"Leibniz on Modality" (Samuel Newlands)
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Gottfried Leibniz is often depicted as the progenitor of contemporary modal metaphysics, the philosopher who formalized our modal vocabulary and introduced possible worlds to eager metaphysicians. Certainly Leibniz's work on modality has had an outsized influence on contemporary work in analytic philosophy, and rightly so: among pre-twentieth century philosophers, Leibniz's modal metaphysics displays exceptionally high levels of care, ingenuity, sophistication, and range.

Nevertheless, Leibniz's own interest in modal concepts stems from broader metaphysical and theological concerns. His career-spanning work on modality was largely devoted to disarming what he took to be a looming threat, one that he came to associate with Spinoza. Admittedly, intellectual pressures can sometimes yield creative insights that transcend their original context, and that is clearly true in Leibniz's case. But given the historical and developmental focus of this volume, I will focus on Leibniz's own path into the modal thicket.

Leibniz contributed to three distinct projects involving modality, all of which were lively points of debate in the seventeenth century. The first concerns the *distribution* of necessity and contingency. What exists, happens, or is true necessarily? What exists, happens, or is true contingently? The second project concerns the *analysis* of modality. What is the nature and true account of necessity and contingency? We might expect an analysis of modality to provide answers to the distribution question, but for Leibniz, the order of discovery usually went in the other direction. He antecedently wanted to avoid certain distribution answers, and he developed various analyses of modality in order to secure the desired distribution. I will present several of his most prominent efforts, some of which seem more promising than others.

Leibniz was also interested in the *grounds* of modality. Like many early moderns, Leibniz thought that God was the ultimate ground of both modal truths and modal truthmakers. But there was fierce disagreement about exactly how God serves as the ultimate ground of modality. Leibniz defends an intellectualist account of the divine grounds of possibility and he offers pointed criticisms of the main alternatives. After exploring Leibniz's grounding account in section three, I will conclude by sketching how Leibniz's different modal projects could work in tandem.

1. Modal Distribution

When Leibniz was 25 years old, he offered a simple and stark account of the distribution of modality in a letter to his friend, Magnus Wedderkopf.

> However, since God is the most perfect mind, it is impossible that he is not affected by the most perfect harmony and thus must bring about the best by the very ideality of things…from this it follows that whatever has happened, is happening, or will happen is the best and, accordingly, is necessary (*CP* 3-5).

According to this account, all actual events happen necessarily and no non-actual events could have happened. This is an event-based version of *necessitarianism,* according to which the events that actually happen are the only events that could happen.[1]

Leibniz reaches this conclusion by reasoning in the following way about the existence and nature of a perfect God, which I will call the **Necessitarian Argument (NA)**:

1. God exists necessarily.
2. Necessarily, it follows from God's existence that the best possible world exists.
3. Whatever follows from something necessary is itself necessary.
4. The best possible world exists necessarily [from 1-3].
5. The actual world is the best possible world [4 and nature of actuality].
6. The actual world exists necessarily [4-5].

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[1] In different passages, Leibniz discusses the modal status of events, propositions, properties, facts, states of affairs individuals, substances, worlds, and existence. For ease, I will mostly follow Leibniz's presentations in a given context and move fluidly among these different foci, as Leibniz was not as concerned about the *bearers* of modality as some of the other philosophers discussed in this volume.

7. Whatever actually happens follows from God's bringing about the actual world.[2]
8. Therefore, all actual events happen necessarily [3, 6-7].

Leibniz came to associate his youthful distribution answer with Spinoza's necessitarianism, and he spent considerable energy over the next 45 years trying to avoid necessitarianism without abandoning the metaphysical and theological commitments that pushed him towards it. In particular, Leibniz never wavered in accepting the theism of [1], the bestness of the actual world in [5], and the metaphysics of events, individuals and worlds that yields [7].

Fifteen years later, Leibniz describes his reconsideration of [8]:

> When I considered that nothing happens by chance…and that no thing exists unless its own particular conditions are present (conditions from whose joint presence it follows, in turn, that the thing exists), I was very close to the view of those who think that everything is absolutely necessary…But the consideration of the possibles, which are not, were not, and will not be, brought me back from this precipice (PE 94).[3]

Leibniz claims that he drew back from the precipice of necessitarianism by thinking more about possibility. That is, by investigating the *nature* of modality, Leibniz thinks he discovered how to avoid the *distribution* answer of necessitarianism.

