \(1977\)](#) distinguishes the following accounts:

1. contingency by the criterion of infinite analysis (original Leibnizian; Adams 1977, Hacking 1974, Mates 1986, Rescher 2003). But the analogy with math is partial; and it invites an epistemic reading of truth, relying on the mode of access.
2. contingency based on the difference between the complete concept and the set of the essential properties of the individual, the "increment-view" (interpretation rather than original Leibnizian: Grimm 1970, Ishiguro 1979). But this conflicts with Leibnizian superessentialism (Mondadori, Mates, Garber, Cover/Hawthorne).
3. contingency based on the tensed view of the temporal features of individuals (can be backed, but still an interpretation: Woolhouse 1982, Mondadori 1975); Woolhouse distinguishes conceptual openness of the future from its empirical closedness (script is written, but can be enacted in different ways).
4. contingency as the lack of definition for concrete individuals (interpretation: C.D. Broad 1949). Would have to be updated to fit with serious essentialism à la Lowe, Fine, Matthews.
5. contingency in the sense of Leibnizian possibility, 'things possible in their own nature' (Adams 1977, Mates 1968, E. Vailati 1986, G. Lloyd 1978). But this conflicts with Leibniz's Platonism, the view that worlds are made up of individual concepts, not possible individuals – so possibility is only de dicto, sub ratione generalitatis (response to Arnauld's objection), but the complete concept "reaches the individual" (Correspondence 1969: 335).
6. contingency of empirical existence (Leibnizian, see Russell 1990, 1949, Curley 1972, Rescher 1952, 2003). Best one: Leibniz says that "creatures are contingent [iff] their existence does not follow from their essence" but also distinguishes in "Necessary and Contingent Truths" between the creation of the members of the series and the creation of the series itself. Existence "comes from an extrinsic principle", not from a definition (Grua 288). So Curley is right that existence for Leibniz is an "extrinsic denomination", like position.

Being possible in its own nature

The threat of determinism and of theological determinism

Take Eve in front of the apple. She could not have taken it – that’s why her taking it is attributable to her as her action, she is responsible for it and can be praised or blamed for her action. Conversely, God is in his right to punish or reward her for her action, but is not himself responsible for it in the way Eve is, for taking the apple is Eve’s action and not God’s. To make sense of these two claims constitutes the problems of determinism, and of theological determinism in particular:

Eve’s taking the apple cannot be necessitated by happenings outside her control, be they logically prior and metaphysically binding divine decrees or temporally and causally prior natural laws.

God’s letting Eve take the apple must be a free action (God’s omnipotence), but one he is neither morally nor causally responsible for (God’s benevolence, Eve’s freedom).

The two desiderata are in tension: whatever control or causal autonomy we ascribe to Eve to secure her authorship of what happened in Eden, the more of such autonomy we are inclined to attribute to God. If Eve really is solely responsible for her sin, then God’s omnipotence seems curtailed; if she is not, and God is partly responsible too, then God’s benevolence is put into question.

Leibniz’s answer to the problem was to insist that the world in which Eve sins and humans are expelled from paradise *is*, contrary appearances notwithstanding, the best of all possible worlds – but not because it is the only possible world, but because God freely chose it over the world where Eve would have resisted temptation. There are different problematic claims here:

Eve’s autonomy Eve could not have taken the apple, even though her taking the apple is part of what makes this world the world it is and it not contingent that this world is the actual one, given that it is the best and God necessarily chooses the best.

God’s autonomy God could have chosen (actualised) another possible world, even though this world (where Eve sins) is the best world and it is not compatible with God’s benevolence to choose any other world than the best.

Contingency down here: possibility *in se*

I’m following [Adams \(1994: ch. 1\)](#) in sketching Leibniz’s solution to these two problems.

Eve’s choice is free and her action hers because a world (and an Eve) where she does not do it is internally consistent, i.e. not self-contradictory, i.e. because neither Eve nor the world, nor indeed God, have an essence that logically entails that she sins.

