Letter to Coste, on Human Freedom (19 December 1707)[243]

Late in his life, Leibniz tried to establish his ideas in England through a correspondence with such figures as Lady Masham, Thomas Burnett, and Pierre Coste (see the section on Locke, especially the Preface to the New Essays). *Coste was very useful for that purpose, since, as the translator of various English authors (Locke, Shaftesbury, and others), he maintained good communications across the Channel.*

I THANK YOU very much for forwarding Mr. Locke's latest additions and corrections, and I am also very pleased to learn about his last dispute with Mr. Limborch. The freedom of indifference on which this dispute turned, and about which you asked my opinion, contains a certain subtlety that few take care to understand, although many people reason about it. It reduces to the consideration of necessity and contingency.

A truth is *necessary* when its opposite implies a contradiction; and when it is not necessary, it is called *contingent*. That God exists, that all right angles are equal to one another, etc., are necessary truths, but that I exist and that there are bodies in nature that actually appear to have right angles are contingent truths. For the whole universe could have been made otherwise, since time, space, and matter are absolutely indifferent to motions and to shapes, and God has chosen from an infinity of possibles that which he judged most suitable.

But once he has chosen, we must confess that everything is included in his choice and that nothing can be changed, since he has foreseen and regulated everything once and for all, for he would not regulate things by bits and pieces. Consequently, sins and evils, which he has judged permissible in order to allow greater goods, are included in some way in his choice. It is this necessity that we can now attribute to things to come, a necessity which we call *hypothetical* or *consequential*, that is, necessity based on a consequence of the hypothesis of the choice made. This necessity does not destroy the contingency of things and does not produce the absolute necessity that contingency cannot allow. And almost all theologians and philosophers (that is, except the Socinians) acknowledge the hypothetical necessity I have just explained and acknowledge that we cannot oppose it without upsetting God's attributes and the very nature of things.

However, although all facts of the universe are now certain with respect to God, or (what comes to the same thing) determined in themselves and even linked among themselves, it does not follow that their interconnection is always truly necessary, that is, that the truth which asserts that one fact

243. Editors' title. G III 400–4. French.

follows from another is necessary. And it is this fact we must especially apply to the case of voluntary actions.

When we present a choice to ourselves, for example, whether to leave or not to leave, given all the internal or external circumstances, motives, perceptions, dispositions, impressions, passions, inclinations taken together, there is a question as to whether I am still in a state of contingency, or whether I make the choice to leave, for example, by necessity—that is, whether in fact this true and determined proposition, that *in all these circumstances taken together, I will choose to leave,* is contingent or necessary. I reply that it is contingent, because neither I nor any other more enlightened mind could demonstrate that the opposite of this truth implies a contradiction. And assuming that by *freedom of indifference* we understand a freedom opposed to necessity (as I have just explained), I agree about this freedom. For, I am actually of the opinion that our freedom, as well as that of God and the blessed spirits, is not only exempt from coercion, but also from absolute necessity, even though it cannot be exempt from determination and certainty.

But I find that we need to be very cautious here so that we do not fall into a chimera which shocks the principles of good sense, namely, what I call an *absolute indifference* or *indifference of equilibrium,* an indifference that some people imagine freedom to involve, and that I believe to be chimerical. We must therefore consider that this interconnection about which I have just spoken is not necessary, absolutely speaking, but that it is certainly true, nevertheless, and that, in general, every time that the circumstances, taken together, tip the balance of deliberation more on one side than on the other, it is certain and infallible that the former side will be chosen. God or a perfectly wise person will always choose the best that they know of, and if one side were not better than the other, they would choose neither the one nor the other. 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).

However, I see that there are people who imagine that sometimes we set ourselves for the lesser option, that God sometimes chooses the lesser good, everything considered, and that a person sometimes chooses without grounds [*sujet*] and against all his reasons, dispositions, and passions, and finally, that we sometimes choose without any reason determining the choice. But I hold that to be false and absurd, because one of the greatest principles of good sense is that nothing ever happens without a cause or determining reason. Thus when God chooses, it is by reason of the best, and when a person chooses, it is the option that struck him the most. If he chooses what he sees as less useful and pleasant in some respects, perhaps it becomes more agreeable to him through a whim, or contrariness, or for similar reasons which belong to a depraved taste; these are determining reasons, even though they are not conclusive reasons. And we will never be able to find a contrary example.