Over the course of his career, Leibniz produced several different analyses of modality that target different premises in the Necessitarian Argument. His earliest theory from the 1670s, his **per se analysis**, challenges [3]. While working on infinity and logic in the 1680s, Leibniz developed his **infinite analysis** account, which tries to block the inference to [6] from [4] and [5]. His **moral necessity** account, which features prominently in late correspondence and his *Theodicy*, targets [2]. Let us explore each of these accounts in turn.

2. Modal Analyses

2.1 Per se account

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[2] This premise follows from bedrock Leibnizian commitments in metaphysics; for one version, see PE 44-46.
[3] In this passage, Leibniz also firmly distinguishes *modal* notions from *temporal* notions. Though not original to Leibniz, his rejection of temporal models of modality proved decisive for subsequent modal metaphysics.

A year after writing his letter to Wedderkopf, Leibniz drafted a lengthy dialogue between a theologian and a philosopher in which the theologian presses a version of the Necessitarian Argument against the philosopher.

> *Th*: What is your response going to be to the argument proposed previously: the existence of God is necessary; the sins included in the series of things follow from this; whatever follows from something necessary is itself necessary. Therefore sins are necessary.

The philosopher replies with what looks like a flat-footed rejection of premise [3] of the Necessitarian Argument.

> *Ph*: I reply that it is false that whatever follows from something necessary is itself necessary…why [can't] something contingent [follow from] something necessary? (CP 55)

This reply looks flat-footed because if one understands "following from" to be equivalent to logical entailment, then the contemporary reader has a ready retort on behalf of the theologian: [3] is true because the distribution axiom [$\Box(p \to q) \to (\Box p \to \Box q)$] encoded in [3] has robust intuitive support and is true on even our weakest contemporary modal logics. And as other chapters in this volume make clear, something like the distribution axiom was accepted by many prominent philosophers throughout history as well.

Leibniz himself became dissatisfied with outright denying [3], and he provided a more sophisticated reply when he revised the dialogue a few years later (the material in < > are the additions):

> *Ph*: I reply that it is false that whatever follows from something necessary <per se> is itself necessary <per se>…why [can't] something contingent <or necessary *ex alterius hypothesi*> [follow from] something necessary <per se>?...<For in this place we call *necessary* only what is necessary per se, namely, that which has the reason for its existence and truth in itself. The truths of geometry are of this sort. But among existing things, only God is of this sort; all the rest, which follow from the series of things presupposed – i.e., from the harmony of things or the existence of God – are *contingent* per se and only hypothetically necessary>.

Leibniz now challenges [3] by first distinguishing between being necessary *per se* and being necessary *ex hypothesi*.[4] This implies that [3] and [4] are open to at least two different readings:

3a. Whatever follows from something necessary per se is itself necessary per se.
4a. Therefore, the best possible world exists necessarily per se.

3b. Whatever follows from something necessary per se is itself necessary ex hypothesi.
4b. Therefore, the best possible world exists necessarily ex hypothesi.

Leibniz concedes that [4a] is indeed worrisome and capable of delivering the problematic necessitarian conclusion of [8a]:

8a. All actual events happen necessarily per se.

But, Leibniz argues, [3a] is false, and so the argument to [4a] is unsound.

At the same time, Leibniz accepts [3b] as a true disambiguation of the original [3], which allows him to endorse a modal distribution axiom in the spirit of the contemporary version mentioned above. But Leibniz thinks [4b] is modally harmless because it leads only to [8b]:

8b. All actual events happen necessarily ex hypothesi.

Presumably, [8b] is modally harmless because its truth is consistent with some actual events happening contingently and some non-actual events remaining possible.

This is where Leibniz's underlying per se analysis of modality does real work, as the following quasi-dialogue shows:

> Indeed, even if God does not will something to exist, it is possible for it to exist, since, by its nature [*sua natura*], it could exist if God were to will it to exist. [An imagined objection:] But God cannot will it to exist. [Leibniz replies:] I concede this, yet, such a thing remains possible in its own nature [i.e., per se] even if it is not possible with respect to the divine will, since we have defined 'possible in its nature' as that which, in itself, implies no contradiction, even though its coexistence with God can in some way be said to imply a contradiction (*PE* 21).

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[4] As other contributors to this volume have shown, this distinction is hardly original to Leibniz.

Leibniz usually analyzes modal terms like necessity and contingency partly in terms of formal consistency, as he does in this passage. Necessary propositions are true propositions whose negation entails a contradiction, and contingent propositions are true propositions whose negation does not entail a contradiction.