For God to be free in his creation of the world, he must be able to choose among several alternatives:

What then is the ultimate reason of the divine will? The divine intellect. For God wills those things that he understands to be best and most harmonious, and selects them, as it were, from an infinite number of all possibles. (A II, i,117f. / L 146f.)

Though his choice is free, its outcome is determined:

Since God is the most perfect mind, however, it is impossible for him not to be affected by the most perfect harmony, and thus to be necessitated to the best by the very ideality of things. (A II, i,117f. / L 146f.)

We have a direct clash between two divine attributes: God's benevolence requires his choice to be guided by what is best; God's omnipotence requires a sense of possibility according to which he could also choose what is not best. The solution is to understand "guided" as weaker than "necessitated", but still strong enough to count for rational control. The way this solution is implemented, according to Adams (1994: ch. 1), is to distinguish between two senses of possibility:

On the hypothesis of the divine will choosing the best, or operating most perfectly, certainly nothing but these things could have been produced; but according to the very nature of things considered in itself [per se], things could have been produced otherwise. (G I,149 / L 204)

Possible worlds that are less than perfect cannot exist (sense one) in the sense that they could not have been chosen by God (God being supremely good), but they still can exist (sense two) and so are, as (merely) possible worlds, objects for God's choice, in that they are internally possible in the sense of not containing a contradiction.

The contrast between 'possible in respect to the divine will' and 'possible in its own nature' is clearly drawn in the following passage:

But we must say that God wills the best by his own nature. Therefore he wills necessarily, you will say. I shall say with St. Augustine that that necessity is happy. But surely it follows from this that things exist necessarily. How so? Because a contradiction is implied by the nonexistence of that which God wills to exist? I deny that that proposition is absolutely true. Otherwise those things which God does not will would not be possible. For they remain possible, even if they are not chosen by God. It is possible indeed for even that to exist which God does not will to exist, because it would be able to exist of its own nature if God willed that it exist. But God cannot will that it exist. I agree; yet it remains possible in its own nature, even if it is not possible in respect to the divine will. For we have defined possible in its own nature as that which does not imply a contradiction in itself even if its coexistence with God can be said in some way to imply a contradiction. [...]

Therefore I say: that is possible, of which there is some essence or reality, or which can be distinctly understood. [...] If God had decreed that no real line must be found which should be incommensurable with other real lines (I call real a line that actually bounds some body), it would not therefore follow that the existence of an incommensurable line implies a contradiction, even if God, from the principle of perfection, could not fail to ordain in this way. (Gr 28gf./AG 20-22)

I find it very interesting that Leibniz solves the problem of God being constrained by what is possible by distinguishing between what is possible for him and what is possible for his creation: constraints arising from the former (that he must choose what is best because he is supremely good) do not limit his power, but are constitutive of it, while constraints arising from the latter are themselves created: God is the ground not just of actuality, but of inner possibility as well because to be "possible in its own nature" *is* being such that "it would be able to exist of its own nature if God willed that it exist".

Here, Leibniz solves two of Descartes' problems in one sweep: (1) God's power is not limited by his will and intellect being the way they are (i.e. such that he cannot fail to choose the best), because what is possible in its own nature (and hence such that God could choose to actualise it) itself depends on God – it is possible because God could choose it (and not the other way round).¹ (2) But it does not follow, from something being

1. In this interpretation, I differ from Adams who says: "The possibility of those other worlds does not depend on the possibility of God's choosing them." (1994: 12–13) To give precedence in the order of creation to 'external' possibility over 'internal possibility' may solve a problem Adams sees for his ascribing to Leibniz an "account of contingency in terms of things possible in their own nature"

impossible in this first sense (being such that it could not have been chosen by God, because it is less than perfect) that it is altogether impossible (impossible in its own nature, implying a contradiction), because whether or not it implies a contradiction is to be determined not absolutely (by determining whether it is *de facto* impossible, given that God exists), but by reasoning *per impossibile*, i.e. by abstracting from God's existence (even though the latter is necessary as well).

The two claims reinforce each other: it is because of (2) that God's choice in (1) is not just possible but free; and it is because of (2) that (1) does not exclude the intelligibility and praiseworthiness of God's choice.

