

6.5 Freedom, Responsibility and the Problem of Evil

6.5.1 Readings and Study questions

- Readings:
 - Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, 13 and 30, 31
 - Additional reading: Voltaire, *Candide*
- Study questions:
 1. How does Leibniz argue that we are free, even if we are self-contained substances?
 2. How does Leibniz argue that we are responsible for our actions, even if it is God who decided to create us as we are in the first place?
 3. How does Leibniz explain the appearance of evil in the best possible world?

6.5.2 Leibniz' account of individual freedom

The problem: Necessitarianism is incompatible with freedom

- The lazy argument: if everything is already written, why bother doing anything? Stop acting altogether, whatever God has planned on happening will happen anyway.
- The problem is the seemingly incompatibility between predetermination, free will and moral responsibility. If from God's decree on, it has been decided what we will be and will do, then how is it possible for Leibniz to hold that what we are and do does depend on us?
- We will have to distinguish between two questions:
 1. Are we free to do what we do?
 2. Are we responsible to do what we do?

Leibniz needs both in order to recover our moral responsibility. Freedom being a necessary condition of responsibility, we'll start with freedom.

Leibniz's rejection of necessitarianism

We have discussed this point earlier. The existence of contingency is a *conditio sine qua non* for the existence of freedom.

- Distinction between necessary and necessary ex hypothesi:
 1. a necessary truth is absolutely necessary – their opposite implies contradiction
 2. a contingent truth is necessary ex hypothesi: necessary under the hypothesis of God's decree
- That you came today in class is a necessary consequence of God's decree to create you as you are. It is a necessary part of your complete concept which God, and only God, understands entirely.
- However, God's decree itself was not necessary, and an different choice, a choice in which you would not have come to class today was possible. It does not imply contradiction. God will not make that choice because He created this world as the best world possible. But your twin, staying home or taking a walk on the lake is still possible. He is part of another possible world.
- There are demonstration a priori of both necessary and contingent truths. However, while in the former case, one shows that the proposition is reducible to an identity which the Principle of Contradiction guarantee to be necessarily true, in the latter case, one can only understand what sufficient reason God had to decide as He did.

—→ *Because they the consequence of a contingent decree based of God's free will, contingent truths are not necessary. This does not show that we are free, but shows that the first requirement for the possibility of freedom is satisfied within Leibniz' philosophy: not everything that happens in the world is necessary.*

Leibniz' solution – Distinction between certainty and necessity

- While one can easily agree that Leibniz does not endorse necessitarianism, there still remains a question of whether we, as created by

God's decree, are free or not. The problem is that even if everything that happens is contingent, it is contingent on God's decree. When God decided to create this world, he could see exactly everything that will happen, because God understand the complete notion of all individual substances, and that in the complete notion of the individual substances is contained everything that will happen.

So: it seems that God, in creating us, made us do what we do!

- Leibniz' responses: what is certain is different from what is necessary
It is not because God can foresee, and even foresee with certainty, what we will do with our lives that he is the one that makes it happen.

Example: your little sister, the horror movie on the TV table, and her nightmares.

Let us say you have a little sister. You know that she is always eager to do what the grown ups do, including watching horror movies. You also know very well that whenever she watches one of these movies, she has awful nightmares for a week. Now let's say you leave the DVD of *Friday the 13th* on the TV table.

You can easily foresee that (1) she is going to watch the movie and (2) she is going to have nightmares for the coming week. But from this it does not follow that you made her watch the movie! She was free to do it, and did it by herself.

—→ *In the same way, God foresees everything you will do but does not make you do it.*

- So: Leibniz has a coherent notion of **individual freedom**: individual substances unfold themselves outside of any external influence. They do what they do "by themselves".

Freedom for Leibniz' individual substances amounts to the ability to act outside of external constraint. This is a coherent notion of freedom, which moreover is compatible with determinism.

Note that this is a similar notion of freedom to Spinoza's.

As Leibniz says, it would be absurd to ask that Caesar's crossing the Rubicon be without a cause: there is a cause, and it is Caesar.