However, Leibniz points out that the negation of a necessary truth can be inconsistent with two different groups of propositions. It could be inconsistent with a proposition about the subject-matter of the original proposition. Consider, for example, a necessary truth from geometry, such as *triangles have three interior angles*. The negation of that proposition is inconsistent with propositions concerning lines, figures and angles. Compare that with a different truth, such as *Caesar crosses the Rubicon*. What is the falsity of that proposition inconsistent with? Leibniz claims that it is not inconsistent with truths about Roman dictators or rivers. He concedes in this passage that it is inconsistent with the necessary truth that God wills the best possible world to exist, but that is a proposition primarily about God rather than about Caesar or the Rubicon per se.

Leibniz uses this intuitive distinction to develop corresponding accounts of a world's possibility and necessity. His basic idea is that a world is *possible in itself* just in case its per se properties—those properties having to do only with it—are consistent. However, a world can be possible in itself even if its non-per se properties, such as *being suboptimal* or *being chosen by God*, are inconsistent with a necessary truth about something else. Using Leibniz's language from this passage, a non-actual world "remains possible in itself" even if its actual existence can "in some way be said to imply a contradiction," namely in relation to God's willing the best possible world to exist. We could say that a world can be possible *in itself* even if is not possible *all things considered*, such as when relations to God's willing are taken into account. This

distinction between the modal status something has *in itself* and the modal status it has *all things considered* is the core distinction in Leibniz's per se analysis of modality. (As we will see in section three, this distinction is deeply rooted in Leibniz view that a world's possibility is grounded in God's *intellect* and is prior to and unaffected by God's volitions.)

This distinction preserves contingency only if being contingent is consistent with being necessary all things considered, and this is just what Leibniz claims. "Everything that is contingent is necessary in some way. That which is actual is necessary in some way" (GR 536), namely everything actual is necessary all things considered or, as Leibniz sometimes puts it, on the hypothesis [*ex hypothesi*] that God wills the best possible world to exist.

One important question for this account concerns the extension of *per se*. Which properties of a thing are per se and which are not? Leibniz often refers to *natures* in this context, which is his way of distinguishing between something like the intrinsic properties of a thing and the properties it has in relation to extrinsic things, such as God's will. But Leibniz's own metaphysics of individuals and worlds can make it hard to draw a sharp, neutral distinction between intrinsic and non-intrinsic properties.[5]

If we focus on Leibniz's efforts to avoid the necessitarianism of [8a] in terms of possible worlds, there are two general classes of properties that might be excluded from a world's *per se* properties. He could exclude various relations to God, such as *being caused to exist by a perfect being*. Alternatively, he could exclude comparative relations to other possible worlds, such as *being the best of all possible worlds*. Leibniz explores both options, but his overall strategy is the same: exclude from the *per se* properties of a possible world those that, together with facts like [1], [2], and [5], would entail its existence or its non-existence. Insofar as the main goal is to

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[5] Sleigh, *Leibniz and Arnauld*, 48–80

avoid the necessitarian *distribution* answer, we could even functionally define the *per se* properties of a possible world as just those properties that are jointly consistent both with its existence and with its non-existence. Leibniz concludes that since all possible worlds have *per se* properties, the existence or non-existence of every possible world is contingent.

Although rich, this account of modality has not been well-received by Leibniz's interpreters. One major worry is that, at the end of the day, it fails to preserve genuine contingency. As Robert Sleigh puts it, "Leibniz's modal distinctions simply lack relevance [to the problem of necessitarianism]" (CP xxvi). Leibniz's distinction between *per se* and non-*per se* properties seems irrelevant because it appears to preserve only a stipulated sense of contingency, whereas the real threat of necessitarianism is realized even if only [8b] is true. The worry is that even if a world's existence does not follow from its *per se* properties and is only all things considered necessary, that modal status is enough to undermine its genuine contingency.

Leibniz might reply that he is not introducing new, wholly stipulated forms of contingency and necessity. As other contributions to this volume have shown, the distinction between *per se* and *ex hypothesi* modalities has a long conceptual history, and Leibniz could argue that our pre-theoretical intuitions about "genuine contingency" are too confused or coarse-grained to be reliable guides (*CP* 51, 59; *T* 367).