Adams thinks that the distinction between inner and outer possibility requires a distinction between two notions of essences: the customary understanding of Leibnizian essences takes them to encompass all truths, from a certain perspective; in addition, Adams holds, we also need a narrower understanding:

The theory requires a relatively narrow understanding of the nature, essence, or concept of a thing or a world. The essence of a substance, in the narrow sense, contains information about such things as the perceptions the substance has, and perhaps the geometrical configurations and motions expressed by those perceptions, and about the substance's powers and tendencies to produce perceptions in itself – but not about other substances. [footnote omitted] It is in this sense that Leibniz can say, “That is possible of which there is some essence,” even if God could not choose to actualize it (Gr 28g). Necessity as well as possibility can be viewed as internal to essences in the narrow sense; indeed, what Leibniz means by necessary existence is precisely existence that follows from the essence of a substance without consideration of the essence of any other substance (1994: 13–14)

But is ‘inner possibility’ really a type of possibility at all? The following argument suggests otherwise:

P₁ It is necessary that God chooses a world where Eve sins.

P₂ It is necessary that if God chooses a world where Eve sins, then Eve sins.

C It is necessary that Eve sins.

Leibniz says that **C** is only hypothetically, but not absolutely necessary. But what can that mean? In *The Philosopher's Confession*, Leibniz writes:

I reply that it is false that whatever follows from what is necessary through itself is necessary through itself. From truths, to be sure, nothing follows that is not true. Yet since a particular [conclusion] can follow from purely universal [premises], as in [the syllogistic figures] Darapti and Felapton, why may not something contingent, or necessary on the hypothesis of something else, follow from something that is necessary through itself? [...]

In this place we call *necessary* only that which is necessary *through itself* – that is, which has the reason of its existence and truth within itself. Such are the Geometrical truths, and of existing things only God. The others, which follow from the supposition of this series of things – that is, from the harmony of things – or from the Existence of God, are *contingent through themselves* and only hypothetically necessary. (A VI, iii, 127-128, interpolations (and quote) from Adams (1994: 17))

(1994: 18). When Leibniz says that “the possibilities of individuals or of contingent truths contain in their concept the possibility of their causes, namely of the free decisions of God” (LA 51) and that “for conceiving of the essence of [a substance], the concept of a possible cause is required” (G II, 225 / L 524), he may be talking exclusively about divine causes: what is internally possible is externally possible even though what's externally necessary is not yet internally necessary. This is consistent because ‘externally possible’ here means ‘creatable by God’ and ‘externally necessary’ does not mean ‘such that it has to be created by God’ but only something weaker, ‘such that it is created by God’. For Leibniz, as for his German rationalist followers, God is the ground not just of actuality, but of possibility as well.

It is not entirely clear, however, how this is supposed to help with the argument for **(C)**. The argument has the following form:

$$\frac{\Box p \quad \Box(p \rightarrow q)}{\Box q} \quad \Box\text{-MP}$$

This is a valid inference even in the weakest normal logic **K**. What premise is Leibniz denying? His analogy with Darapti and Felapton may provide a clue. An instance of the valid syllogistic figure Darapti is the following:

$$\frac{\text{All swine are dirty. (SaM) \quad \text{All dirty things are happy. (MaP)}}{\text{There is a happy swine. (SiP)}}$$

While this inference – with two universal premises and a particular, existentially committing, conclusion – is a valid syllogism, its counterpart in classic predicate logic is not:

$$\frac{\forall x(Sx \rightarrow Dx) \quad \forall x(Dx \rightarrow Hx)}{\exists x(Sx \wedge Hx)}$$

The reason is that the premises, both universally quantified, are true in the empty domain and in domains that lack both swines and dirty things; the conclusion, on the other hand, is not true in such domains.

