On Freedom and Possibility (1680–82?)[35]

ALL THINGS in God are spontaneous.[36]

It can scarcely be doubted that every person has the freedom of doing what he wills.[37]

A volition [*voluntas*] is an endeavor [*conatus*] for acting of which we are conscious.

A deed necessarily follows from a volition and the ability [to do it] [*facultas*].

There is no volition where all of the conditions requisite for both willing and being unwilling [to do something] are equal. Rather there is indifference, that is, even if all of the conditions requisite for acting are assumed, an action can be prevented if contrary conditions obtain. A person resists reasons through forgetfulness alone, that is, by turning his mind away from them. And so it is indeed possible to resist reasons.

Unless we admit this proposition, *that there is nothing without reason, that is, that there is no proposition in which there is no connection between the subject and the predicate, that is, no proposition which cannot be proved a priori.*[38]

There are two primary propositions: one, the principle of necessary things, *that whatever implies a contradiction is false,* and the other, the principle of contingent things, *that whatever is more perfect or has more reason is true.* All truths of metaphysics, or all truths that are absolutely necessary, such as those of logic, arithmetic, geometry, and the like, rest on the former principle, for someone who denies them can always be shown that the contrary implies a contradiction. All truths contingent by their nature, which are necessary only on the hypothesis of the volition of God or of some other being, rest on the latter principle.

And so all truths that concern possibles or essences and the impossibility of a thing or its necessity (that is, the impossibility of its contrary) rest on the principle of contradiction; all truths concerning contingent things or the existence of things, rest on the principle of perfection. Except for the existence of God alone, all existences are contingent. Moreover, the reason [*causa*] why some particular contingent thing exists, rather than others, should not be sought in its definition alone,[39] but in a comparison with other things. For, since there are an infinity of possible things which, nevertheless, do not exist, the reason [*ratio*] why these exist rather than those should not be sought in their definition (for then nonexistence would imply a contradiction, and those others would not be possible, contrary to our hypothesis), but from an extrinsic source, namely, from the fact that the ones that do exist are more perfect than the others.

35. Editors' title. VE II 275–78; Gr 287–91. Latin.

36. See marginal comment A below.

37. Leibniz deleted the following: "that is, doing what he judges best. One can ask whether people also have freedom of willing."

38. This sentence is incomplete in the ms.

39. Leibniz originally continued the sentence as follows: "but from some further reason [*ratio*]. Indeed, since there was a reason [*ratio*] for it to exist rather than not to exist." This was deleted, and the sentence finished as in the main text.

For, above all, I hold a notion of possibility and necessity according to which there are some things that are possible, but yet not necessary, and which do not really exist. From this it follows that a reason that always forces a free mind to choose one thing over another (whether that reason derives from the perfection of a thing, as it does in God, or from our imperfection) does not eliminate our freedom.

From this it is also obvious how the free actions of God are to be distinguished from his necessary actions. And so it is necessary that God love himself, for this is demonstrable from the definition of God. But it cannot be demonstrated that God makes[40] that which is most perfect, since the contrary does not imply a contradiction; otherwise the contrary would not be possible, contrary to the hypothesis. Moreover, this conclusion derives from the notion of existence, for only the most perfect exists.[41] Let there be two possible things, A and B, one of which is such that it is necessary that it exists, and let us assume that there is more perfection in A than in B. Then, at least, we can explain why A should exist rather than B and can foresee which of them will exist; indeed, this can be demonstrated, that is, rendered certain from the nature of the thing. And, if being certain were the same as being necessary, then, I admit, it would also be necessary for A to exist. But I call such necessity hypothetical, for if it were absolutely necessary that A exist, then B would imply a contradiction, contrary to the hypothesis. And so we must hold that everything having some degree of perfection is possible and, moreover, that the possible that occurs is the one more perfect than its opposite, and that this happens not because of its nature but because of God's general resolve to create that which is more perfect. Perfection, or essence, is an urge for existence [*exigentia existentiae*] from which existence indeed follows *per se*, not necessarily, but[42] from the denial that another thing more perfect prevents it from existing. All truths of physics are of this sort; for example, when we say that some body persists in the speed with which it begins, we mean it does so if nothing prevents it.