Alternatively, Leibniz could be using this historically familiar distinction to make a subtler claim about the nature of modality. Let us set aside the thorny question about exactly which properties get classified as *per se* and non-*per se*. What makes the difference between these two classes? After all, in the case of individuals, both *per se* and non-*per se* properties are genuine properties of the individual substance. Leibniz sometimes claims that a thing's *per se* properties are only *conceptually* distinguished from the rest of its properties:

And thus everything that will happen to Peter and Judas, both necessary and free, is contained in the perfect individual notion of Peter or Judas, considered from the perspective of possibility [*sub ratione possibilitatis*] by abstracting the mind from the divine decree to create him and is seen there by God (*PE* 32).[6]

In this passage, Leibniz points to two different ways of *considering* an individual, ways that track his *per se* and non-*per se* distinction. He explains that this difference in conception results from mentally abstracting away some of a thing's genuine properties, namely by excluding from consideration its non-*per se* properties. Most importantly, Leibniz implies that genuine modal differences track these conceptual differences. For example, Peter can be conceived both in relation to God's will and also independently of that relation, and that difference in how Peter is conceived tracks or perhaps even generates a genuine modal difference. Considered more narrowly by including only his *per se* properties, Peter does not exist necessarily. Considered more inclusively by including all his non-*per se* properties, Peter does exist necessarily. Insofar as Peter's genuine modal status is tied to such conceptual differences, Peter could consistently exist necessarily *and* non-necessarily, relative to these different ways of being conceived.

The general thesis that modal facts are sensitive to conceptual differences is deeply at odds with contemporary, Kripke-inspired accounts of modality. It more closely resembles a family of views sometimes called "anti-essentialist" and associated with modal skeptics like Quine.[7] But we need not impose Quine's full anti-essentialism to appreciate what Leibniz might be advocating. In Leibniz's terms, Kripkean accounts of modality are capable of tracking only all things considered modal facts insofar as they interpret *all* necessary truths as propositions that are true in *every* possible world. I suspect this interpretation lies behind the contemporary suspicion that [8b] is not modally harmless, since being all things considered necessary entails

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[6] Translation slightly modified; see also *L* 204; for further discussion, see Newlands, "The Harmony of Spinoza and Leibniz."

[7] For a starting point, see Quine, "Reference and Modality."

being necessary full stop. At the very least, Leibniz's *per se* analysis requires finer-grained modal distinctions than contemporary possible-worlds semantics typically allow, and this leads to the charge that Leibniz's distinctions are irrelevant for blocking the Necessitarian Argument— *on the assumption that the true modal semantics are so coarse-grained*.

Happily for Leibnizians, in recent years, contemporary metaphysicians have raised a chorus of objections to Kripkean modal orthodoxy, often on grounds that its possible worlds framework is too coarse-grained. They have begun reintroducing finer-grained notions, such as grounding, hyperintentionality, and impossible worlds to more adequately account for this richer structure. For those sympathetic with this contemporary movement, Leibniz's *per se* account appears ready for a fresh evaluation.

2.2 Infinite analysis

During the 1680s, Leibniz developed an alternative analysis of necessity and contingency. He claimed that contingent propositions have an interesting feature: their formal proof structure is infinitely long and cannot be completed in a finite number of steps. He argued that there is a deep connection between the modal status of a proposition and its formal proof structure, one that undermines an important step in the Necessitarian Argument. This account of contingency and necessity has come to be known as Leibniz's "infinite analysis" account.

Here is a representative passage in which Leibniz posits the connection between contingency and proof structure:

> Every true universal affirmative proposition, either necessary or contingent, has some connection between subject and predicate. In identities this connection is self-evident; in other propositions it must appear through the analysis of terms. And with this secret, the distinction between necessary and contingent truths is revealed, something not easily understood unless one has some acquaintance with mathematics. For in necessary propositions, when the analysis is continued indefinitely, it arrives at an equation that is an identity; this is what it is to demonstrate a truth with geometrical rigor. But in contingent propositions, one continues the analysis to infinity through reasons for reasons, so that one

never has a complete demonstration, though there is always, underneath, a reason for the truth, but the reason is understood completely only by God, who alone traverses the infinite series in one stroke of mind (PE 28).

Leibniz first gestures at his conceptual containment theory of truth. According to this theory, at least for every true proposition of the form *S is F*, the concept of the predicate is contained in the concept of the subject. Leibniz believed that this containment can be demonstrated via *a priori* "analysis," a formal procedure in which subject and predicate terms are stepwise replaced using definitions and axioms until a formal identity statement, like *A is A*, is reached.

Leibniz then claims that the demonstrations of necessary truths via such analyses is importantly different from the demonstrations of contingent truths. The demonstrations of necessary truths can be completed in a finite number of steps, whereas the demonstrations of contingent propositions cannot. This leads him to posit the following bi-conditionals:

> A proposition is necessary iff its a priori demonstration can be completed in a finite number of steps.
> A proposition is contingent iff its a priori demonstration cannot be completed in a finite number of steps.

