Leibniz and the Ground of Possibility

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1. Introduction

When it comes to the metaphysics of modality, Leibniz holds a special pride of place among modern philosophers. He had far richer and more developed insights about modality than any of his near contemporaries, and arguably the depth and quality of his work on modal matters was unsurpassed until the twentieth century. It's thus not surprising that

Abbreviations: Frequently cited works have been identified by the following abbreviations, which are grouped by author:

Leibniz

AG *Philosophical Essays*, ed. and trans. by Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989).

Ak *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, ed. Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften (Darmstadt and Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1923–). Cited by series/volume/page. When unaccompanied by another reference, translations are my own.

CP *Confessio Philosophi: Papers Concerning the Problem of Evil, 1671–1678*, trans. and ed. by Robert C. Sleigh Jr. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

Leibniz's writings on modality are among the most discussed by his commentators in the past several decades. A substantial portion of this discussion concerns what we might call "Leibniz's *analyses* of modality." The following narrative, in broad outline, has emerged.

Early in his career, Leibniz flirted with—or fell face-first into— necessitarianism, the view that all truths are necessary truths, a dreaded position that Leibniz would come to associate with Spinozism. Realizing the danger of his ways by the early to mid-1670s, Leibniz developed a new account of modality, his *per-se*-possible account, to defang the threat of necessitarianism while still respecting his other metaphysical and theological commitments. According to most interpreters, this attempt was a

DSR *De Summa Rerum*, trans. by G.H.R. Parkinson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

GP *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, ed. by C. I. Gerhardt (Berlin: Weidmann, 1875–90; repr., Hildesheim: Olms, 1965). Cited by volume and page.

L *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, trans. and ed. by Leroy E Loemker, 2nd ed. (Dordrecht and Boston: Reidel, 1969).

LA *The Leibniz-Arnauld Correspondence*, ed. and trans. by H. T. Mason (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967).

M *Monadology*, translation by Ariew and Garber in AG. Cited by section number.

NE *New Essays on Human Understanding*, ed. and trans. by Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

T *Essais de Théodicée*, cited by paragraph number from GP VI. Translations are my own.

Descartes

CSM *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols. 1 and 2, ed. and trans. by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). Cited by volume/page.

CSMK *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 3, ed. and trans. by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Cited by volume/page.

Spinoza

C *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). Cited by page number, except when taken from the *Ethics*, where I cite only the standard part/type/number of the *Ethics* itself (e.g., E2p1).

Kant

All translated texts are from *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755–1770,* trans. and ed. by David Walford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Cited by title/page number, according to the following abbreviations of titles:

ND *New elucidation of the first principles of metaphysical cognition*

NM *Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy.*

OPB *The only possible argument in support of a demonstration of the existence of God.*

failure. Fortunately, the story continues, Leibniz later developed an alternative account, his so-called infinite analysis theory of contingency. Unfortunately for Leibniz, this theory has been widely judged an even greater failure, something of a modal catastrophe.

The underlying question of Leibniz's proximity to "Spinozistic necessitarianism" is an old one and has become well-trod interpretive ground.[1] In this essay, I will turn to a different aspect of Leibniz's modal metaphysics, though in the end, Spinoza will—as always—be waiting in the wings. Instead of focusing on Leibniz's *analyses* of modality, I will discuss his *grounding* of modality. By this I have in mind Leibniz's thesis that possibilities and *possibilia* are, in some sense, grounded in God's intellect. This grounding claim is one of Leibniz's most stable modal views, one that he endorses early, late, and at many, many points in between. As is his tendency, Leibniz tries to integrate his grounding thesis into the core metaphysical and theological views he held at any given time, though here I'll present the core of his grounding thesis independently of some of those shifting views.

I will introduce the basic contours of Leibniz's view by first presenting two nearby alternatives, one familiar (though often misunderstood) from Descartes and one less familiar from Spinoza (section 2.1). After discussing Leibniz's view and its motivations in more detail (sections 2.2–5), I will then defend Leibniz's position against a pair of recent objections that invoke the early work of Kant (section 3).

2. Leibniz (and Assorted Others) on the Ground of Possibility

A basic and deeply held conviction of many prominent Scholastics and all seventeenth-century rationalists is that, in slogan form, *everything depends on God*. They operated with a kind of two-pronged regulative ideal: construct one's metaphysics so as to make as much as possible as dependent on God as possible, without violating other essential features of God (moral perfection and transcendence topped most lists). As Leibniz put it, "My opinion is that it must be taken as certain that there is as much dependence of things on God as is possible without infringing divine justice" (Leibniz 1973, 102).[2] There were, of course, sharp disagreements over the exact

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1. Admittedly, the crowds haven't stopped me from writing about it: see Newlands 2010a.

2. See also Ak, 6.4.2319. I cite English translations when available and suitable; otherwise the translations are my own.

nature and scope of such dependence, but great philosophical ingenuity went into preserving the dependence of all things on God.

Among seventeenth-century rationalists, there was a further consensus that modal truths are grounded in God in the sense that their truth-values and truth-makers are (logically) posterior to, and in some way dependent on, the existence, nature, or activities of God.[3] In this, they followed the lead of Augustine and other Christian Platonists against those who would make modal truths independent of God, either by appealing to ungrounded abstracta (as in some versions of pure Platonism) or by grounding them in features of the human mind.[4]

Beyond this point of consensus, there were deep disagreements about the ways in which modality or modal facts depend on God.[5] The disagreements centered on two questions that are worth keeping distinct:

Question 1 (Q1): On what in God do modal truths and modal truth-makers depend?

Question 2 (Q2): What is the manner(s) of dependence by which modal truths and modal truth-makers depend on God?

The first question asks about the grounds of modality; the second about the grounding relation that modality bears to its ground. Leibniz's answers are, very roughly, God's intellect (Q1) and a form of ontological dependence (Q2). Before examining these answers, let us consider two nearby alternatives found in the writings of Descartes and Spinoza, which will set the stage for much of what follows.

2.1. Two Seventeenth-Century Alternatives

Descartes held that modal truths are true in virtue of essences (or "natures"), entities whose existence and features depend on God. To use his

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3. By "truth-maker" I mean whatever entity or entities it is in virtue of which modal truths are true. The seventeenth-century philosophers I discuss assume that (a) at least most modal truths have such truth-makers and (b) those truth-makers include (and, for Leibniz, just *are*) essences. I will remain noncommittal here on whether they would have endorsed some form of truth-maker maximalism.

4. The authors of the fifth set of objections to Descartes's *Meditations* suggest these are the only viable options (CSM, 2/281); Descartes, Spinoza, Malebranche, and Leibniz all demur. For Leibniz's acknowledgments to Plato and Augustine on this topic, see L, 592, and NE, 447. (For a note of slight disagreement with Augustine on this issue, see Ak, 6.4.1859.)

5. For convenience, I'll sometimes use the term "modality" to refer to both modal truths and the bearers of modal properties—possibilities and *possibilia* most especially.

stock example, the essence of a triangle makes it the case that, necessarily, its three interior angles equal two right angles, and the existence and features of such essences depend, like everything else, on God (CSM, 2/44–45). So far, so good; explaining modal truths in terms of essences that somehow depend on God was widely accepted in the seventeenth century. What was scorned and rejected by many early moderns was Descartes's further insistence that modal truths and truth-makers depend wholly on God's volitions (Q1) and that the nature of this dependence involves efficient causation (Q2).

Perhaps most scandalously, Descartes (CSMK, 3/235) claimed that the dependence of modality on God's volitions entails that God could have brought about the existence of mountains without valleys and the falsity of '$2 + 2 = 4$'.[6] More generally, Descartes seems to think that necessary truths depend on God in such a way that for any necessary truth n, God could have willed efficaciously the falsity of n. This is part of Descartes's so-called "Creation Doctrine" (CD), a doctrine that has proven endlessly fascinating and frustrating to contemporary inter-preters as well: by one count, more than one hundred scholarly articles and chapters have been devoted to this topic in the past forty years alone.[7]

However, on the seemingly innocuous assumption that an agent could have brought about φ only if φ is possible, it is hard to see how the Cartesian account can preserve the *de re* necessity of anything that falls under its scope. Let me briefly suggest one way to understand Descartes's theory in light of this concern. In an underappreciated passage in the "Conversation with Burman," the following exchange occurs:

[Burman]: But what then of God's ideas of possible things? Surely these are prior to his will.

