Leibniz, *Dialogue on Human Freedom and the Origin of Evil* (25 January 1695)

The following document is a dialogue with Baron Dobrzensky, counselor of state and war to Brandenburg. Given what Leibniz wrote in a later letter to Dobrzensky, 26 January 1695 (Gr 369), it appears quite likely that the dialogue is a record of an actual conversation.

A.—I am often bothered by the thought that sin appears to be necessary and inevitable. Many fine things are said on this question, and I would not be able to reply well to them, but, at bottom, they do not satisfy me, and they soon fade away.

B.—These things require deep meditation, and unless one gives them the attention they require, one may not be sufficiently satisfied.

A.—Father Sperandio at Munich advised me not to apply myself at all to the matter. One day I presented my doubts to him and he replied with much eloquence, and in such a plausible way, that it reduced me to silence. After he finished, he asked me if what he said didn't appear right to me. I said yes. And so, [he said], sir, content yourself with this for now, and so that you might have peace of mind, think no longer about this matter. It is true that I have not been able to heed his advice.

B.—It would be easy for a mediocre mind to follow the advice of this Father, but not a person of your intelligence. I admit that one does not need to bother with such subtle questions, and I do not advise anyone to interest himself in them. I only say that when someone has enough diligence to raise these difficulties for himself, then he must have enough to investigate their solutions. As for Father Sperandio's advice, I do not approve of it. Good and solid answers are of such nature that, the more one reflects on them, the more solid they appear; and it is a characteristic of evasions that, to find them satisfactory, one should consider them as little as possible.

A.—I will tell you, then, what bothers me. We are all in agreement that God knows all things and that the future is present to him just like the past. I cannot now move my arm without his having foreseen it from all eternity. He knows whether I will commit a murder, a crime, or some other sin. And since his foresight is infallible, it is infallible that I will commit the sin that he foresaw. It is therefore necessary that I will sin and it is not within my power to abstain from it. Thus, I am not free.

B.—It must be admitted, sir, that we are not completely free; only God is completely free, since he alone is independent. Our freedom is limited in many ways: I am not free to fly like an eagle nor to swim like a dolphin, because my body lacks the necessary equipment. Something similar can be said about our mind. Sometimes we admit that we do not have a free mind. And, speaking rigorously, we never have perfect freedom of mind. But that does not prevent us from having a certain degree of freedom that beasts do not have, that is, our faculty of reasoning and choosing in accordance with how things appear to us. As for divine foreknowledge, God foresees things as they are and does not change their nature. Events that are fortuitous and contingent in themselves remain so, notwithstanding the fact that God has foreseen them. Thus they are assured, but they are not necessary.

A.—Assured or infallible, isn't that almost the same thing?

B.—There is a difference: it is necessary that three times three is nine and this depends on no condition. God himself cannot prevent this. But a future sin can be prevented, if the man does his duty, even though God foresees that he will not do it.[1] This sin is necessary because God foresaw it, and if God foresaw it only because it will be, it follows that it is as if one had said: it will necessarily happen, assuming that it will happen. This is what one calls conditional necessity.

A.—These distinctions do not resolve the difficulty.

B.—I must confess that I don't see any difficulty. Is there something wrong with granting that God foresees everything? On the contrary, since it is so, it wouldn't be of any use to be displeased by it; indeed, it would amount to not loving God.

A.—I am completely satisfied with divine foreknowledge. It only displeases me that I am not able to reply to the troublesome consequences which seem to me to arise from the certainty or necessity resulting from it, whether one takes it as conditional or as absolute. For if a sin is necessary, or at least if it is foreseen, and if it is infallible that I will sin, then regardless of my attempts to avoid it, it will nonetheless happen.

B.—These troublesome consequences have no place here. The ancient philosophers had a similar sophism, called the sloth's syllogism, because it concludes that we should do nothing. For if something is foreseen and infallible, it will happen without my effort, and if it is not foreseen, it will not happen, even though I am able to do it. I reply to this by denying something put forward without proof, that the thing foreseen will happen, whatever I do. If it is foreseen that I will do it, it is also foreseen that I will do what is needed to do it, and if it will not happen because of my laziness, my laziness itself will also have been foreseen.[2] What a German proverb says about death, that it needs to have a cause, can also be said about eternal death or damnation, sin, or any other thing. Thus since we know nothing of what is foreseen, we should do our part without pausing over the useless question as to whether success is foreseen or not, all the more so since God is content with our good will when it is sincere and ardent.[3]

A.—This is very good advice, and it completely accords with my view. However, the great difficulty about the origin of evil still remains. I am asking about the origin of the origins, and I am not easily satisfied with the ordinary evasions. It is said that man sins because his nature is corrupted by Adam's sin. But we return to the same question with respect to Adam himself, for how did it happen that he sinned? Or, more generally speaking, how did sin come into the world, since God, the creator of the world, is infinitely good and infinitely powerful? To account for sin there must be another infinite cause capable of counterbalancing the influence of divine goodness.

B.—I can name you such a thing.

A.—You would therefore be a Manichean, since you admit two principles, one of good and the other of evil.