Leibniz then applies these bi-conditionals to what we called the Necessitarian Argument in section one. He claims that the demonstration of [5] cannot be completed in a finite number of steps, in which case [5] is only contingently true and the argument for [6] is invalid. "So, although one can concede that it is necessary for God to choose the best, or that the best is necessary, it does not follow that what is chosen is necessary, since there is no demonstration [completeable in finite steps] that it is the best" (PE 30).

According to Leibniz, the demonstration of [5] is not finitely completable because any demonstration of a world's bestness involves comparisons among infinitely many possible worlds. Leibniz sometimes makes this point in epistemic terms. For example, he writes, "Since

we cannot know the true formal [i.e., demonstrable] reason for existence in any particular case because it involves a progression to infinity…" (PE 29). Similarly, he later claims, "one may imagine possible worlds without sin…but these same worlds again would be very inferior to ours in goodness. I cannot show you this in detail. For can I know and can I present infinities to you and compare them together?" (T 10). But as we will see, Leibniz's appeals to what we can *know* about such demonstrations, as opposed to facts about the demonstrations themselves, may be more distracting than helpful.

Undoubtedly, this is an elegant analysis of modality that draws on many other facets of Leibniz's formal work. But considering it as an independent account of modality, most interpreters have judged Leibniz's infinite analysis account to be an egregious philosophical failure that is subject to numerous counter-examples, something of a modal catastrophe. Summarizing the dismal received view, Jeff McDonough and Zeynep Soysal quip that Leibniz's infinite analysis account "may well seem to lack even the minimal virtue of intelligibility."[8]

One very general worry about Leibniz's infinite analysis account is that it again appears to change the subject. Leibniz's frequent appeals to our ignorance about infinities in this context makes it sound like he is offering only an *epistemic* account of modality, which does not seem to be relevant to the metaphysical modalities in the Necessitarian Argument. If [5] is necessarily true for an omniscient being like God, that seems bad enough. Notice, however, that the underlying bi-conditionals are not epistemic or perspectival in any way, and so our own inability to make infinite comparisons may be a red herring. The differences in proof structures, not in our grasp of them, are what Leibniz most wants to associate with necessity and contingency.

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[8] McDonough and Soysal, "Leibniz's Formal Theory of Contingency." They also provide a succinct overview of the counter-example (and counter-counter-example) literature.

Still, it is not clear why we should associate modal concepts with the formal proof structure of propositions in the first place. On McDonough and Soysal's recent account, Leibniz was independently interested in issues of what we would now call formal decidability and computability, and he thought he had discovered a way of marking a modal distinction that tracked his metalogical views concerning formal languages and demonstrations.

But insofar as Leibniz's infinite analysis account is *also* supposed to undercut the Necessitarian Argument (and he certainly seems to think it does), this additional contextualizing does not really blunt the charge of changing the subject. Consider Leibniz's claim in the long passage quoted above that even apart from formal proof structure, there is always a reason for the truth of a contingent proposition, one that God alone grasps. Thus, [5] is true for a reason, and it is hard to see what that reason could be other than a fact about the overall bestness of our world. But that reason, whatever it may be, is not contingent in the robustly intuitive sense that it could have been different. If so, then even if there is not a finitely completable demonstration of [5], [6] still follows from the conjunction of [4], the non-contingent *reason* for the truth of [5], and another application of [3]. Unless Leibniz can show that this other, far more familiar sense of "contingency" is misleading or false (as opposed to showing only that he can construct an alternative formal concept of contingency), then his infinite analysis account fails to avoid the conclusion of the Necessitarian Argument, after all.

2.3 Metaphysical and Moral Necessity

Leibniz's first two analyses of modality focus on finite substances and worlds, either their properties or the proof structures of propositions about them. Leibniz's third account focuses more on God. Leibniz argues that there is an important distinction among the *sources* of God's actions, one that tracks a modal distinction that undermines the Necessitarian Argument.

Leibniz does not always draw the salient distinction in God in the same way. Sometimes he points to a distinction among God's *attributes*, such as between divine power and wisdom. Other times, he distinguishes between kinds of divine causation, such as between an efficient and a final cause. Yet other times, he distinguishes among kinds of divine *reasons* for acting, such as between goodness-based reasons and "blind," non-axiological reasons. Although distinct, these carvings all line up neatly, according to Leibniz. On the one hand, there is acting by divine *wisdom* through *final* causation for the sake of *goodness*; on the other, there is acting by absolute divine *power* through *efficient* causation on the basis of *non-axiological* reasons.