[Descartes]: These too depend on God, like everything else. His will is the cause not only of what is actual and to come, but also of what is possible and of the simple natures. There is nothing we can think of or ought to think of that should not be said to depend on God. (CSMK, 3/343)

6. Although Descartes is sometimes read as deriving this claim from an unusually strong concept of omnipotence, he explicitly claims that his starting point is preserving both the maximal independence of God and the maximal dependence of everything on God. See CSMK, 3/23, 24–25; CSM, 2/261.

7. This striking statistic comes from Easton 2009.

The key point in this passage is that possibilities and *possibilia* also fall under the scope of CD. Hence, according to CD, it is false that *God could bring about φ only if φ is possible*.[8] God's power, prior to creation, is a kind of premodal form of power. What is possible is also determined by divine volitions; divine volitions at creation aren't constrained or even informed by what is possible. So, by CD, $φ$ is possible iff God wills that $φ$ is possible. Thus, from the fact that God could have brought about the falsity of a necessary truth n, it does not follow that n is possibly false. To infer that would be to misunderstand the scope of CD. Hence there is no threat of universal possibilism or anything like it in Descartes's reply to Q1. In fact, CD leaves unchanged almost all of our pretheoretical modal judgments—as well it should, since CD is an account of the theistic grounds of modality, not a revisionist account of the modal status of truths and entities downstream from it.[9]

Denying the entailment from God's ability to bring about a state of affairs to the possibility of that state of affairs saves Descartes's theory from many *reductios*. Still, I suspect many will share Leibniz's concerns about the sheer intelligibility of such a "premodal" form of divine power.[10] In reply, Descartes could fill out his "could have brought about" locution with some negative existential claims: God could have brought about $φ$ just in case there is nothing that prevents God from willing $φ$, compels God to will $φ$, or inclines God to favor or disfavor willing $φ$ (see CSMK, 3/235).[11] We sometimes interpret "could" in a similar, though weaker way, such as when a student asks, "Could I raise an objection?" and I snap, "Nothing's stopping you!" Now suppose the quantifier in that reply had a *completely* unrestricted domain.

For some, this fuller account may still fail to provide enough positive content to save it from unintelligibility. Descartes himself concedes that, at the end of the day, there *is* something deeply mysterious about God's premodal power, a power that outstrips our ability to make it wholly

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8. Dan Kaufman (2002) ultimately reaches a similar diagnosis.

9. This account would also require very little semantic fiddling. For those desiring a Kripkean semantics for Cartesian modals, simply change the domain of quantification from sets of possible worlds (Kripke's 'W') and possible individuals (Kripke's 'D') to sets of divine volitions and divine singular concepts.

10. See GP, 1.256, for Leibniz's best objection; see Leibniz 1989, 2, for its better-known formulation.

11. Kaufman (2002, 38) offers a similar (though weaker) version. Descartes's claim is quite strong, however: nothing—including goodness, truths, and reasons that depend on other perfections of God—even *influences* the divine will (CSM, 2/291).

intelligible. "There is no need to ask how God could have brought it about from all eternity that it was not true that twice four make eight, and so on; for I admit this is unintelligible to us" (CSM, 2/294).[12] So if one thinks the CD's notion of premodal power is ultimately mysterious, at least that is where Descartes tells us to expect mystery.

This last quotation might suggest that Descartes balks at answering Q2, which asks about the nature of the grounding relation in CD. However, Descartes states in other passages that the kind of grounding he intends is a familiar one: efficient causation. "You [Mersenne] ask me: by what kind of causality God established the eternal truths. I reply: by the same kind of causality as he created all things, that is to say, as their efficient and total cause" (CSMK, 3/25).[13] In other words, the form of dependence that essences and eternal truths bear to God is *causal* dependence on a divine volition: "It is because he willed [*quia voluit*] that the three angles of a triangle should necessarily equal two right angles that this is true and cannot be otherwise" (CSM, 2/291).[14]

Alternative answers to Q1 and Q2 can be found in Spinoza, although he too thinks of essences as the immediate truth-makers for modal truths. However, Spinoza claims that "neither intellect nor will pertain to God's nature" (E1p17s), which rules out both Descartes's and Leibniz's answers to Q1.[15] Instead, Spinoza thinks possibilities and *possibilia* are grounded in God's attributes, which are something like God's fundamental properties or perfections: "The ideas of singular things, or of modes, that do not exist must be comprehended in God's infinite idea in the same way as the formal essences of singular things, or modes, are contained in God's attributes" (E2p8).[16]

The actual attributes of God, including nonmental attributes, ground the essences of nonexisting things by formally containing them, a relation Spinoza elsewhere glosses in conceptual terms: "Essences

12. See also CSMK, 3/23, 25, 235.

13. See also CSM, 2/294.

14. See also Descartes 1964–76, 7.380 (CSM, 2/261), which is better translated, "The essences of things and the mathematical truths we can know concerning them . . . are immutable and eternal because God has willed them so, because God has decreed them so."

15. I discuss Spinoza's reasons for this rejection in Newlands (Forthcoming-a).

16. See also E2p6c; E2p8s2; and C, 154–55. I do not intend to suggest an answer here to the question of whether the rest of Spinoza's ontology contains space for *merely* possible things or modes. For a recent argument that it does not, see Laerke 2008, 782–88.

[of nonexisting things] are comprehended in another in such a way that they can be conceived through it" (E1p8s2).[17] In an early piece, Spinoza claims that providing such grounds is a perfect-making feature of God: "God's true perfection is that he gives all things their essence, from the least to the greatest; or, to put it better, he has everything perfect in himself" (C, 87).

As with Descartes, we can extract a more general version of Spinoza's account. Possibilities are grounded in God by being *actually exemplified* in the divine nature. For example, it is *possible* that something has the nature of thought because God *actually* has the nature of thought. As we will see, Spinoza's grounding of possibility by actual exemplification in an existing being is very close to Leibniz's own grounding thesis, and even closer to the early Kant's.

As it stands, however, Spinoza's version is problematic for traditional monotheists. For while it is clearly possible for creatures to be extended and experience pain, many believed that it was not possible for a perfect being to be extended or experience pain. Yet, according to Spinoza's account, if it is possible for a finite essence to be extended, God is actually extended as well. In other words, according to more traditional monotheistic accounts, God's nature is considerably sparser than is the range of possible creaturely essences and properties, in which case the grounding of possible properties and natures in God's actual properties and nature will need refinement.

Spinoza, of course, is quite happy to expand the divine nature so that it exemplifies every possible fundamental attribute (E1p9) and every possible derivative property (E1p16), thereby preserving his general grounding thesis. (Admittedly, as Spinoza's critics—including Leibniz and Kant—have pointed out, it is far from clear that every possible fundamental and derivative property *can* be consistently exemplified in a single substance.)[18]

But for those who (a) are sympathetic to Spinoza's general attempt to ground possibilities in the actually existing nature of God without appealing to God's volitions and (b) wish to avoid Spinoza's account of an expansive divine nature, there are two main options, both of which

17. For more on Spinoza's conceptual containment relation, see Newlands 2010b, 2012. It is important for present purposes that conceptual containment in Spinoza is *not* a purely mental relation; it is attribute neutral.

18. For a recent discussion of this sort of objection to Spinoza (made most famously by Pierre Bayle) and a reply on behalf of Spinoza, see Melamed 2009.

were pursued in the early modern period. Either *construct* creaturely possibilities like *being extended* out of the sparser divine nature or *reduce* creaturely possibilities like *being extended* to versions of God's sparse properties.

Spinoza himself explicitly rejects both of these alternatives for the case of extension. To claim, as Descartes, the early Kant, and many others do, that God's nature somehow or other "contains" extension without actually being extended is just to plead ignorance, according to Spinoza. "By what divine power could [extended things] be created? They are completely ignorant of that. And this shows clearly that they do not understand what they themselves say" (E1p15s).[19] Similarly, Spinoza rejects attempts to reduce the range of fundamental and derivative possible properties to some narrower set of more traditional divine properties (E1p16–17, E2p1–2). According to Spinoza, God's perfect nature demonstrably requires a plentiful range of attributes and modifications, thereby ruling out reductionist alternatives like idealism.[20]

In this way, Spinoza raises an underappreciated challenge for those who think that modality depends on God. Those wanting to ground possibilities in God's actual existence without appealing to a mysterious premodal form of power (Descartes) or expanding the divine nature beyond the bounds of orthodoxy (Spinoza) must either (a) defend a fairly severe form of reductionism or (b) make intelligible how derivative possibilities are grounded in God without being directly exemplified in the divine nature. Although Leibniz has strong reductionist tendencies, I'll argue in section 3 that Leibniz presents a defensible version of (b) that allows him to answer this challenge, something that the Kantian alternative ultimately fails to do.