God produces the best not by necessity but because he wills it. Indeed, if anyone were to ask me whether God wills by necessity, I would request that he explain what he means by necessity by adding more detail, that is, I would request that he give a complete formulation of the question. For example, you might ask whether God wills by necessity or whether he wills freely, that is, because of his nature or because of his will. I respond that God, of course, cannot will voluntarily, otherwise there would be a will for willing on to infinity. Rather, we must say that God wills the best through his nature. "Therefore," you will say, "he wills by necessity." I will say, with St. Augustine, that such necessity is blessed. "But surely it follows from this that things exist by necessity." How so? Since the nonexistence of what God wills to exist implies a contradiction? I deny that this proposition is absolutely true, for

40. Leibniz originally wrote "chooses" here, but deleted it in favor of "makes."

41. See marginal comment B below.

42. Leibniz originally continued the sentence as follows: "from the hypothesis of God's production or".

otherwise that which God does not will would not be possible. For things remain possible, even if God does not choose them. Indeed, even if God does not will something to exist, it is possible for it to exist, since, by its nature, it could exist if God were to will it to exist. "But God cannot will it to exist." I concede this, yet, such a thing remains possible in its nature, even if it is not possible with respect to the divine will, since we have defined as in its nature possible anything that, in itself, implies no contradiction, even though its coexistence with God can in some way be said to imply a contradiction. But it will be necessary to use unequivocal meanings for words in order to avoid every kind of absurd locution.[43]

Therefore I say: a possible thing is something with some essence or reality, that is, something that can distinctly be understood. For example, a pentagon would remain possible even if we were to imagine that no exact pentagon ever was or would be in nature. However, one should give some reason for why no pentagon ever existed or would exist. The reason for this state of affairs is nothing but the fact that the pentagon is incompatible with other things that include more perfection, that is, with other things that include more reality, which, to be sure, exist ahead of that pentagon. But, you infer: therefore it is necessary that it does not exist. This I concede if it is understood in the sense that the proposition, "a pentagon will not exist nor has one ever existed" is necessary. But the claim is false if it is understood in the sense that the proposition, "no pentagon exists" (abstracted from time) is necessary, because I deny that this proposition can be demonstrated. For the pentagon is not absolutely impossible, nor does it imply a contradiction, even if it follows from the harmony of things that a pentagon can find no place among real things. This can best be illustrated by analogy with imaginary roots in algebra. For the square root of -1 involves some notion, though it cannot be pictured, and if anyone wanted to picture it by a circle, he would find that the straight line required for this [way of picturing roots] does not intersect the circle.[44] But there is a great difference between problems that are insoluble on account of imaginary roots and those that are insoluble because of their absurdity, as for example, if someone were to look for a number which multiplied by itself is 9 and also added to 5 makes 9. Such a number implies a contradiction, for it must, at the same time, be both 3 and 4, that is, 3 and 4 must be equal, a part equal to the whole. But if anyone were to look for a number such that its square added to nine equals that number times three, he could certainly never show, by admitting such a number that the whole is equal* to its part, but nevertheless, he could show that such a number cannot be designated.[45]

43. Quotation marks have been added in this paragraph to distinguish Leibniz's remarks from those made by the imaginary antagonist.

44. Leibniz has in mind here a way of determining the imaginary roots of an equation by noting where a given line intersects a particular circle. This method is discussed in an unpublished manuscript on universal mathematics, GM VII 73–74. There Leibniz also discusses why it fails when the roots are imaginary.

45. The equation in question is:

$$x^2 + 9 = 3x$$

Unlike the previous example, the number that squared is equal to 9 and that added to 5 equals

If God had decreed that there should be no real line incommensurable with other real lines (what I call a real line is one that really bounds some body), it would not therefore follow that it would imply a contradiction for any incommensurable line to exist, even if, because of the principle of perfection, God could not have made things differently.

Given these considerations, we can eliminate difficulties concerning the foreknowledge of future contingents. For God, who foresees the future reasons why some things should exist rather than others, foresees them in their causes with certain knowledge. And indeed, he has certain knowledge of them and formulates propositions that are necessary, given that the state of the world has, once and for all, been settled, that is, given the harmony of things. But the propositions are not necessary in an absolute sense, as mathematical propositions are necessary.