Leibniz claims that this distinction within God generates a modal distinction in what follows from God:

> [Notice] how much difference there is between…*an absolute necessity*, metaphysical or geometrical, which may be called blind and which does not depend upon any but efficient causes [and] *a moral necessity*, which comes from the free choice of wisdom in relation to final causes (T 349).

Leibniz singles out Spinoza as someone who accounts for God's actions exclusively in terms of non-axiological reasons and absolute power (*T* 173-4). But Leibniz complains that other early moderns also overlook the distinction between moral and metaphysical necessity. Samuel Clarke "confounds moral necessity, which proceeds from the choice of what is best, with absolute necessity; he confounds the will of God with his power" (L 709). Likewise, Pierre Bayle "confuses what is necessary by moral necessity, that is, according to the principle of Wisdom and Goodness, with what is necessary by metaphysical and brute necessity, which occurs when the contrary implies a contradiction" (T 174).

One way to unpack this distinction is to focus on God's bringing about the actual world. Leibniz claims that God's creative power extends quite widely: God can do anything that is metaphysically possible, which he describes in this last passage in terms of formal consistency.

With respect to God's absolute, non-moral power, it is possible for God to bring about sub-optimal worlds. Hence, Leibniz concludes, it is not *metaphysically necessary* for God to bring about the best possible world.

However, in deciding which world to create, God has additional, value-based reasons based on God's own goodness and wisdom. In particular, God is a perfectly wise agent, and Leibniz thinks that perfectly wise agents choose the best possible option (*T* 8). Based on such goodness and wisdom, God brings about the best possible world. Hence, Leibniz concedes, the existence of the best possible world is *morally necessary*, a modal status it has in virtue of the fact that its existence depends on God's value-based character and wise decision-making. Correspondingly, it is *morally impossible* for God to bring about a sub-optimal world, even though it is metaphysically possible for God to do so. Therefore, the existence of the actual world (which, given its existence, is in fact the best possible world) is morally but not metaphysically necessary.

Most importantly, Leibniz argues that existing with moral necessity is compatible with existing contingently. "But this [moral] necessity is not opposed to [metaphysical] contingency; it is not of the kind called logical, geometrical or metaphysical, whose opposite implies contradiction" (T 282). In fact, Leibniz claims that morally necessary actions involve a "happy necessity," and that it is a perfect-making feature of rational agents to act with moral necessity. "It is only a moral necessity, and it is always a happy necessity to be bound to act in accordance with the rules of perfect wisdom" (T 345).

This allows Leibniz to disambiguate premise [2] of the Necessitarian Argument in two ways:

2a. It follows from God's existence with metaphysical necessity that the best possible world exists.

2b. It follows from God's existence with moral necessity that the best possible world exists.

Assuming that the modal distribution principle in [3] also tracks the metaphysical/moral

distinction, [2a] leads to the worrisome [8c]:

8c. All actual events are metaphysically necessary.

But, according to Leibniz, [2a] is false for reasons we have just seen. God's creation of the best

is only morally necessary. Thus [2b] is true, but Leibniz claims that it leads only to the modally

innocuous [8d]:

8d. All actual events are morally necessary.

That conclusion is modally innocuous because moral necessity is compatible with metaphysical

contingency. In fact, we saw Leibniz claim that it is a good-making feature of all actual events

that they follow from God's acting with perfect wisdom in choosing the best.

Leibniz appeals to moral necessity only in his later writings, and he sometimes suggests

that these appeals are more ecumenical than genuine and that moral necessity is not really a

genuine species of necessity at all:

> But necessity of this kind [i.e., moral necessity], which does not destroy the possibility of
> the contrary, has the name [of necessity] by analogy only: it becomes effective not
> through the mere essence of things, but through that which is outside them and above
> them, that is, through the will of God. This necessity is called moral, because for the wise
> what is necessary and what is owing are equivalent things; and when it is always
> followed by its effect, as it indeed is in the perfectly wise, that is, in God, one can say that
> it is a happy necessity (*T* Obj 8).

Leibniz distinguishes here between the modal status that things have in virtue of their essence

alone and the modal status that they have virtue of their relation to something "outside and

above" them (namely, God's will), a distinction that harkens back to his earlier *per se* modal

analysis. Hence, Leibniz might not have intended to offer a new modal distinction at all and

might instead just be co-opting the terminology of "moral necessity" for his own theory. If so,

then being morally necessary is just what I described in section 2.1 as being "all things considered necessary," simply with the added emphasis that "all things" includes relations to God's wisdom and goodness.