Classical syllogistic, on the other hand, makes what has been called ‘existence presuppositions’, i.e. operates only with predicates that have at least one instance. This assumption, as Leibniz rightly observes, may be taken to undermine the validity of \Box -MP. Let us consider the following inference:

$$\frac{\Box(\text{All men are rational animals (SaM)}) \quad \Box(\text{All rational animals can laugh. (MaP)})}{\Box(\text{Some man can laugh. (SiP)}}$$

From an Aristotelian perspective, the premises may well be taken to be true: while the first premise states what men essentially are, the second notes a necessary feature, a proprium, of rationality. The conclusion, however, may well be taken to be false, at least in a certain sense of “ \Box ”: the capacity to laugh pertains to humans only accidentally, in virtue of the fact that they are rational.

If something like this underlies Leibniz’s qualification of \Box -MP, Russell was partly right in his emphasis on the rôle of the syntheticity of existence for Leibniz’s solution of the problem of contingency.

Though Leibniz accepts **C**, he plays down its importance: that Eve sins is not *sui generis* necessary, but only necessary on the hypothesis of God’s existence. That Eve sins is a necessary, but not an essential truth, for Eve’s being some other way (not sinning) is something we can understand:

“...there is a *hypothetical necessity* when a thing’s being *some other way* can indeed be understood through itself, but it is necessarily *this way*, nonessentially [*per accidens*], on account of other things outside itself already presupposed” (Gr 27of., Conversation with Steno, quoted in Adams (1994: 18))

Adams (1994: 18-19) spots here a tension with a version of the **PSR**: if the **PSR** requires that effects that are possible-in-se must have possible causes, i.e. can be brought about; this would collapse the distinction if it requires that anything that is possible-in-se (e.g.: worlds that are not the best) could be brought about by God. This would contradict the claim made in the *Confessio* in the following way. That not all necessary properties are essential (such that their privation cannot be conceived) means that not all conceivable (accidental) properties are possible:

For not all of the things we can conceive can therefore be produced, on account of other, superior things with which they are incompatible. (G 1,143 / L 199)

The distinction between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ possibility may help us explain the contingency of the world (and of Eve’s sinning), but it does not help us to explain the contingency of God’s choices, for the two notions of possibility (distinguished by whether God’s existence is presupposed when establishing consistency) coincide for God. The solution, as we shall see in section , is that there is another way for God to be the reason for the possibility of *w* (some world, say, worse than the best) than by being such that he could create it.

Contingency for God: what the PSR is about

Leibniz developed his account of the freedom God enjoys in his creation in opposition to Spinoza:

Spinoza [...] appears to have explicitly taught a blind necessity, having denied to the author of things understanding and will, and imagining that good and perfection relate only to us and not to him. It is true that Spinoza’s opinion on this subject is somewhat obscure. [...] Nevertheless, as far as one can understand him, he acknowledges no goodness in God, properly speaking, and he teaches that all things exist by the necessity of the Divine nature, without God making any choice. We will not amuse ourselves here refuting an opinion so bad, and indeed so inexplicable. Our own is founded on the nature of the possibles – that is to say, of the things that do not imply any contradiction. (T 173)

To Spinoza’s ‘blind’ necessity, Leibniz opposes his ‘moral’ one: God’s necessity to do what he does is a moral one, in the sense in which an action is morally necessary if it is not possible to not do it without doing something morally wrong. Because God is supremely good, he does everything that is required to be good; because his being good is not an outside constraint, but part of what he is, his freedom is not diminished by this requirement: it is not “metaphysical necessity, which leaves no place for any choice, presenting only one possible object, [but] moral necessity, which obliges the wisest to choose the best” (T 367).

We may understand this point as the claim that “do what is required to be good” is ambiguous. On one reading, the description “what is required to be good” is understood referentially, as referring to a fixed set of actions and the imperative says that one should perform these; if this constraint were imposed on God (as perhaps it is by Spinoza, at least on Leibniz’s reading), God’s freedom would be curtailed. On another reading, however, the description is understood descriptively, and the imperative means that if there is some action performance of which is necessary for one to be good, then one should do it. On this reading, the constraint imposed by the imperative is merely conditional, and only prescribes doing Φ on the assumption that doing Φ is among the things required to be good.