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[1] [A similar, but more extensive, discussion of this point may be found in *Discourse on Metaphysics* 30. —JA]

[2] [It may be helpful to recall DM 13, the last paragraph of DM 14, and M 22's claim that the present of each monad is "pregnant with the future." —JA]

[3] [The title of the dialogue tells us it discusses two main topics: human freedom, and the origin of evil. The discussion of freedom ends here; what follows is the discussion of the origin of evil. —JA]

B.—You yourself will acquit me of this charge of Manicheanism when I name this other principle.

A.—Then please name it now, sir.

B.—It is nothingness [*le Niant*].

A.—Nothingness? But is nothingness infinite?

B.—No doubt it is; it is infinite, it is eternal and it has many attributes in common with God. It includes an infinity of things, for all things that do not exist are included in nothingness, and all things that are no longer have returned into nothingness.

A.—You are joking, no doubt. [This is] almost like a wise man whose book about Nothing I remember having seen. (Passentius, *de Nihilo*.)

B.—No, I am not joking. The Platonists and Saint Augustine himself have already shown us that the cause of good is positive, but that evil is a defect, that is, a privation or negation, and consequently, it arises from nothingness or nonbeing.

A.—I do not see how nothingness, which is nothing, can enter into the composition of things.

B.—Yet you know that, in arithmetic, zeros joined to ones make up different numbers, such as 10, 100, 1000; a witty fellow, having written several zeros in a row, wrote above them: on the other hand, a "one" is needed too. But, without going so far, you would admit that all created things are limited, and that their limits, or their *non plus ultra* if you wish, constitute something negative. For example, a circle is limited on account of the fact that the separation of the compass used to inscribe that circle was not larger. Thus the boundaries or the *non plus ultra* of this separation determine the circle. It is the same for all other things, for they are bounded or imperfect by virtue of the principle of negation or of nothingness they contain, by virtue of the lack of an infinity of perfections in them, and which are only a nothingness with respect to them.

A.—Yet you would admit that everything was created good and in such a way that God had reason to be pleased with it, as the Sacred Scriptures tell us. Original sin came after. And that is what I find surprising, namely, how original sin could have arisen in things wholly good.

B.—Before all sin, there was an original imperfection in all created things, an imperfection which arises from their limitation. In the same way that an infinite circle is impossible, since any circle is bounded by its circumference, an absolutely perfect created thing is also impossible;[4] that is why it is believed that the Sacred Scriptures meant to refer even to angels when they suggested that among the ministers of God, there are none without defects. There was no positive evil in created things at the beginning, but they always lacked many perfections. Thus, because of a lack of attention, the first man was able to turn away from the supreme good and be content with some created thing, and thus, he fell into sin. That is, from an imperfection that was merely privative in the beginning, he fell into a positive evil.

A.—But where does the original imperfection antecedent to original sin come from?

B.—It can be said that it arises from the very essences or natures of created things; for the essences of things are eternal, even though things aren't. It has always been true that three times

[4] [Compare this to Descartes' discussion of how we "participate in non-being" in the fourth paragraph of the Fourth Meditation. —JA]

three is nine and it will always be so. These things do not depend on God's will, but on his understanding. For example, essences or properties of numbers are eternal and immutable, and nine is a perfect square, not because God wants it to be so, but because its definition entails that it is, for it is three times three, and thus it is a result of the multiplication of a number by itself. God's understanding is the source of the essences of created things, such as they are in him, that is, bounded. If they are imperfect, one can only blame their limitation on their boundaries, that is to say, the extent of their participation in nothingness.

A.—I acknowledge, after what you have just said, that created things are necessarily limited, a bit like the circle we spoke of earlier. But it seems that it was up to God to create them at least perfect enough so that they don't fall.

B.—I believe that God did create things in ultimate perfection, though it does not seem so to us considering the parts of the universe. It's a bit like what happens in music and painting, for shadows and dissonances truly enhance the other parts, and the wise author of such works derives such a great benefit for the total perfection of the work from these particular imperfections that it is much better to make a place for them than to attempt to do without them. Thus, we must believe that God would not have allowed sin nor would he have created things he knows will sin, if he could not derive from them a good incomparably greater than the resulting evil.[5]

A.—I would like to know what this great good is.

B.—I can assure you that it is, but I cannot explain it in detail. One would have to know the general harmony of the universe for that, whereas we know only a very small part.[6] It is when speaking in rapture about the depths of divine wisdom, that is, when explaining this same matter, that Saint Paul exclaimed, "Oh, depth of riches." [Romans 11:33]

A.—Yet it is strange that there are creatures who have fallen and others who have been elevated. Where does this difference come from, then?

B.—The difference between created things arises originally from their essence, as I believe I have just shown, and the order of things, something from which divine wisdom did not wish to deviate, required this variety. I will give you an example from geometry, something not unknown to you.

A.—It is true that this science touches upon things, and shows what the human mind is capable of, if it is led in an orderly way. But I do not see how one can find something there relevant to our concerns. So, I will be even more pleased to hear it.