That is getting ahead of ourselves, however. So far, we have seen that whereas Descartes appeals to God's will and efficient causation as the grounds and grounding of eternal truths, possibilities, and essences, Spi-

19. Spinoza presents the Cartesian version without critical commentary at C, 24, and C, 303–04, although in the latter, we get a hint of dissatisfaction: "[Descartes] could not attribute extension to God. So we were *constrained to allow* that there is some attribute in God which contains all the perfections of matter in a more excellent way and can take the place of [*supplere*] matter" (C, 304, emphasis mine). It is this mysterious relation of substitution that Spinoza finds unsatisfactory.

20. For more on Spinoza's arguments for attribute and mode plenitude and the anti-idealist implications of these commitments, see Newlands 2010a and 2012.

noza appeals to what is conceptually contained in God's fundamental attributes, including nonmental ones. Leibniz rejects much of this.[21]

2.2. Leibniz's Version: The Basics

Although Leibniz sometimes uses "essences," "concepts," "ideas," and "possibilities" indiscriminately (for example, Ak, 2.1.588; AG, 19; L, 293; Ak, 6.4.1391; Ak, 6.4.1459; Ak, 6.4.1528), I think he basically agrees with Descartes and Spinoza that essences are the primary truth-makers for possibilities and necessities. As Leibniz puts it in a rich pair of texts from 1677, "Truths arise [*oriuntur*] from natures or essences. Therefore, essences or natures are also certain realities that always exist" (Ak, 6.4.19); "Necessary truths follow [*consequuntur*] from natures. Therefore natures too are eternal, not just truths" (6.4.17).[22]

However, Leibniz parts company with Descartes and Spinoza by claiming that divine *ideas*, not volitions or other nonmental properties, ground essences, a view Leibniz takes himself to share with some of the Scholastics (T, 186).[23] (Still, Leibniz sometimes voices frustration with Scholastic treatments: "Nevertheless, if you ask the scholastics about the 'origin of possibility' as they call it, or about the roots and inner nature of possibility, you will hear such fantastic and confusing things that you will thank God when they stop" [CP, 13]) More generally for Leibniz, modal propositions express facts about essences, essences that ontologically depend on the divine mind. Here are some of Leibniz's most familiar formulations of this doctrine:

> That is why I also find completely strange the expression of some other philosophers who say that the eternal truths of metaphysics and geom-

21. Malebranche shares Leibniz's concerns with the alternatives and gestures in very underdeveloped ways toward the theory that Leibniz will champion (see especially Malebranche 1997b, 615–19, 586–87).

22. See also Leibniz 1989, 13; AG, 150; Ak, 2.1.588; Ak, 6.3.583; and Ak, 6.4.1618. As ever with Leibniz, there are occasional passages that run in the reverse direction, for example, "Now, this possibility or this necessity forms or composes what we call the essences of natures and the truths we commonly call eternal" (AG, 2).

23. Scotus is perhaps the closest Scholastic analogue, though Leibniz sometimes objects to Scotists on this topic. T, 184. On other readings of the Scholastics (for example, Cross 2010), Henry of Ghent is even closer, according to whom the *esse essentia* is not *esse existential* and lacks *esse realitas*. Such essences have merely *esse cogitum*, which is the ontological status Leibniz assigns them as well. The clearest contrast among Scholastics is with Aquinas, for whom nondivine essences have no kind of *esse* of their own at all; quantifying over nondivine essences is just quantifying over ways of imitating the divine essence.

etry and consequently also the rules of goodness, justice, and perfection are merely the effects of the will of God; instead, it seems to me, they are only the consequences of his understanding, which, assuredly, does not depend on his will, any more than does his essence. (Leibniz 1989, 2; AG, 36)

For in my opinion, it is the divine understanding that makes the reality of eternal truths, while his will plays no part at all. (T, 184)

It is true that God is not only the source of existences, but also that of essences insofar as they are real, that is, or the source of that which is real in possibility. This is because God's understanding is the realm of eternal truths or that of the ideas on which they depend. (M, 43; AG, 218)

Neither those essences nor the so-called eternal truths pertaining to them are fictitious; rather, they exist in a certain region of ideas, so to speak, in God himself, the source [*fonte*] of every essence and of the existence of the rest. (AG, 151–52; GP, 7.305)

According to these and similar passages, God's intellect, and not God's will, is the ground of the reality of essences and the modal truths that "arise" or "follow" from those essences.[24]

What sort of ontological status or "reality" do these essences or *possibilia* have, according to Leibniz? There has been some scholarly debate on this point. However, in one of his clearest answers, Leibniz writes, "The objective reality [of God's idea of Peter] constitutes the total nature or essence of Peter" (Ak, 6.4.1600).[25] That is, harkening back to terminology still familiar to us through Descartes, essences are the objective beings of God's ideas.[26] Leibniz sometimes describes them as the "internal objects" of God's intellect, which makes a similar point about their ontological status as purely intentional objects (see GP, 3.33;

24. Here are a few others from different periods of Leibniz's writings, though this is by no means exhaustive: CP, 43; DSR, 29; LA, 61; Ak, 6.4.1635; Leibniz 1948, 365; NE, 155; T, 42; and GP, 6.339–40.

25. This is a quotation from "De libertate, fato, gratia Dei," 1686–87(?); see also Ak, 2.1.590, and T, 42.

26. To ramp up the Scholasticism a bit more: essences have the kind of *esse* that representational content, *qua the objects being represented*, has, namely, an *esse intelligibile* (or *esse cogitum*), which is nonetheless a *realitas secundum quid*. I therefore disagree with interpreters such as Benson Mates and Ohad Nachtomy who try to flatten Leibniz's ontology on this point (see Mates 1986, 49, 73; and Nachtomy 2009, 14, 16). For a rich discussion of the underlying ontology of representational objects in late Scholasticism, see Clemenson 2007.

M, 46). As constituted by the objective reality of God's ideas, essences do not exist independently of being thought about by God.

As usual for Leibniz, God's own essence is an important exception case, though the ontological exception preserves a perfectly general theory of modal truth-makers in terms of essences. God's essence makes necessary truths about God true, such as *that God necessarily exists*. But God's essence, unlike any other essence, does not exist in virtue of being the object of a divine thought.[27] This exception also allows Leibniz's theory to avoid circularity.[28] Although essences make modal truths true for Leibniz, not every modal truth-maker depends on God's ideas for its existence and reality. In particular, God's essence does not depend for its reality on divine ideas; if anything, the dependence runs in the opposite direction.[29]

In this way, God's ideas do double-duty for Leibniz. (1) God's ideas ontologically ground nondivine *possibilia* or essences, and (2) the objects of God's ideas—nondivine essences—are the truth-makers for (most) modal propositions.[30] This allows Leibniz to identify truth-makers for possibilities and necessities *and* an ontological foothold for those truth-makers. For convenience, I will refer to the ontological dependence and truth-making components of his theory together as "Leibniz's grounding thesis."

2.3. Leibniz's Version: Some Refinements

Although correct, this basic account needs refinement. For one, more than just the content of God's ideas ground possibilities, according to Leibniz. Rather, the content *and arrangement* of divine ideas are the grounds of possibilities and necessities. In this way, God's ideas provide both the *material* (via their content) and the *form* (via their arrangement)

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27. Leibniz makes this point in many passages; for a clear example, see Ak, 2.1.588.

28. For a version of the circularity objection, see Russell 1937, 178–81. Russell describes Leibniz's reasoning on this topic as "scandalous."

29. This is where Russell goes most wrong in his circularity objection. Russell (1937, 179) writes, "God cannot be conceived of without [nondivine] essences," which establishes only coeternal existence, one that falls short of dependence. Put another way, mutual entailments are consistent with asymmetrical dependence. For a different reply to Russell's charge, see Adams 1994, 184–86.

30. Fabrizio Mondadori (1990, 173) makes what I think is a similar point about possibilities being both "of" and "in" divine ideas.

of modal truths.[31] This suggests a kind of combinatorial account of modality, which is itself based on a combinatorial account of essences. As Leibniz explains, "A plurality of truths joined [*junctae*] together produce new truths.... Therefore, whatever in any truth eternally exists *a parte rei* is united to any other truth. This is much clearer from the fact that one nature joins [*concurrit*] in constituting another nature" (Ak, 6.4.17). Again: "The same nature joins in constituting innumerable others, and can join together with any other" (6.4.19).

