Metaphysics // Fall 2022

Handout 1

Classical discussions: Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, *Letter to Coste*

Two necessities. Leibniz's key distinction is between absolute necessity and hypothetical necessity. 17, 481
We may state it thus:

(1-1) a. A proposition P is absolutely necessary ('really, truly' necessary) if not-P leads to a contradiction.

b. A proposition P is hypothetically necessary (and 'really' contingent) if not-P leads to a contradiction only when combined with some further non-trivial proposition R.

Examples of absolutely necessary propositions include 'The sum of the angles of the triangle is 180°', 'God exists'. In general, absolute necessity is attached to mathematical/logical truths and divine existence. Among hypothetically necessary propositions there are, 'Paris is the capital of France', 'Napoleon existed', '$E = mc^2$'—indeed, every other proposition true in our actual world, but false in some possible world. But why declare these plainly contingent, empirical propositions necessary in some sense? And what is the proposition R that yields that necessity?

Well, events in our world (speaking differently, contingently true propositions) are not *random*. The reason they occur is, ultimately, the Divine choice that initiated the chain of events in accordance with mechanical laws. These laws are also instituted by God and are hypothetically necessary. *Given* the Divine choice (proposition R), all these events are necessary. On the other hand, God's choice itself is not absolutely necessary either. God is not *compelled* (how can He be?) to create the world and its contents the way they are created (or at all!), but chooses to create freely.

Freedom and determinism. There is a further claim, too (a corollary on the distinction above). Events in the actual world are contingent not simply because they are consequences of God's (free) choice. They 481
are so also because their mutual dependence is not a logical truth: their negation (to speak in linguistic terms) is not resolved, at least by a finite mind, into a contradiction. This, Leibniz says, is a central characteristic of a voluntary, free action.

On the other hand: choices *are* determined ('certainly true', as he says). Not only God, but also a perfectly wise person will always choose the best. Less wise people will follow the strongest inclination (possibly a passion). In this way we reconcile freedom (which now means 'freedom from necessity') with determinism, the idea that every event has a 'determining reason'. 482

In the *Discourse* the additional challenge for Leibniz is to reconcile between the reality of freedom 18
and the nature of substances. To put the latter view somewhat crudely: I have a soul, and the soul is a substance, an indivisible, non-material block of reality. Unlike the faceless atoms of the materialists, Leibniz's substances have individual natures ('essences'). These natures are like tightly written pieces of code. If, like God, you could read the code, you could see all the choices I have made in the past or 20
will make in the future.

But, you say, what I do depends, for example, on where I am. And where I am depends, self-evidently, not only on me, but on the external circumstances. Leibniz's answer is that the code (my individual 20
essence) includes also all that happens elsewhere in the world. My soul mirrors the universe, very dimly, but sufficiently well for the supreme intelligence to read off the code the description of the entire universe.

To return to the main problem: how do we secure freedom under this doctrine of individual substances? Leibniz's answer, again, is that any actual empirical event ('Caesar crossing the Rubicon') is 'certain, 18
but not necessary'. You can't prove it as a logical truth, and its opposite you can't resolve into a 18
contradiction.

Foreknowledge and freedom. In the *Letter to Coste* Leibniz reassures us that determinism, strictly 484
speaking, applies to our *present* choices. As for the future choices, they are to a very great extent up to us. That's because we can educate, habituate ourselves to be more or less attentive to certain thoughts and behaviours.

Question 1. How does this last claim hold up?

He then turns to foreknowledge: 'The present is big (i.e. pregnant) with the future etc.' Everything 484
in the world is interconnected. We can't discern these connections, including between the present and the future, simply because we are weak in reason and perception. So foreknowledge is a comparatively trivial implication of this metaphysical outlook.

But this possibility of Divine foreknowledge, along with the earlier theses about individual essences, would be difficult to reconcile with freedom. A free choice is, at best, an illusion. Leibniz is certainly aware of this tension. Consider this passage:

> God, in concurring with our actions, ordinarily does no more than follow the laws which he has established, that is to say, he conserves and produces continuously our being in such a way that thoughts happen to us *spontaneously or freely* in the order that the notion of our individual substance *bears*, in which one could *foresee* them from all eternity. Moreover, in virtue of the decree that he has made that the will shall always tend to the apparent good, in expressing or imitating God's will in certain particular respects, with regard to which this apparent good always has some truth in it, he determines ours to choose what seems the best, without, nevertheless, necessitating it. For speaking absolutely, our will is in indifference, in so far as it is opposed to necessity, and it has the power to do otherwise or even to suspend its action completely: the one and the other alternative being and remaining possible. (*DM*, §30, italics added)

How is the choice free if the individual essence already contains them? Could I actually choose an alternative that is *not* contained in the essence? If I couldn't, then the choice is only apparently free. The same question must be asked about foreknowledge, too.

As for the 'apparent good', is God's decree merely that we choose anything that seems good to us (whatever this good is), or that we choose a particular good in the given circumstance? The first alternative leaves ample room for free choice. God, in this picture, is an aloof designer issuing higher-order rules, like 'X will choose any y that appears good to him', without specifying *what* entity X will in fact choose. The particular choices are left at X's discretion—they are chosen freely. But this clashes with the idea of individual essences also determined by God and which are also supposed to determine the person's choices. There may also be a problem with foreknowledge: how would God foresee any of the choices? This last issue may be dealt with theologically by appealing to God's special capacities like being outside of time etc.

Still, Leibniz can't easily think of God as an aloof designer. But even if he were such a designer, how can we say that the will is in a state of indifference? Suppose that, on a given occasion, I prefer this cake to that ice-cream. Then, by God's decree, I *must* choose the cake. This is so, even if we now assume that the cake-preference itself arose in me freely, somehow.

Finally, consider Leibniz's appeal to the distinction between 'inclining' and 'necessitating'. In the next paragraph, he says that we should educate ourselves to choose well (so that *our* apparent goods are really good; compare the passage from the *Letter to Coste* above). Put together, this seems to mean:

(1-2) a. To incline X to ϕ: to subject X to higher-order rules of choice where ϕ-ing is one of the alternatives.

b. To necessitate X to ϕ: to subject X to a lower-order rule where ϕ-ing is the only real alternative.

Plausibly, this is how we ordinarily think of 'inclining'. For example, I want to educate you to be brave. The outcome, I say, will be that you will be 'inclined to act bravely'. That is: you'll be 'disposed' to so act, there will be a good chance that you so act. But it would be strange if I also said that it is already determined that you will be acting bravely, or that I could foresee that you'd be acting bravely.

In other words, if God is no more than a modest educator who puts certain dispositions in us—therefore inclining us—to act in a certain way, free choice is secure. But it is not secure when we also insist that essences include every choice that the person will make, or when we insist that someone (God) can, for this very reason, foresee how the person will act.

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