B.—Geometers draw a great distinction between commensurable and incommensurable lines. They call lines commensurable when they can be expressed by numbers, that is, by measures or by parts of a measure. But when neither a whole number nor a fraction of a number can be found to express them, they are incommensurable. For example, if there were two lines, one nine feet and one ten feet long, they would be commensurable, for they have a common measure, the foot. And if one of them was ten feet and the other nine feet and a fifth, they would still be

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[5] [Compare this to Descartes' discussion of the need to consider the universe as a whole in the Fourth Meditation (seventh paragraph, and third-to-last paragraph). —JA]

[6] [Compare this to Descartes' claim that "there is no reason to marvel at the fact that God should bring about certain things the reasons for which I do not understand" in paragraph six of the Fourth Meditation. —JA]

commensurable, for the fifth of a foot would be the common measure, being contained fifty times in the line ten feet long and 46 times in the line 9-1/5 feet long.

A.—That is easy to understand, but incommensurables are a bit more difficult.

B.—Here is an example: the square root of two is incommensurable with the unit. This number is called a surd [*nombre gourd*] because it cannot be expressed exactly either by whole numbers or by fractions. And you will never find a whole number, nor a fraction, nor half a whole number, nor half a fraction, which multiplied by itself produces the number two, as one can easily understand by searching for such a number.

A.—But I was expecting incommensurable lines, rather than incommensurable numbers.

B.—Here is one, corresponding to the square root of two, namely, the diagonal of the perfect square, for it was long ago noticed that this line is incommensurable with the side of the square. Let ABCD be a perfect square, whose sides are all equal and whose angles are also equal, that is, all right angles; I claim that its diagonal AC is incommensurable with its side, for example, with AB.

A.—Let's see the proof of this.

B.—It is an easy proof. Construct another perfect square whose side is the diagonal of the first square. This new square will be ACEF. It is evident that the second square is exactly twice the preceding square, ABCD, for square ABCD contains two triangles ABC and ADC, whereas square ACEF contains four of these triangles, namely, ADC, CDE, EDF, and FDA, and all these triangles are equal. And that which contains a same magnitude fourfold is no doubt twice that which contains it only twofold.

A.—That's certainly evident, but what do you conclude from it?

B.—It follows that if a side of the small square ABCD, namely, the line AB, is one foot long, the side of the large square ACEF, namely, AC, will be the square root of two. For the square on that side has the value of two square feet, and, in order to find its side, we must take the square root of the area, which is two, as all mathematicians know. But we have already shown that the square root of two is incommensurable with the unit and completely inexpressible in rational numbers [*nombres exact*].

A.—Now that is surprising. Wouldn't God be able to find a number capable of expressing exactly the square root of two or the length of the diagonal of a square?

B.—God can't find absurd things. That would be as if we asked God to teach us the way to divide three coins into two equal parts without breaking one, that is, without getting a one and a half or the like.

A.—You are right; that would be to ask for absurdities unworthy of God, or rather, that would be to ask for nothing or not to know what it is that one is asking for. I see the necessity of what you are saying about incommensurables, although it goes beyond our imagination. This should enable us to understand, at the same time, both our inadequacy and our adequacy. For many things we know *that* they are, but we cannot claim to know perfectly why they are. Yet, what do you derive from this fine geometrical meditation that can be applied to our question?

B.—Here it is: isn't it true that if the order of things or divine wisdom required God to produce perfect squares, then God, having resolved to do this, couldn't fail to produce incommensurable

lines, even though they have the imperfection of not being able to be expressed exactly? For a square cannot fail to have a diagonal, which is the distance between its opposite angles. Let us push the comparison further, and let us compare commensurable lines with minds who sustain themselves in their purity, and incommensurables with less regulated minds who then fall into sin. It is evident that the irregularity of incommensurable lines arises from the very essence of figures, and must not be imputed to God; it is even evident that this incommensurability is not an evil that God can fail to produce. It is also true that God could have avoided it by creating, not figures and continuous quantities, but only numbers or discrete quantities. But the imperfection of incommensurables has been paid back with even greater advantages, insofar as it was better to allow them to occur so as not to deprive the universe of all figures. It is the same with minds less firm in sustaining themselves, whose original imperfection arises from their essence, which is bounded in accordance with their degree. Their sin, which is only something accidental or contingent (though it is grounded in their essence, without, however, resulting from it as a necessary consequence), arises from their will; and the incommensurably greater good that God knows how to derive from this evil comes from his infinite wisdom, and led him not to exclude them from existence, nor to prevent them from sinning. This he could have done, by using his absolute power, but it would, at the same time, have overturned the order of things that his infinite wisdom chose.[7]

A.—These are singular meditations and they shed new light on this matter.

B.—I believe that we could have explained the matter using expressions and comparisons very different from mine. But I hold that we will not be able to deny my account at bottom, if we meditate on it ever so little. It conforms with Saint Paul, Saint Augustine, and, in part, with the excellent work of Luther on servitude of the will, which is extremely good, in my opinion, as long as one tones down some extravagant expressions, and which has seemed to me, from my childhood, to be the finest and most solid book he left to us.

[7] [This is perhaps a useful supplement to Leibniz's argument that ours is the best possible world (*Discourse on Metaphysics* 1-3; *Monadology* 46, 51-5). —JA]