For now, put aside Leibniz's overly excited suggestion in these passages that there are no limits whatsoever to his essence and modal combinatorialisms. The important point is that natures can be combined together to constitute new natures, which in turn make true additional possibilities and necessities. Leibniz usually thinks the direction of combinations moves from simpler to more complex, in which case complex possibilities are generated by combinatorial operations on simpler possibilities, a configuring of modal space that reflects the configuring of modal truth-makers.[32]

Although I have been treating them together, the grounds of possibilities and necessities are obviously a little different. As Leibniz explains in one of the earliest outlines of his theory, "The *possible* is what can be conceived, that is . . . what is conceived by an attentive mind" (CP, 55). A few paragraphs later, he adds: "Now, I have defined *the necessary* as something whose contrary cannot be conceived; therefore the necessity and impossibility of things are to be sought in the ideas of those very things, not outside those things" (57), ideas that "subsist" in the divine intellect (43). In short, the grounds of possibilities are consistent divine thoughts about essences (57), whereas the grounds of necessities are consistent divine thoughts that have no contraries in God's intellect.

Leibniz here introduces some constraints on the domain of possibility, described in these early writings in terms of *conceivability* and throughout most of the rest of his corpus in terms of *consistency*. This suggests that there are restrictions built into Leibniz's combinatorialisms after all; not every combination of essences and possibilities will produce

31. Of course, content will reflect facts about arrangement, but some of that content will be derived from relations among the content of other ideas. Content reflects form, but neither is reducible to the other for Leibniz. (Admittedly, Leibniz sometimes *tried* to reduce semantics to logical or syntactic form, though without much success.)

32. See also CP, 85, and DSR, 29, 71. For later versions of modal combinatorialism, see AG, 150, and T, 225. For an extended discussion of Leibniz's early combinatorialism, see the first three chapters of Nachtomy 2009.

further essences and possibilities. To cite a warning from Leibniz's *concept* combinatorialism, "One must take care that the combinations do not become useless by joining incompatible concepts together" (L, 230). This restriction raises two orthogonal sets of issues. First, to what combinatorial rules or constraints do God's ideas conform: to mere logical consistency, or also to additional metaphysical truths? I will return to this question later.

A second topic concerns the grounds of these constraints or rules, whatever they are. To keep it simple, stick with bare logical consistency and a toy example: in virtue of what does God not think *that p-and-not-p*? If the answer is that God *can't*, then the requirement of consistency involves *modal* facts, in which case Leibniz needs to provide grounds for those modal facts too. Presumably Leibniz would reply that the truth-makers for modal rules like the principle of noncontradiction are built into the content of the most basic essences in God's ideas. That answer dashes the hopes of a fully reductive analysis of modality, but as contemporary combinatorialists know all too well, giving a wholly nonmodal characterization of restrictions on combinations is quite difficult.[33] Invoking modal primitives at this point would at least preserve Leibniz's truth-maker and ontological grounding accounts, and a fully *grounded* theory of modality that falls short of being fully *reductive* may be good enough for his purposes.

Nonetheless, Leibniz has the resources for a bolder answer here, though I have not found a passage in which he embraces it.[34] Instead of building primitive combinatorial restrictions into the basic essences themselves, which sounds a bit hand-wavy, Leibniz could instead claim that these rules are just generalizations about what God actually thinks. To put it cheekily, Leibniz could be more of a Humean about "modal laws." In virtue of what is *p-and-not-p* not possibly true? In virtue of the fact

33. See, for instance, Armstrong 1989, 48–49. Unlike Armstrong, however, Leibniz doesn't motivate his grounding thesis by an appeal to the theoretical or epistemological advantages of a *reductive* account of modality. Leibniz's theism may even give him an advantage here since it can vouchsafe his modal epistemology and provide a concrete and actual ground for combinatorial modal space.

34. Mondadori (2000, 218–19) argues that Leibniz actually rejects something like this alternative, on the grounds that for Leibniz, "God cannot but abide by [the] principle [of noncontradiction]." He cites passages like Leibniz 1948, 379, in support, but the cited passages do not entail anything more than this: whatever abides by the principle of noncontradiction does so immutably. However, that claim is consistent with the principle being a second-order fact about God's immutably occurrent ideas.

that God doesn't think *that p-and-not-p*. To some, that answer gets matters backward. But the promise of a reductive grounding account of modality *should* be attractive to an advocate of the principle of sufficient reason (PSR) like Leibniz. And we might well wonder, is a buck-stopping, table-pounding "God just can't!" explanatorily better off than a buck-stopping, table-pounding "God just doesn't!"?[35] Certainly the latter answer seems more in the spirit of Leibniz's general project of providing theistic grounds for modal truths: base what God (and creatures) can and cannot do on what God actually does and does not do.[36]

Another important refinement to the basic version is that, strictly speaking, the content and arrangement of simpler divine ideas alone do not ground *possibilia* and configure modal space. Like Descartes, Leibniz thinks God's grounding of modality requires God to be actively doing something, but Leibniz denies that God's will is the only source of activity in God. Leibniz thinks that God's intellect is also active insofar as God mentally reflects on God's more basic ideas and generates more complex ideas and possibilities out of them. Leibniz emphasizes this active element of God's intellect in both early and late writings. "God brought these things [necessary truths] about not by willing them but by understanding them" (CP, 43). "These [eternal truths] do not exist without an understanding being aware [*prenne connaissance*] of them" (T, 189).[37]

However, we need to be careful here. By actively thinking, God makes essences have reality, and so in *that* sense, God's active understanding contributes to modal truth-making. But God's understanding an idea

35. Anja Jauernig asked the following (sneaky!) question: on this account, *could* God have thought something different than God has in fact thought? I don't quite know what to say about this metamodal sense of "could." This is like asking, of all of modal space, could it have been shaped differently? On one reading (where *could* entails *possibility*), the answer is clearly no; on another (where *could* is nonmodal), the question wouldn't be intelligible to Leibniz.

36. Here is an indirect argument for why Leibniz should find this alternative appealing. Recall that Leibniz sometimes claims that all basic essences are mutually compossible. This view fits well with his occasional effort to map the basic modal truth-makers onto God's simple attributes (AG, 26), attributes that are purely positive and so compossible, according to Leibniz's version of the ontological argument (DSR, 101). But given such mutual compossibility, it is hard to see where incompatibilities, and hence impossibilities, could *ever* arise for Leibniz, a puzzlement Leibniz himself sometimes voiced (GP, 7.194, cited in Cover and O'Leary-Hawthorne 1999, 138). This "Humean" account supplies Leibniz an answer: facts about compossibility are derived from basic combinatorial arrangements, not vice versa.

37. For middle-period texts, see LA, 61, and Ak, 6.4.1601. Malebranche (1997a, 197) makes a similar point.

does not create the *content* of that idea. Leibniz's God doesn't have *that* sort of creative intellect.[38] In a way, Leibniz's grounding thesis turns on the coherence of this distinction. God's thinking grounds the reality of the objects of His ideas, but does not thereby fully determine their content, especially at the most basic level of essences. For example, God's thinking establishes the reality or being of the essence of triangularity, but it does not thereby make it the case that being triangular involves being a three-sided figure. By thinking, God's intellect gives being to essences without thereby fully determining the content of those essences.[39]

As noted in the introduction, I have presented Leibniz's grounding thesis independently of other, shifting pieces of his metaphysics and theology. For instance, I have said almost nothing about how Leibniz moves from a collection of compossible *essences* to a possible *individual substance*. In his middle years, Leibniz appeals to God's will "considered as possible" to help establish the fully determinate content required by his complete concept theory of individual substances.[40] However, these additional integrations add richness without changing the basic form of Leibniz's grounding thesis. By actively reflecting on the content and arrangement of His ideas, God establishes the reality of nondivine essences or *possibilia*, whose existence, content, and arrangements, along with God's essence, are the truth-makers for all modal truths.

