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An Explication of Leibniz's Compatibilist Model of Freedom

The compatibility of freedom and determinism has been a quagmire for philosophers, theologians, and laypeople alike. The issue is best explained by Rev. Father Michel Angelo Fardella when he says, "I don't understand well enough how this sort of divine foreknowledge and predetermination can be reconciled with the freedom of the human mind" (102). Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, a prominent rationalist philosopher, also shares his thoughts on the complexity of reconciling freedom and determinism when he states, "For there are two labyrinths of the human mind, one concerning the composition of the continuum, and the other concerning the nature of freedom..." (95). Despite the magnitude of this philosophical challenge, Leibniz lays out a framework for freedom that he claims is compatible with determinism and also claims that, "there is no other hypothesis which favors human freedom more than ours does" (102).

In this paper, I will establish the philosophical foundation that Leibniz crafted to provide context for his model of freedom. Next, I will explain Leibniz's definition and criteria for freedom as well as how he meets these criteria. Additionally, I will propose objections to Leibniz's idea of freedom as well as his responses to said objections. It should also be noted that this paper focuses on Leibniz's earlier works, which seem to be more open to the possibility of dualism despite his later advocacy for idealism.

At first glance, it seems that compatibilist philosophy would stand in direct contradiction to our own incompatibilist intuitions; Leibniz would say otherwise. Many theories that Leibniz proposes place him squarely in the determinist camp, and his argument for freedom subsequently places him in the compatibilist camp as well. In addition to causal determinism, Leibniz's

theories of pre-established harmony and conceptual containment theory are integral in shaping his model of freedom.

At this point it is necessary to elaborate on Leibniz's causal determinist stance. This is best seen when Leibniz discusses "notion" using the example of Alexander the Great: "thus when we consider carefully the connection of things, we can say from all time in Alexander's soul there are vestiges of everything that has happened to him and marks of everything that will happen to him…" (41). This makes it clear that each individual's past, present, and future are not only already known, but part of their essence, making this a strictly deterministic model. It appears that Alexander would have ruled Macedonia as surely as he would have been named Alexander.

Leibniz also proposes a seemingly dualist model that denies interactionism (the interaction of different substances) called pre-established harmony. He describes pre-established harmony metaphorically like, "two clocks or watches that are perfect agreement," that were constructed "with so much skill and accuracy that one can be certain of their subsequent agreement" (147-8). Leibniz says, "Thus there is perfect *harmony* between the perceptions of the monad and the motions of bodies, pre-established from the first between the system of efficient causes and that of final causes" (208). Pre-established harmony not only denies interactionism, but also implies that minds and bodies are programmed in a deterministic manner.

According to Leibniz's conceptual containment theory (CCT), a proposition is true if its predicate is contained within the subject. For example, if one were to say, "A bachelor is unmarried," the predicate *unmarried* is already contained within the subject *bachelor*. Furthermore, CCT argues that every true proposition is analytic. According to Leibniz, "When

the predicate is not explicitly contained in the subject, it must be contained in it virtually" (41). Leibniz also argues that, "the complete or perfect notion of an individual substance contains all of its predicates, past, present, and future" (32). Leibniz uses CCT to segue into what he calls the universal expression theory in which he says, "*every individual substance contains in its perfect notion the entire universe* and everything that exists in it, past, present, and future" (32). When reflecting on the three aforementioned theories that claim past, present, and future are not only determined, but also ingrained in beings, it seems borderline ludicrous to advocate for compatibilism.

Leibniz systematically unfolds his tripartite framework for freedom in his book the *Theodicy*. In his other works, he addresses the notion of desires in regards to freedom as well. According to him, freedom is chiefly composed of these elements: intelligence, spontaneity, and contingency. Each element is necessary for an act to be truly free. While intelligence can be satisfied in varying degrees, spontaneity and contingency are binary in nature. Leibniz also posits that humans have unconscious desires, as well as appetitions, or, "tendencies to go from one perception to another" (66, 207). To elaborate, humans unconsciously (but freely) desire to express the universe, and desires to move from one perception to another are inspire actions. In order to best understand each element of freedom, they will be explained and analyzed individually.

Intelligence, as defined by Leibniz is, "distinct knowledge of the object of deliberation" (Jolley, 130). Put simply, in order for an act to be free, it must be correctly known what the act is and what its consequences are. This being said, it is important to define what constitutes distinct knowledge. According to Leibniz, humans are often lacking distinct knowledge when

performing various actions. Furthermore, decision making still doesn't always seem intelligible from a purely rational standpoint. Humans are influenced by various passions which can be in line with or contradict rationality. Leibniz himself says, "The passions often take the place of reason in other intelligent substances, and we can always assert, with respect to the will in general, that *choice follows the greatest inclination* (by which I understand both passions and reasons, true or apparent)" (194). In light of this, it would seem impossible to satisfy the intelligence criteria. However, Leibniz salvages the argument by suggesting that intelligence is a "continuum concept- that is, one that admits of degree" (Jolley, 130). Distinct knowledge is non-binary, and as long as one has sufficient (he argues that we always do), though imperfect knowledge to act, then said act is free.