There is still a problem, however: would not the metaphysical contingency of “God chooses the best” require us to be able to conceive of a God who chooses something that is not best, i.e. a God whose essence does not include benevolence? Based on some notes from Leibniz’s Italian tour (Gr 305f. / AG 30, Gr 336), Adams tries to solve the problem by a *de dicto* / *de re* distinction:

de dicto “God chooses the best” is *de dicto* necessary, because its negation is self-contradictory (ascribing a predicate to God that is the negation of one of the predicates in his complete concept).

de re “God chooses the best” is *de re* contingent, because that which is the best is not necessarily the best (1994: 24).

It is certainly true that whether or not this actual world is actually the best is “indemonstrable, contingent, a truth of fact [if a truth at all]” (Gr 493), and I agree with Adams (1994: 25–26) that it makes sense of Leibniz’s claim that “this world is the best one” is a contingent truth and that its contingency is to be understood in terms of its having an infinite analysis:

And here is uncovered the secret distinction between Necessary and Contingent Truths, which no one will easily understand unless he has some tincture of Mathematics – namely that in necessary propositions one arrives, by an analysis continued to some point, at an identical equation (and this very thing is to demonstrate a truth in geometrical rigor); but in contingent propositions the analysis proceeds to infinity by reasons of reasons, so that indeed one never has a full demonstration, although there is always, underneath, a reason for the truth, even if it is perfectly understood only by God, who alone goes through an infinite series in one act of the mind. (Gr 303/AG 28, translation follows Adams (1994: 26))

That this world is the best is only hypothetically necessary, because its necessity requires the presupposition (of course legitimate, but not conceptually necessary) that it is the one that has been created by God. It is, however, contingent in another sense and this other sense is, according to Adams, the one captured by Leibniz’s infinite-analysis conception of contingency.

It is contingent that this world is the best because it cannot be proved, in finitely many steps, from the complete concept of this world that it is the best of all, infinitely many, possible worlds:

Indeed, even if one could know the whole series of the universe, one still could not give the reason for it, unless one had set up a comparison of it with all the other possible [series]. From this it is clear why no demonstration of any contingent proposition can be found, no matter how far the analysis of concepts is continued. (C 19/MP 99)

The grounds of possibility

The PSR and the grounds of possibility

That “God is necessarily the one who wills the best. But not the one who necessarily wills the best” (Gr 494) is not just making the *de dicto* / *de re* contrast.² Rather, it makes the claim that, of the following two claims about the actual world (referred to by “@”), the first does not imply the second:

choice God chooses @ as the best possible world.

making God makes @ the best possible world.

As Adams stresses rightly, it is with respect to **choice** that Leibniz sees his difference to Spinoza: the Spinozistic God is theologically and morally unsatisfying because he does not choose; and he does not choose because there is nothing for him to choose from. The stronger principle, **making**, on the other hand, does rule this out as well: if it is by the very same fact, God’s creation of @, i.e. his choice of it, that the choice is of the best, then God does not choose the best and cannot be praised for it – all possible divine choices would have been of the best world.

2. Adams (1994: 25) recognises this: “It is misleading, however, for Leibniz to make an issue of which verb ‘necessarily’ modifies.”

To have **choice** without **making** requires a certain conception of choice and of the interaction between God's will and his intellect. If God, by choosing anything, were to express a belief that it is the best (a very strong and intellectualist version of the doctrine of the guise of the God), then that belief could not be false and the choice would be guaranteed to be of the best, in virtue of what it itself is – this, I think, would be a version of **making** and thus unacceptable to Leibniz. The version of the guise-of-the-good doctrine that we may ascribe to God's choosing is thus not **belief**, but at most **taking**:

belief By choosing A , I express the belief that A is the best.

taking By choosing A , I am taking A to be the best.

Adams' "possibility in the narrow sense"

We have introduced above Robert Adams' proposal to distinguish between two notions of possibility in Leibniz (1994: 13–14), roughly characterisable as follows:

wide p is necessary_w iff there is a concept X such that analysis of X (finite or infinite) yields a proof that p
narrow p is necessary_n iff there is a concept such that analysis of X , *without consideration* of any other concept, yields a proof that p

This helps with God because the choice cannot be relational to its intentional object, but it may be extrinsic because of it. CF carving-out metaphor of what goes on in creation.