2.4. On Leibniz's Grounding Relation

Leibniz repeatedly emphasizes that the way by which God "establishes" or "brings about" *possibilia* and makes possibilities true does not involve efficient causation or acts of will. Although Leibniz sometimes uses volitionally loaded terminology like "giving" and "brought about" in this context, he also uses expressions that mark a contrast with volitional dependence, like "consequence of," "founded on," "due to," and "grounded in." What is the nature of the dependence on God's active intellect, according to Leibniz (Q2)?

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38. See, by way of comparison, T, 335; LA, 46; though see NE, 149, in which Leibniz lumps reality-making and truth-making together.

39. Where then *does* the content come from? In section 3, I'll suggest the answer I think Leibniz should and sometimes does give: God has a primitively rich intellect. I'll also argue against the most plausible alternative, that the content of God's basic ideas is wholly given to God's mind by God's simple, extramental perfections.

40. I say a little bit more about this particular example in Newlands (forthcoming-b). I am grateful to Brandon Look and Anja Jaurenig for pressing this point.

Leibniz often asserts a counterpossible here: were [*per impossible*] God not to exist, nothing would be possible (for example, CP, 43; M, 43; T, 243; GP, 6.440). But independent of worries about the semantics of counterpossibles, this fails as an account of dependence for the same reason that supervenience theses fail to capture metaphysical dependence: even necessary covariation is insufficient to establish the direction of dependence. Leibniz needs an asymmetrical, *in virtue of* relation. These counterpossibles, at best, establish only the coeternal existence of God's intellect and modal facts.[41]

I think what Leibniz intends in answering Q2 is closest to what contemporary metaphysicians call "ontological dependence."[42] Possibilities ontologically depend on God's ideas, which is to say that the truth-makers for possibilities have their reality in virtue of God's ideas, namely, as the objects ("objective beings") of God's ideas.[43]

A correlate to ontological grounding is that of ontological priority. If *x* ontologically depends on *y*, then *y* is ontologically prior to, or more fundamental than, *x*. Leibniz emphasizes the ontological priority of God's ideas over possibilities in order to show that God's ideas are more fundamental than possibilities, a priority that Leibniz likens to the substance/mode relation: essences and necessary truths are mere

41. In responding to Russell's circularity objection, Adams (1994, 185) warns, "We must be careful therefore not to foist on Leibniz claims of priority to which he is not committed . . . it is equally part of Leibniz's view that God could not exist without understanding exactly those necessary truths. They are two sides of a single fact." I agree that, for Leibniz, *necessarily God exists iff God understands every necessary truth*. However, mutual entailments are consistent with priority and asymmetrical dependence, including the dependence of God's understanding on God's existing. Adams's caution is warranted only if we incorrectly assimilate priority to entailment, as Russell did. Thanks to a referee for raising a valid concern about an earlier version of this note.

42. For a quick overview of the topic, see Lowe 2010. One potential source of disagreement between Leibniz and contemporary metaphysicians concerns the formal properties of this grounding relation. In most contemporary accounts, ontological dependence is irreflexive, asymmetrical, and transitive (for but two examples, see Schaffer 2010, 37; and Rosen 2010, 115–17). I do not think Leibniz would agree. For, given the explanatory component of the grounding relation, asymmetry plus a lower bound on possibilities would entail that there is at least one brute, and hence ungrounded, possibility. Leibniz should instead insist that at least one essence (namely, God's) grounds, and hence explains, its own possibility, which requires a denial of irreflexivity. For a similar urging on behalf of Spinoza, see Newlands, Forthcoming-a.

43. Leibniz often puts his point in terms of existence conditions (in virtue of what do *possibilia* exist?), but he would surely affirm a stronger *essential* or *identity* dependence as well: what it is to be a *possibilis* is metaphysically determined by the nature of God's ideas.

"modes" and "not substances" (Ak, 6.4.17–19). That is, nondivine essences, like modes, are dependent beings that cannot exist on their own, a requirement that Leibniz thinks pure Platonism about essences would violate.

Another important feature of ontological dependence for Leibniz is that it is explanatory. "The reason for [eternal] truths lies in the ideas of things, which are involved in the divine essence itself" (Leibniz 1973, 77).[44] Providing such reasons partly constitutes the nature of grounding: *x* ontologically depends on *y* only if facts about *y provide reasons for* or *explain x*.[45] More loosely, *x* ontologically depends on *y* only if *x* exists or has its nature *because* of *y*. The obtaining of an efficient causal relation may well entail the obtaining of explanatory dependence (it surely does for Leibniz), but not vice versa. In the present case, divine ideas provide the reasons in virtue of which essences have their reality, and those essences in turn provide "the specific reason of [a thing's] possibility" (Ak, 2.1.588). In this way, facts about God's ideas *explain* modal truths. Leibniz's rationalism and grounding thesis here unite.

2.5. *Motivating Leibniz's Grounding Thesis*

What motivates Leibniz to find grounds for modality in the first place? There are several overlapping concerns within Leibniz's own system that his grounding thesis addresses. As mentioned in the introduction, this thesis secures the dependence of all things on God in a very strong way: the possibility and essence of every nondivine thing depends on the existence, nature, and activity of God. It also helps Leibniz blunt the charge of necessitarianism by providing the metaphysical grounds for nonactual *possibilia* and possibilities, a crucial step in establishing the contingency of the actual world in his *per se* modal theory. The grounding thesis plays a corresponding role in Leibniz's account of creation since it is by surveying God's own ideas that God discovers the relative excellences of possible worlds, a discovery that informs God's decision to create the best possible world.

The grounding thesis also plays an important role in Leibniz's early and mature theodicies.[46] A central strand in Leibniz's reflections

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44. See, by way of comparison, Ak, 2.1.588, 6.3.583; AG, 32, 149.

45. This formulation allows for partial dependence, as it presumably should in the case of complex possibilities. My formulation covers both existential and essential forms of dependence. For contemporary analogues, see Correia 2005 and Schneider 2006.

46. I discuss this more fully in Newlands, forthcoming-b.

on the problem of evil is that the existence of evil is ultimately due to God's *understanding* and not God's *will*. As Leibniz increasingly emphasized, the essential limitations of creatures, which determines their imperfections and metaphysical deficiencies, are given to God in His understanding, prior to any volitional activity and outside of God's creative control (see, for example, Ak, 6.4.1459, and AG, 114–15). Leibniz's grounding thesis provides the metaphysical machinery for this move.

Leibniz also noticed that his grounding thesis could be used to prove the existence of God (or at least a unique, necessarily existing, intelligent being), starting with the incredibly weak premise that something is possible (for example, Ak, 6.4.18; Leibniz 1973, 77; M, 45; and AG, 151–52). However, as one might have guessed, Leibniz's case for his grounding thesis rests on some rather controversial metaphysical premises that will probably not persuade someone who isn't already inclined toward his rationalist theism.

Leibniz argues that possibilities must be grounded in the first place by appealing to a more general actualist principle: "All reality must be founded on something that exists" (T, 184). He explicitly applies this principle to modality: "For if there is reality in essences or possibles, or indeed, in eternal truths, this reality must be grounded in something existent and actual" (M, 43). In line with his general nominalism, Leibniz also claims that the only suitable actualist grounds for possibilities will be *concretely* existing things, not abstracta (for example, Ak, 6.4.17–19). Although Leibniz's belief in the ontological priority of the actual and the concrete is not universally shared, here at least he will have many sympathizers.

However, even if possibilities must be grounded in actual concreta, why must they be grounded in a necessary being? Leibniz appeals to a contentious intuition: were no contingent beings to exist, truths about possibilities would remain unaffected, in which case no contingent being or collection of contingent beings could be the ground of possibilities.[47] However, even if that were true, why must possibilities be grounded in a *single* necessary being? All else equal, considerations of parsimony and nonarbitrariness may favor a single, unified ground, though I suspect only those sympathetic with Leibniz's rationalism will be moved.

On Robert Adams's reconstruction of this final step, Leibniz's theory of relations does the heavy lifting (Adams 1994, 181–83). If (1)

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47. For Leibniz's version of this claim, see Ak, 6.4.18. For critical discussion of this step, see Adams 1994, 179ff.

the reality of every relation is grounded in the perception of an existing substance and (2) necessary truths are connected in such a way that the members of the set of all necessary truths bears at least one relation R to each other, then (3) there exists a single perception of an existing substance grounding R. Obviously even fewer non-Leibnizians will be convinced by (1), meaning Leibniz's argument for God's existence from modal truths will probably not persuade neutral parties. However, the philosophical interest of such arguments surely does not depend on whether they succeed by *that* standard, lest virtually every substantive philosophical argument be rendered philosophically uninteresting.