The second criterion is what Leibniz calls spontaneity. Spontaneity is defined as, "having the principle of action in oneself; a person is spontaneous just in case he or she is the causal source of his or her actions" (Jolley, 131). Leibniz himself handily sums up spontaneity when he says, "we must say that God originally created the soul (and any other real unity) in such a way that everything must arise for it from its own depths [*fonds*], through a perfect *spontaneity* relative to itself, and yet with a perfect *conformity* relative to external things (143). Humans have spontaneity because, according to Leibniz, they generate their own perceptions with causal power. Leibniz posits that, "we are always in a state of perfect spontaneity" (195). In summation, spontaneity is always fulfilled and humans always perceive freely.

Despite establishing spontaneity and freedom of perceptions, one might question whether undesirable perceptions, such as being pushed in front of a train, are really free. While some might think this issue is related to spontaneity, actually pertains to desires. The freedom to

perceive is not jeopardized by unpleasant perceptions, but it does beckon the question of why one would desire to perceive something that most would deem unpleasant. According to Leibniz, "God determines our will to choose what seems better, without, however, necessitating it" (61), and, "...a reason that always forces a free mind to choose one thing over another (whether that reason derives from the perfection of a thing, as it does in God, or from our imperfection) does not eliminate our freedom" (20). Since humans will supposedly act in a way that God deems is best, while also nonconsciously desiring to express the universe, it is still free to perceive things that are seemingly unpleasant or undesirable.

The third criterion for Leibniz's model of freedom is contingency. This criterion is by far the most difficult for Leibniz to defend given his other commitments. Between causal determinism and CCT, it initially seems to be that there wouldn't be room for any type of contingency; everything in the Leibnizian philosophy and timeline seems locked in. However, Leibniz has a solution. He first posits that, "a truth is *necessary* when its opposite implies a contradiction; and when it is not necessary, it is called *contingent*" (193). For example, it is necessary that a square has four equilateral sides, because if the contrary were true then it would not be a square, but a rectangle. However, it is only contingent that a square, for example, be two feet in length, for if the contrary were true and a square was not two feet in length, there is no contradiction in the fact that its essence is still that of a square.

Leibniz's remedy is handily summarized by the phrase, "existence is the root of contingency" (Jolley, 135). For example, the act of Adam eating the apple is contingent, not necessary. This is due to the fact that Adam's existence is contingent, despite the fact that if Adam were to exist, it is already determined that he eat the apple. Leibniz reiterates this when he

says, “the other reply is that the conclusion [consequence], by virtue of which all the events follow from the hypothesis, is indeed always certain, but it is not always necessary with a metaphysical necessity…(69). This argument goes hand in hand with Leibniz’s theory of possible worlds, where he states that necessary truths are true in all possible worlds, while contingent truths are only true in some possible worlds. For example, it is necessary that God exist, but it is contingent that Adam exist because there could be a possible world in which Adam did not exist, but no possible world in which God did not exist. The contingency argument can be recapitulated as follows: “Whatever happens in conformity with these predeterminations [*avances*] is certain but not necessary, and if one were to do the contrary, he would not be doing something impossible in itself, even though it would be impossible [*ex hypothesi*] for this to happen” (45). Essentially, humans are free because their acts are certain, but not necessary.

To recapitulate, Leibniz’s framework for compatibilist freedom requires the satisfaction of three different elements: intelligence, spontaneity, and contingency. Leibniz also noted that appetitions, or desires, fuel inwardly generated perceptions. According to Leibniz, humans do have freedom due to the fact that they act based on their self generated appetitions and perceptions, and while those actions are indeed certain, they are not necessary.

While the criteria for human freedom are met, one could object to God’s “divine freedom” being subject to the same framework. Leibniz may have walked into a dilemma by saying that God would choose the best possible world to exist. It seems that God’s omnibenevolence would deem it necessary that he create the best possible world, and not freely, because to do the contrary would be a contradiction to God’s nature. God’s existence and nature are both necessary, which would potentially make His actions not free.

Despite this kerfuffle, Leibniz successfully crafted a compatibilist model of freedom that identifies problems raised by incompatibilists and addresses them through multiple avenues of thought.

References:

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2. Jolley, Nicholas. *Leibniz*. London: Routledge, 2005.