Only the proposition that God [exists is necessary in an absolute sense].[46]

If an [exact] pentagon exists, it follows that it is more perfect than other things; but it is not. Therefore an [exact] pentagon does not exist. But it does not follow from this that it is impossible for it to exist. This is the best answer. We must therefore say that it is possible for the imperfect rather than the more perfect to exist. But, you say: it is impossible for something to exist that God does not will to exist. I deny that what is not going to exist is, in its nature, thereby impossible. And so we must say that what God does not will to exist does not exist, but we must therefore deny its necessity.

Marginal Comments:

A. Hence, a Scholastic, cited in Bonartes, *The Harmony of Knowledge with Faith,* claimed that God is indifferent not as to acting but as to willing.
B. If complete indifference is required for freedom, then there is scarcely

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9, there are numbers that satisfy the constraints $\frac{3}{2}(1 \pm \sqrt{-3})$. But both roots of the equation are imaginary, and in that sense cannot be represented through line segments as other roots can by the construction outlined in the previous note.

This example is followed by the following two equations, added to the original text:

"xx from x equals $-b^2$

"xx equals $bx - bb$"

That is

$x - x^2 = -b^2$

$x^2 = bx - b^2$

It is likely that these are intended to be transformations of the equation under discussion, $x^2 + 9 = 3x$, with $b = 3$. In that case, the first of the two equations should read:

bx from xx equals $-b^2$

or

$x^2 - bx = -b^2$

It is not obvious why the equations were added.

46. There is a lacuna in ms here, filled in by the editors. Leibniz's thought seems to be that "God exists" is the only existential proposition that is absolutely necessary.

ever a free act [*actus*], since I think that the case in which everything on both sides is equal scarcely ever comes up. For even if, by chance, the reasons are equal, the passions will not be, and why should we argue about circumstances that do not arise? Nor do I think that one can produce an instance in which it is the will [*voluntas*] that chooses, since there is [always] some reason for choosing one of two things.

The Thomists place freedom in the power [*potentia*] of the will, which stands over and above every finite good in such a way that the will can resist it. And so, in order to have indifference of will, they seek indifference of intellect. They think that necessity is not inconsistent with freedom in God and that the freedom God has for loving himself is such a free necessity. But with respect to creatures he does not decide with necessity. [Vincent] Baron denies that God created those things which are most perfect.

Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas (1684)[47]

The "Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas" was Leibniz's first mature philosophical publication; it appeared in the November 1684 issue of the Leipzig journal Acta Eruditorum, *in which many of Leibniz's most important publications in mathematics and physics are also to be found. The controversies to which Leibniz refers in the opening paragraph were the famous Arnauld-Malebranche debate, occasioned by the publication of Arnauld's* Des vraies et des fausses ideés *in 1683, an attack on Malebranche's philosophy, which began a long series of exchanges. Leibniz presents himself as a mediator in this essay, which is often cited and paraphrased in his later writings. In the title and in most of the occurrences in this essay, what we have translated as* knowledge *is* cognitio, *knowledge in the weak sense, something close to understanding, acquaintance, or even cognition. It is to be distinguished from* scientia, *which is knowledge in the strict sense and which normally entails certainty and truth.*

SINCE CONTROVERSIES rage today among distinguished persons over true and false ideas and since this is an issue of great importance for recognizing truth, an issue on which Descartes himself is not altogether satisfactory, I would like to explain briefly what I think can be established about the distinctions and criteria that relate to ideas and knowledge [*cognitio*]. Thus, knowledge is either obscure or *clear,* and again, clear knowledge is either confused or *distinct,* and distinct knowledge either inadequate or *adequate,* and adequate knowledge either symbolic or *intuitive*: and, indeed, if knowledge were, at the same time, both adequate and intuitive, it would be absolutely perfect.

A notion which is not sufficient for recognizing the thing represented is *obscure,* as, for example, if whenever I remember some flower or animal I

47. G IV 422–26; VE V 1075–81. Latin.