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—→ *Individual Substances are free in the sense that they deploy themselves outside of any external influence. That God knows what they are going to do does not change that they are free.*

6.5.3 Leibniz' account of individual responsibility

The problem of responsibility

- We have seen above that Leibniz has a coherent notion of individual freedom. But this does not solve the problem of the compatibility between pre-determination and moral responsibility.
- The problem is not that God make us do what we do. It is true that even God can foresee the entirety of our future actions, is not the one who is actually acting when we act.

The problem is instead that, once God has decided to create an individual substance, all what will happen to this substance comes with it. This seems to imply that, while we are *free* to do what we do, we are not *responsible* for it:

Here goes the argument

- That “what we do” happens depends solely on our complete nature’s being part of the actual world

- that our complete nature is part of the actual world solely depends on God’s decree

CC: That “what we do” happens depends solely God’s decree and is not our responsibility

- For this reason, Leibniz does not seem to give a satisfactory answer to the problem of our **responsibility** for our acts.

That another me is part of another possible world does not change the fact that the actual me, the one which was actualized by God, cannot be or do anything else than what I am.

- Classic examples:
 - Ceasar and the Rubicon
 - Adam and the apple

Leibniz' attempts to save moral responsibility

Here is how Leibniz struggles to preserve our responsibility for our actions. God does not necessitate our actions, but only inclines us to do whatever seems the best:

- God has established the laws of nature. The law that we, human being, are always following, is to do what appears the most desirable, or the best.

Our fundamental nature is to aim for the best.

- God has also made us such that we are in a state of ignorance as to which particular actions our nature bounds us to accomplish.
- Thus, we remain in a state of (epistemic) indifference – we could act otherwise in principle even if it is certain that we will act in some way.

—→ *We may not be responsible for the fact that whatever happens in fact does happen, but we are responsible for deciding and acting the way we do, which is another way to say that we are responsible for our choices.*

Does this solve the problem of responsibility? Is not God responsible for making you real in the first place?

6.5.4 The problem of evil

The problem of evil is a classical problem for all philosophers who take God as a perfect creator as part of their system. The problem is to account for what we take as evil in the world. In Leibniz' case, it is of outermost importance to make the appearance of evil consistent with the idea that God created the best possible world.

Here are his arguments:

- The greater good:

What appears as evil is a necessary part of a better world

For example, that sin exists might be for the greater good for we are then responsible for our actions, and we have to possibility to act in the right way. If we did not have the possibility to act in the wrong way, we would not be responsible for acting in the right way either.

- That we do not understand what greater good a given seemingly evil serves is due to our epistemic limitations.

All we need to know are the general rule: that everything happens for the best. We cannot know the details

- Evil is not evil, but *mere negativity*.

Evil and Sin only come from the fact that creatures are limited and not perfect.

→ Overall, Leibniz gives very traditional solutions to the problem of evil.

6.6 Conclusion on Leibniz

The core aspects of Leibniz' philosophy are the following:

The core insight – God being absolutely perfect must have created the most perfect world

That the world is perfect does not mean that everything is wonderful, but that this world features the best balance between the simplicity of the means and the richness of the result.

Epistemology – A mitigated rationalism:

- empirical knowledge does exist
- knowledge of eternal and necessary truths is possible, superior, and, while it is triggered by the senses, it is ultimately grounded in pure reason

Metaphysics – Individual Substances

- Leibniz puts the notion of individuality at the center of its metaphysics: the fundamental constituents of the universe are individual substances, each of which is unique of its kind.
- As substances, they are self-sufficient, that is to say, they are self-contained and independent from one another. The only way they can be influenced is in being created or destroyed by God.
- The appearances of our world as constituted of causally interacting physical systems is a well grounded illusion. It is an illusion because

Necessity, Freedom and Responsibility – Leibniz' version of compatibilism:

- Leibniz reject the idea of sheer necessity. Contingency exists, that is, the world could have been otherwise
- That said, Leibniz rejects the idea of chance as well: nothing happens in our world which was not planned by God. God does not make things happen, but he chooses which individual substances get created, knowing exactly what these substances are going to accomplish.
- Leibniz has a coherent notion of individual freedom
- It is not clear that he manages to design a coherent theory of moral responsibility