Regardless of Leibniz's intent, does this moral necessity account successfully block the Necessitarian Argument? Not obviously, at least from the contemporary vantage point. As with his functionally similar *per se* modal analysis, Leibniz's moral necessity analysis requires a more fine-grained distinction in modal properties than current modal orthodoxy recognizes. Unless modal distribution principles like [3] are sensitive to differences in the *source* of a thing's modal status, pointing out a source distinction in God's attributes or reasons will be irrelevant for its modal status. One could respond that Leibniz *was* introducing (or co-opting) a distinctive kind of modal concept here. But as we have seen repeatedly, that reply just invites the charge of irrelevance: the original contingency threatened by the Necessitarian Argument is not the kind of contingency that Leibniz's moral necessity analysis preserves.

Leibniz's moral necessity account faces an internal worry as well. Leibniz claims that it is morally necessary for God to choose the best. "It is a moral necessity that the wisest should be bound to choose the best" (T 230). However, God's character is not a metaphysically contingent feature of God, in which case it seems to be metaphysically necessary that God acts with moral necessity. To claim that it is only morally necessary for God to act most wisely would be to claim that God acts most wisely because it is most wise to act the most wisely. But since we are asking *why* God acts wisely in the first place, appealing to more moral necessity will not provide an informative answer. Presumably, God acts wisely because it is essential to God's perfect nature to act wisely (CP 21).

Similarly, it seems to be metaphysically necessary that *if* God acts in the wisest way, God brings about the best possible world. It would again be uninformative to say that this connection is only morally necessary and that it is only according to God's wisdom that if God acts wisely, God brings about the best. Moral necessity applies to the *reason* for God's action, not to the connection between God's reason and whatever satisfies that reason. Hence, it will be *metaphysically* necessary that a perfectly wise agent brings about the best possible outcome.

Therefore, it is not metaphysically contingent that God acts most wisely, nor is it metaphysically contingent that *if* God acts most wisely, then God brings about the best possible world. But if (a) it is metaphysically necessary that God acts wisely and (b) it is metaphysically necessary that bringing about the best possible world follows from God acting wisely, then applying [3] here would again generate the worrisome necessitarian conclusion of [8c]. And this follows even if the existence of the best follows only from God's wise and value-laden reasons and actions. A little metaphysical necessity, even just within the divine nature, goes a long way.

3. Theistic Ground of Modality

Many early modern metaphysicians operated with a guiding rule when it comes to God: make as much as dependent on God as possible, without compromising God's nature. As Leibniz expresses this idea, "My opinion is that it must be taken as certain that there is as much dependence of things on God as is possible without infringing divine justice" (MP 102). This applies to modality as well, and seventeenth-century philosophers developed competing accounts of how modality depends on God.

They were primarily interested in two sorts of questions. First, on what *in* God do modal truths and modal truth-makers depend? For example, Descartes thought that modal truths depend primarily on God's will in such a way that necessary truths are necessary *because* God wills

them to be necessary. Second, what is the nature of the dependence *by which* modal truths and modal truth-makers depend on God? Descartes claimed that God *causes* modal truths to be true through efficient causation.[9] Although these questions are distinct, the answers often worked in tandem. For Descartes, God's volitions are the grounds of modal facts, and God executes his volitions through efficient causation.

Descartes' answers were not the only option. Indeed, his was the least popular view on offer, though it remains the most discussed today. A nearby variant of Descartes' volitional account, one that has roots in earlier philosophers like Aquinas, appeals to divine *powers* as the grounds of modal truths and modal truth-makers. God's power or capacity to bring about a state of affairs makes that state of affairs possible. Others, including Spinoza and the early Kant, claimed instead that God's actual attributes are the grounds of modal truths and modal truth-makers. On this account, it is possible for something besides God to think because God actually thinks.

Leibniz rejected all of these options. He objects that the volitional and powers accounts are explanatorily backwards. God wills and can do various things *because* it is possible to do them, not the other way around (*PE* 36). Indeed, it is hard to grasp what a pre-modal power or volition would even be, as possibility seems to be built into the very concept of power or willing.