3. A Neglected Alternative? The Early Kant

In recent years, however, even those friendly to Leibniz have offered criticisms of his grounding thesis. Robert Adams and Andrew Chignell have each argued that Leibniz's account is *inadequate*; both also suggest that the precritical Kant offers a better theistic alternative, according to which the ultimate grounds of modal truths are not divine *thoughts* but *nonmental* divine properties, an alternative very close to the one I ascribed to Spinoza in section 2.1.[48] I will respond separately to their objections on behalf of Leibniz, but I will also press the same moral to both: *if* their objections are correct, the corrective is not Kant; it's Spinoza. And that, I take it, is a conclusion all three—Adams, Chignell, and the early Kant— would find troubling.

3.1. Kant on the Ground of Possibility

Before taking up their objections, it is worth noting that the position attributed to the early Kant by Adams and Chignell is not the only available interpretation of Kant on the ground of possibility. Indeed, although it is generally agreed that Kant offers *some* sort of nearby alternative to Leibniz's grounding thesis in his precritical writings, there is considerable disagreement among interpreters over exactly what Kant's alternative is.[49] This disagreement is not entirely the fault of Kant's readers: on

48. The objections are found in Adams 2000 and Chignell 2009. I'll follow Adams and Chignell in focusing mostly on Kant's precritical discussion of this issue, most especially in OPB.

49. In addition to Adams and Chignell, see also the recent discussions of Fisher and Watkins (1998), Logan (2007), and Stang (2010). For a reading of *Leibniz's* grounding thesis that is a version of what Adams and Chignell attribute to Kant, see Nachtomy (2009, 20–25, 32), which rests heavily on early texts like DSR, 79, 101.

the most crucial points for our purposes (Q1 and Q2), Kant is often frustratingly vague.

In precritical writings, Kant clearly agrees with seventeenth-century rationalists that God is, in some sense, the ground of possibility. As Kant puts the basic point, "All the essences of other [finite] things and the real element of possibility are grounded in this unique being," namely, God (OPB, 135).[50] In defending this grounding thesis, Kant also appeals to a version of Leibniz's actualist principle: "All possibility presupposes something actual in and through which all that can be thought is given" (127). Kant's terminology even echoes Leibniz's at times: possibility "is something which cannot be conceived at all, unless it is the case that whatever is real in the concept exists in God, *the source [fonte] of all reality*" (ND, 17, emphasis mine).[51]

However, as he does in this last quotation, Kant often leaves it unclear exactly how he would answer Q1. On what "in God" is the reality of possibilities grounded? Kant claims that "the possibilities of things themselves . . . are given *through the divine nature*" (OPB, 135, emphasis mine), but he does not explicitly state which of the prominent seventeenth-century options he favors, if any: the divine will (Descartes), the divine understanding (Leibniz), or additional divine attributes/properties (Spinoza).[52]

Kant's vagueness on this point is not accidental. Kant keenly saw the danger to orthodox monotheism in the claim that God grounds all

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50. According to Kant, God's actual existence grounds God's own possibility (OPB, 131–32). For sources of parallel discussions in the post-Leibnizian tradition (especially Wolff, Baumgarten, and Crusius), see Stang 2010, 295n3, 296n10–11.

51. One point of difference, which crops up in this passage and throughout these early writings, is that whereas Kant talks about possible *concepts* and *predicates*, I have followed Leibniz and contemporary usage in discussing possible *essences* and *properties*. Though these ontological differences are important, they won't come into play in this discussion, so for continuity I will continue to rephrase Kant's concept/predicate language in terms of objects and properties.

52. Stang (2010, 280–81) has proposed a fourth candidate for Kant: divine *power* or *capacities*, a position he also attributes to Crusius. With respect to Kant, I do not find the textual evidence offered by Stang very convincing: the only passage he quotes in support is one I will also cite shortly (OPB, 124), and I see no reason to read Kant there as invoking God's bare capacities to produce. Nor does Stang provide any independent reason for thinking that Kant changed his mind from his otherwise very similar argument in "New Elucidations" eight years earlier, which Stang concedes is *not* the bare powers version. From Leibniz's perspective, if this *were* Kant's answer to Q1, it would get things backward in the same way that Descartes's answer does. God's creative powers are posterior to, and range over, what is possible, not the other way around.

possibilities by actually exemplifying every possible reality or way of being: "But precisely these determinations, in virtue of which this being is the ultimate ground of all possible reality, invest that being with the highest degree of real properties which could ever inhere in a thing . . . but this is not to be understood to mean that all possible reality is included among its determinations" (OPB, 130).[53] Such a bloated, Spinozistic divine nature would have too many properties, including ones that, according to Kant, could not actually be coexemplified by a perfect being, such as *having a will* and *being extended* (130–31). Hence, for Kant, God grounds some possibilities without actually exemplifying them directly. "It is thus apparent that all reality is, *in one way or another*, embraced by the ultimate real ground" (130, emphasis mine).

According to Kant, there are two different ways in which possibilities are grounded in God, either *directly* as "determinations" or *indirectly* as "consequences": "Now, this relation of all possibility to some existence or other can be of two kinds. Either the possible can only be thought insofar as it is itself real, and then the possibility is given as a determination existing within the real; or it is possible because something else is real; in other words, its internal possibility is given as a consequence through another existence" (124). In other words, God grounds every possible property either by exemplifying it directly as a determination that "inheres in" God (132) or by directly exemplifying that of which its possibility is a consequence. The first category straightforwardly repeats Spinoza's account and involves a modal form of existential generalization and an inference from *actually* φ to *possibly* φ. For example, it is possible that something possesses understanding because God actually possesses understanding.

Kant introduces the second, more indirect category precisely to handle possible creaturely properties that God does not directly exemplify, such as being extended. Kant claims that such possibilities are grounded in God by being consequences of God's actual properties.[54] A great deal turns on how we understand Kant's "consequence" [*Folge*] relation in this context, which is clearly not *logical* consequence. This

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53. See also ND, 32, and NM, 238.

54. See also OPB, 129–31. There is a second class of problematic possibilities that Kant also discusses: possibilities involving limitation and negation. Kant offers two different strategies for handling them, one that relies on their ontological status as *negations* or *privations*, that is, *lacks* of reality that need no real grounds (131), and another that restricts the limitations in God to limitations in God's creative act itself (ND, 32).

means that understanding Kant's answer to Q1 depends mightily on how we understand his answer to Q2, the nature of the grounding relations themselves.

The clearest gloss Kant gives on "consequence" in these early texts gets us nowhere: "All reality must either be given as a determination in the necessary being, or it must be given through the necessary being *as through a ground*" (OPB, 133, emphasis mine). This means that those creaturely possibilities not directly exemplified by God are grounded in God in the sense of being . . . well, grounded in but not exemplified by God. What Kant needs is clearer than what he provides. Kant needs a way to construct the full range of creaturely possibilities out of God's sparser, actual nature. That is, he needs to show how God's actual nature can act as an "adequate substitute" for the range of possibilities that God does not directly exemplify (to borrow an apt expression from OPB, 132).

This returns us to the challenge from Spinoza in section 2.1. How can God ground every possibility without directly exemplifying every possible way of being? As I mentioned, one alternative is to go reductionist on the possible creaturely properties: perhaps all that is real in such possibilities is, in fact, contained in the sparse divine nature. For example, perhaps *being extended* can be reduced to intellectual relations, à la idealism. Like Spinoza, Kant is unsatisfied with such reductionist moves in these early writings. "Nor does it help if one seeks to evade the issue by maintaining that the quality in question is not regarded as true reality" (OPB, 130). But if reductionism, Spinozism, and Cartesianism on this topic are all rejected, what remains for the theist committed to the grounding of possibility in God?

The history of theistic metaphysics is littered with metaphors masquerading as explanations, all aimed at providing some alternative, such as "virtual" containment, "eminent" perfection, and "intelligible extension." We can now add Kant's "consequence as through a ground" to this list of unfulfilled promissory notes. For Kant does not have a more illuminating account in these texts of how such nonreductive reconstruction is supposed to go, although he keenly sees the need for one. Happily, theists do have another option: Leibniz's grounding thesis.