Thus, although we have a freedom of indifference which saves us from necessity, we never have an indifference of equilibrium which exempts us

from determining reasons. There is always something which inclines us and makes us choose, but without being able to necessitate us. And just as God is always infallibly led to the best, even though he is not led to it necessarily (other than by a moral necessity), we are always infallibly, but not necessarily, led to what strikes us the most; since the contrary does not imply any contradiction, it was neither necessary nor essential that God created, nor that he created this world in particular, even though his wisdom and goodness led him to it.

That is what Mr. Bayle, subtle as he was, did not consider well enough when he held that a case similar to Buridan's ass was possible, and that a man placed in circumstances of perfect equilibrium could nevertheless choose. For we must say that the case of a perfect equilibrium is chimerical, and never happens, since the universe is incapable of being divided or split into two equal and similar parts. The universe is not like an ellipse or other such oval, where a straight line drawn through its center can cut it into two congruent parts. The universe has no center, and its parts are infinitely varied; thus the case never arises in which everything is perfectly equal and strikes equally on all sides. And although we are not always capable of perceiving all the small impressions that contribute to determining us, there is always something that determines us [to choose] between two contradictories, without the case ever being perfectly equal on all sides.

However, although our choice *ex datis*, with respect to all internal and external circumstances taken together, is always determined, and although, for the present, we cannot alter our will, it is true, nevertheless, that we have great power with respect to our future volitions, by choosing to be attentive to certain objects and by accustoming ourselves to certain ways of thinking. In this way we can accustom ourselves to resist impressions better and have our reason behave better, so that we can contribute to making ourselves will what we should. Moreover, I have also shown that when we take things in a certain metaphysical sense, we are always in a state of perfect spontaneity, and that what we attribute to the impressions of external things arises only from confused perceptions in us corresponding to them, perceptions that cannot fail to be given to us from the first in virtue of pre-established harmony, which relates each substance to all the others.

If it were true, sir, that your Cevennois were prophets, this circumstance would not be contrary to my hypothesis of pre-established harmony, indeed, it would strongly agree with it.[244] I have always said that the present is pregnant with the future, and that there is a perfect interconnection between things, no matter how distant they are from one another, so that someone who is sufficiently acute could read the one from the other. I would not even oppose someone who maintains that there are spheres in the universe in which prophecies are more common than in ours, just as there might be a world in which dogs have noses sufficiently acute to smell their game at 1,000 leagues;

244. Cf. G III 393, where Coste refers to Cevennois rebels against Louis XIV who prophesized and spoke in tongues.

perhaps there may also be spheres in which genii have greater leave than they have here below to interfere with the actions of rational animals. But when it is a question of reasoning about what actually happens here, our presumptive judgment must be based on what is usual in our sphere, where these kinds of prophetic views are extremely rare. We cannot swear that there are no such prophets, but, it seems to me, it is a good bet that those in question aren't. One of the reasons that could best lead me to judge favorably with respect to them would be Mr. Fatio's judgment, but we would need to know what he judges, without getting it from a newspaper. If you yourself have observed, with all due attention, a gentleman with a yearly income of two thousand pounds sterling who prophesies well in Greek, Latin, and French, although he only knows English well, there would be nothing to criticize. Thus I beg you to send me some more information about this very curious and important matter; I zealously await your response, etc.

Remark of the Author of the System of Pre-established Harmony on a Passage from the Mémoires de Trévoux of March 1704 (1708)[245]

This piece is in response to a criticism found in René-Joseph de Tournemine, "Conjectures sur l'Union de l'Ame et du Corps," published in Mémoires pour l'Histoire des Sciences et des Beaux Arts *(commonly known as the* Mémoires de Trévoux*), May 1703, pp. 864–75. Tournemine had objected to pre-established harmony as an account of mind–body unity. Referring to the two-clock example Leibniz often used to illustrate pre-established harmony, Tournemine noted: "Thus correspondence, harmony, does not bring about either union or essential connection. Whatever resemblance one might suppose between two clocks, however justly their relations might be considered perfect, one can never say that the clocks are united just because the movements correspond with perfect symmetry" (pp. 869–70). For the two-clock example, see also the "Postscript to a Letter to Basnage de Beauval." The date in Leibniz's title probably refers to the date on which the issue actually appeared.*

FATHER TOURNEMINE has spoken of me so obligingly in one of his *Conjectures* presented in the *Mémoires de Trévoux* (conjectures which are, in general, ingenious) that it would be wrong of me to complain that he attributes to me an objection against the Cartesians which I do not remember having made, an objection which can clearly be turned against me. However, I declare that if I did ever make it, I renounce it from now on, and would have made the following assertion instead, if I had not been so tardy in noticing the passage from the *Mémoires*.

245. G VI 595–96. French.