For on my interpretation, Leibniz's grounding thesis provides theists a blocking mechanism sufficient to answer Spinoza's challenge. God can represent possibilities by thinking about them without actually exemplifying anything in the rest of the divine nature that corresponds to them. Purely representational space with merely intentional objects is Leibniz's proposed middle ground. God can think about properties with-

out exemplifying those properties outside God's intellect, an alternative that neither expands God's nature nor reduces the range of creaturely possibilities. Hence, God can think about bodies and pains and horrors without having to exemplify extension and pains and horrors and without burdening the theist with trying to show how God's perfect and immaterial state *somehow* contains the actual but nonexemplified grounds of being extended and experiencing pain.[55] On my account of Leibniz's version, God grounds the possibilities of the objects of His thought by thinking them, without forcing the content of those thoughts to be reflected elsewhere in the divine nature.

3.2. *Adams and Explanatory Demands*

I take the block between the content of divine ideas and the nonrepresentational properties of God to be a great *virtue* of Leibniz's account. Adams apparently takes it to be a *vice* of the theory. Adams argues that the most plausible account of how God represents certain possibilities must appeal to *non*representational, actually exemplified properties of God that either resemble or cause the content of God's ideas. Adams focuses mostly on ideas of fundamental qualitative or sensory states, like the idea of some phenomenal shade of blue.[56] He suggests that it is partly in virtue of resembling something like the actual state of God's consciousness— God's being conscious of the quality of blueness—that such ideas have their content. "If God's representation of qualities is by resemblance, a version of the qualities must be present in God's thought, as qualities of some aspect of God's consciousness" (Adams 2000, 437).[57] If so, Adams reasons, then God's nonrepresentational properties, and not the derivative *ideas* of them, will be the true grounds of the possibility of such fundamental qualities, a position he likens to the early Kant's.

I will make three brief points of reply on behalf of Leibniz. First, Leibniz could accept everything Adams says about the connection be-

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55. Leibniz sometimes attempts just this (for example, DSR, 101; Ak, 6.4.2313–16; AG, 210), though other times he resists (for example, Ak, 6.4.2309–10, 6.4.2317).

56. These aren't very Leibniz-friendly examples, given Leibniz's view of sensory ideas, but that's part of Adams's point. So I'll present Leibniz's reply independently of worries about the particular examples.

57. Adams makes a similar point in nonqualitative cases in which the most plausible account of their mental content will appeal to causal dependence on actually exemplified properties of God, which I'll ignore for the sake of space. The same points of reply will apply to these kinds of ideas as well.

tween divine properties and the content of divine ideas, but still deny that *possibilities* are grounded in nonrepresentational divine properties. The grounding of representations via causation or resemblance to nonrepresentational states is a different *kind* of dependence than the ontological form of grounding that Leibniz posits between possibilities and their grounds (see section 2.4 above). So even if Leibniz conceded that (a) possibilities are grounded, in a noncausal way, in ideas and (b) ideas are grounded, in a causal or resemblance way, in nonrepresentational, exemplified divine properties, it would not follow that (c) possibilities are grounded in the nonrepresentational properties. There is no common relation, so there is no application of transitivity.

I suspect this reply is too conciliatory, however. A better alternative for Leibniz is to deny that every basic divine idea has all of its representational content in virtue of something else, such as God's nonrepresentational states. Instead, Leibniz should claim that divine representations are individuated by their content, and at least some of God's fundamental ideas have at least some of their content primitively. This would not conflict with Adams's resemblance or causal thesis applied to nondivine ideas, and it would keep us within the family of the Platonic resemblance tradition in philosophical theology that Adams and Leibniz both embrace: God's ideas (though not God's nonrepresentational properties) are the archetypes for possible ways of being. However, I think Leibniz should insist that some in-virtue-of-what questions about some mental content end with basic divine thoughts: *that's just what God thinks*. This reply strikes me as no worse off in the explanatory game than Adams's parallel "Kantian" answer about in virtue of what God is conscious of the shade of blue: *that's just what God exemplifies*.[58] I do not see why fundamental representations in God's mind "cry out" for explanation more loudly than do fundamental states of God's consciousness.

These are defensive replies. Here's an offensive one. Leibniz needs to reject Adams's setup because it leads not to the precritical Kant but to Spinoza. For consider God's idea of the quality of pain. That idea does not seem any less fundamental than the idea of the quality of a particular shade of blue.[59] However, on Adams's principle that divine ideas whose representational content cannot be explained by the content

58. And if, as Adams suggests in passing, omniscience explains why God has the states of consciousness God has, why wouldn't omniscience justify a fortiori the wide range of divine ideas?

59. Even Kant agrees here (OPB, 130).

of other ideas must resemble or be caused by a nonrepresentational divine property, God's nature will need to include a conscious state of pain for just the same reason that it needed to include phenomenal consciousness of blue. The problem cases are easy to generate. Consider the quality of forgetting an important piece of information, or feeling impotent in the face of danger, or feeling depravity at the awareness of one's moral failings. The qualitative life of our experiences is incredibly rich and not obviously reducible to a few orthodox-friendly bases in God's nature.[60]

Like many in his tradition, Leibniz denied that God is conscious of pain (or any other sensory qualities, for that matter). Though he sometimes struggles to retain this denial,[61] Leibniz tentatively suggests that "the consciousness of metaphysical imperfection is less perfect, again speaking metaphysically, than the consciousness of metaphysical perfection" (L, 177). I think Leibniz's instinct is to distinguish what God is conscious of from what God has ideas of—the *qualia* of the representation from the representation of the *qualia*—in order to show how God's perfection is incompatible with being *conscious* of pain while still being compatible with God's having an *idea* of pain.

As I have suggested in this section, this strategy generalizes: the content of divine ideas of imperfections need not be exemplified elsewhere in the divine nature. So whereas Leibniz's grounding thesis prevents the richness of divine ideas from bleeding into the rest of God's nature, Adams's explanatory demands on basic mental content would not. So, I suggest, Leibniz ought to reject the setup and take some of God's fundamental ideas to have some of their content primitively.[62] Failing to do so on Adams's principles will result in a bloated collection of divine states that too closely resembles the Spinozistic *Deus sive natura* for traditional theists to accept. Admittedly, as Adams has pointed out in reply, resorting to a primitively rich divine intellect requires Leibniz to reject further explanatory demands about the source of some basic

60. Of course, one might stoutheartedly try to reconstruct the qualities of, say, pain out of some more orthodox set of divine properties, though presumably the same move would be available for other sensory qualities like Adams's shade of blue. However, like Adams himself, I remain pessimistic about the prospects for such a reconstruction project.

61. Here I am indebted, yet again, to Adams (1994, 119–21).

62. In his early *Confessio Philosophi*, Leibniz repeatedly bottoms out his explanatory chain at this very point, in the ideas of things held by God (for example, CP, 43). For middle texts that support this interpretation (which aren't as unambiguous as I would like), see Ak, 6.4.1389, 6.4.2317.

mental content, which seems to cut against his explanatory rationalism. I concede this much: it may well be that rejecting some explanatory demands to preserve traditional forms of theism just is the price of avoiding Spinozism. (A less snarky reply, offered above, is that ending the explanation at basic divine ideas does not seem worse off explanatorily than ending it at divine nonrepresentational states, especially when doing so also offers unique advantages for traditional theists.)

3.3. *Chignell and the Ground of Metaphysical Possibility*

A rather different objection to Leibniz comes from Kant via Andrew Chignell. According to Chignell, the early Kant most objects to Leibniz's grounding thesis because it cannot distinguish what is logically possible—that which involves no logical contradiction—from what is, in Kant's language, "really" possible, a domain of possibility that Chignell associates with the contemporary category of metaphysical possibility (OPB, 122–23, 125–26). Here's the basic idea. According to Chignell-cum-Kant, on Leibniz's account the only available grounds of possibility are basic divine ideas and their combinations via first-order logical operations of conjunction and negation. Hence if an idea can be consistently constructed, it represents something possible. But, the objection runs, there are logically consistent combinations of ideas that are nonetheless not really or metaphysically possible. Such combinations exhibit what Kant calls "real repugnance" (130).

Kant illustrates this with the example of the incompatibility of a substance's *being extended* and *thinking*, though readers are welcome to choose their own favorite anti-*Tractarian* example, such as a thing *being red all over* and *being green all over* at the same time. Kant claims that although it is logically possible for something to be both thinking and extended, such a combination does not represent a real possibility (130).[63] The worry is that Leibniz's account seems unable to accommodate the mere logical possibility of such a thing.

At first glance, a Leibnizian might be tempted to understand Kant's category of real possibility in terms of *actualizability*, which for Leibniz is the difference between what is logically consistent and what could be brought about by God. But that can't be what the objectors have

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63. Kant offers no argument for such incompatibility in this passage, so I take him to be using a stock example from his context like we might use the color example off-handedly against contemporary modal combinatorialists in ours.

in mind since Leibniz has ample resources to distinguish what is logically possible from what is actualizable. Indeed, his *per se* modal theory just *is* his way of distinguishing what is possible in itself from what God could bring about.[64] Therefore, I take it that Chignell and the early Kant are demanding at least a tripartite division in modal domains: logical, meta-physical, and the divinely actualizable. In reply, I will argue that Leibniz can make even this distinction in his grounding thesis, though I will pass over further questions about how coextensive Leibniz takes these differ-ent modal domains to be.[65]

We might begin by asking why the space of divine ideas alone is in principle incapable of distinguishing logical from real possibility. Chignell (2009, 183) tentatively suggests the following: "Kant seems to implicitly rely on the doctrine that mere 'thought' tracks *logical* and not real possibility" (see OPB, 126). But why saddle Leibniz with that doc-trine? Why can't divine thoughts also track real possibility?[66]

I suspect that a faulty assumption lies behind the objection. The assumption is that for Leibniz, the only combinatorial rules at work in God's ideas are consistency-preserving, first-order logical operations of negation and conjunction. Though false, this assumption is not without some basis in Leibniz's texts. In his early work on logic and concepts, Leibniz sometimes writes as though all complex *concepts* are in principle constructable out of simpler concepts plus consistent applications of these logical operators (L, 235–46). It may also be that, *for us*, the most

64. One might object that the domain of the actualizable is far too restrictive on Leibniz's account since it contains but a single world (thankfully, ours). But that's a separate fight, one Leibniz would welcome as he has quite a bit to say about God's choice of the best.

65. I take Chignell's main objection to be that Leibniz's thesis cannot distinguish the really possible from the merely logically possible, not that Leibniz fails to correctly cat-egorize some possibilities. As with my reply to Adams, in my response I will accept the proposed examples for the sake of discussion.

66. In correspondence, Chignell suggests that Kant's argument for this thesis may rest on an epistemological concern: our thought is much more reliable at tracking logical possibility than real possibility, so we need other grounds for establishing the reliability of our judgments about real possibility, given our putative ability to know some real possi-bilities. If so, Leibniz has a ready reply. After all, Leibniz's grounding thesis is a theory about *God's* ideas, not ours. Since, presumably, God's thinking doesn't have reliability issues, it still seems that *God's* thought can reliably track real possibility, even if we aren't well equipped to do so. And now Leibniz can go on the offensive: if human epistemologi-cal concerns are driving this, how will appeal to God's nonmental attributes (Kant's alternative) help? Why think we're any better at tracking God's extramental properties than we are at tracking God's ideas?

reliable way to demonstrate a priori the possibility of a combination of essences will be to use only the principle of noncontradiction (Ak, 6.4.1454; L, 232; and LA, 62). Leibniz also claims in more than one place that all possibilities are based on the principle of noncontradiction (for example, AG, 15, 28).

Nevertheless, Leibniz frequently uses additional principles (such as the PSR, the identity of indiscernibles, and substantive metaphysical theses about the nature of substance, relations, causation, true unities, representations, worlds, and so forth) to demarcate a domain of possibility (for example, L, 187, 227; AG, 31–32, 170–71; D 13).[67] Leibniz does not think, on balance, that metaphysical principles like the PSR are derivable from the law of noncontradiction (see especially L, 227, and AG, 217).[68] Leibniz even suggests—though not unambiguously—that there are possible worlds that fail to adhere to some of these metaphysical principles.[69] Although Leibniz doesn't ever line things up this cleanly, I think that Leibniz's divisions between the principle of noncontradiction, metaphysical truths such as the principle of sufficient reason, and the principle of the best correspond to the tripartite division (logical/metaphysical/divinely actualizable) that Chignell's Kant demanded.

Therefore, regardless of how coextensive these modal domains turn out to be, Leibniz can and does distinguish between the principles that circumscribe different modal domains, and so can distinguish, *within God's thought*, grounds for real versus logical possibility.[70] So long as Leibniz's theory can distinguish between such principles, Leibniz has the resources to distinguish those ideas that represent complex essences conforming merely to the principle of noncontradiction from those

67. For further discussion, see Cover and O'Leary-Hawthorne 1999, 210–13.

68. Admittedly, in his early writings, Leibniz sometimes offered a deductive proof of the PSR. CP, 33, and Ak, 6.2.483. Leibniz also claims the PSR "directly follows" from his containment theory of truth (AG, 31), though the so-called logicist reading of Leibniz's metaphysics is surely wrong about how to understand this.

69. See, for example, AG, 170–71; LC, 7.394–395; NE, 127, though these passages can be read in other ways (even within the same text: see NE, 114, 151).

70. I am assuming that the difference between, say, logical and metaphysical necessity is a matter of demarcation or domain restriction and does not involve a difference in "kind" or "strength" of necessity, whatever that may mean. Though this assumption is not universally accepted, I hereby invoke the authority of Kant himself in support: "When we distinguish hypothetical necessity . . . from absolute necessity, what is at issue here is not the force or the effective power of the necessity. We are not concerned, namely, whether a thing is . . . more or less necessary. What is at issue is the necessitating principle: namely, *whence* the thing is necessary" (NM, 22).

that represent possibilities conforming to additional combinatorial principles.

Once again, these are mostly defensive replies. Here's the same offensive response I made to Adams. Chignell's Kantian objection, if left standing, leads not to the early Kant but to Spinoza—a point Chignell (2012) himself has recently made.[71] As we have seen, Kant claims that the grounds of the real possibility of consistently thinkable ideas lie in God's actually exemplified, extramental properties. In the most straightforward case, God's actual exemplification of properties p and q grounds the real possibility of something's being p-and-q. But we also saw that, unlike Spinoza, Kant denies that God directly exemplifies every metaphysically possible property. Some real possibilities are consistent "consequences" of God's actual properties, out of which their possibility can somehow be constructed.

However, this second step re-creates the very gap between logical and real possibility that Kant thought needed bridging in the first place. For suppose God directly exemplifies properties p and q. Consider some derivative property d that is a consistent "consequence" of God's being p, which I have interpreted as being somehow constructible out of God's exemplification of p. What, then, are the grounds for the real possibility of something's being q-and-d? It can't be simply facts about logically consistent constructability—by Kant's own reasoning.[72] The grounds of real possibility require more than the grounds of mere logical consistency, or else we're back with Kant's Leibniz. The proposed Kantian bridge from logical consistency to real possibility is *actual exemplification*, in which case God will need to instantiate directly p, q, *and* d in order to ground the real possibility of something's being q-and-d. And off we go expanding the divine nature to include every metaphysically possible property.

Even worse, consider a gradable divine property like *power*. Is the existence of something with submaximal power really possible? The fact that there is no logical inconsistency between the existence of an omnipotent being and a less powerful being is not enough by Kant's principles. After all, bad things can happen—real repugnance!—when logically

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71. The first case is essentially the same as the one Chignell raises; in correspondence, he has challenged my second case of gradable properties.

72. On the other hand, if it turns out that constructability *can* respect metaphysical laws rather than just logical rules in the case of divine properties, then surely the same could hold in the case of divine thoughts, in which case Kant's original objection to Leibniz fails by his own lights.

compossible properties that are not actually coexemplified are combined. This concern should also apply to submaximal *degrees* of the gradable properties God exemplifies to the maximal degree, in which case God will also need to exemplify every metaphysically possible degree of every metaphysically possible gradable property in order to ground the real possibility of a plentiful range of limited creatures. (If that doesn't seem so bad, consider the implications for the gradable property *goodness*.)

Whatever might such an expansive account of God's properties look like? Here is a hauntingly familiar version, again from Spinoza: "Since the divine nature has infinitely many attributes . . . from its necessity there must follow infinitely many things [that is, properties] in infinitely many ways, i.e., everything which can fall under an infinite intellect" (E1p16d). As with Adams, the objections from Chignell's Kant that lead away from Leibniz lead *not* to the sparse God of the orthodox early Kant, but to the bloated nature of Spinoza's *Deus sive natura*. In these final sections, I have offered some Leibniz-friendly methods to resist their objections. Avoiding the collapse, yet again, into Spinozism may provide the motivation to embrace them.

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