Leibniz did sometimes offer grounding answers similar to Spinoza's, but making God's actual features the ground of *all* possibilities requires either a stark restriction on the range of possibilities or else a worrisome expansion of God's nature. Take the standard early modern example of being spatially extended. If God's actual perfections are the ground of the possibility of something being spatially extended, then either being spatially extended is reducible to some

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[9] For discussion of Descartes' views, see Kaufman, "Descartes's Creation Doctrine and Modality."

other divine feature (as in, for example, reductive idealism) or else God too is actually extended.[10]

Spinoza's grounding account also threatens to collapse a distinction that was very important for Leibniz's non-necessitarian distribution answer. Leibniz claims that God is not metaphysically necessitated to create this world because "all the possibles cannot be produced together," and this is true because "all the possibles are not compatible together" (T 201). But if God's actual perfections are all mutually compatible – as surely they must be if God actually exists – and if all possibilities are built up from combinations of this mutually compatible base, where could combinatorial incompatibilities and the resulting non-actual possibilities come from?[11]

Leibniz provides an alternative account of the theistic grounds of modality that avoids these concerns. He claims that God's intellect is ground of modal truths and modal truth-makers, and this grounding involves non-causal, ontological dependence. Very roughly, a state of affairs is possible because God *thinks* it, as opposed to because God *wills* it, or *can make* it, or actually *has* the relevant features.[12] On Leibniz's intellectualist account, the content of God's ideas, plus God's active thinking of those ideas, are the grounds of possibility and necessity.

> It is true that God is not only the source of existences, but also that of essences insofar as they are real, that is, of the source of that which is real in possibility. This is because God's understanding is the realm of eternal truths or that of the ideas on which they depend (PE 218).

One advantage of Leibniz's intellectualist account over Descartes' volitional account concerns the problem of evil. On Leibniz's account, God's will ranges over possibilities without

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[10] For more on this dilemma, see Newlands, "Backing into Spinozism."

[11] There is a vast literature on Leibniz's account of the grounds of incompossibility; for a recent summary, see Brown and Chiek, *Leibniz on Compossibility and Possible Worlds*.

[12] For more details on Leibniz's account and the aforementioned alternatives, see Newlands, "Leibniz and the Ground of Possibility."

establishing them. This allows Leibniz to argue that God could not create a better world than ours because, on the hypothesis that God in fact created the best, there just is no better possible world than ours, even with all of its evils. On Descartes' account, God could have created a better world and yet did not, raising hard questions about God's goodness and praiseworthiness.

An advantage of Leibniz's account over Spinoza's version is that the intellectualist account creates a divide between the content of God's ideas and the rest of God's nature. God can think about things that are radically unlike God's own nature. This representational firewall prevents the content of God's ideas from slipping into God's actual, non-representational nature. Most saliently, God can represent possibilities like extension, pain, and moral failure without those features being traceable to God's own nature. On this account, God's creative mind generates truly novel ideas, and God need not think only about God's own nature to ground and generate possibility space.

The cost of this Leibnizian firewall is that it is unclear where all this additional mental content comes from. If God doesn't decide to create it – since God's volitions are downstream from the establishment of possibility – and if the content is not the result of God just thinking about God's own actual nature, what is its source? The only available reply seems involve a primitively creative intellect. For at least some divine ideas, that's just what God thinks up. To theists with high explanatory demands, accepting primitive divine mental content may be too high a price to pay.[13] But accepting primitive divine intellectual creativity might be worth avoiding the costs of the alternatives. As ever, nothing comes cheaply in metaphysics.

4. Linking the Leibnizian projects

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[13] For some other potential costs, see Newlands, "Baumgarten's Steps Toward Spinozism."

Leibniz was an especially restless and creative philosopher, constantly developing, retooling, abandoning, and renewing theories. His fertile mind generated an impressive range of modal theories and insights, some of which have decisively shaped subsequent modal theories. As we have seen, however, none of Leibniz's responses to the Necessitarian Argument are beyond challenge. In recent years, some interpreters have even claimed that Leibniz never really intended to reject necessitarianism itself, after all.[14]

To the extent to which this revised narrative is driven by the sense that Leibniz failed to block the necessitarian distribution answer (and so he must not have wanted to do so in the first place), fresh hope for Leibniz may be on the horizon. As I suggested above, at least some of Leibniz's modal accounts look more promising in light of recent developments in metaphysics that challenge the once dominant possible worlds framework – a framework that, somewhat ironically, Leibniz is often credited with introducing in the first place.

Alternatively, we could try to bolster Leibniz's anti-necessitarian efforts by drawing some of his discrete modal projects into a more coherent package. In particular, we might link Leibniz's rejection of necessitarianism, per se analysis, and intellectualist grounding accounts. As we saw in the previous section, Leibniz argued that possibilities are wholly independent of and prior to all divine volitions. If so, Leibniz wondered, how could God's volition to create a world affect any world's modal status? "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" (PE 21). This anti-volitional commitment provides the basic impulse for Leibniz's entire *per se* modal analysis. For if God's volitions do not make a world's existence possible, impossible, or necessary, then how could God's volition

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[14] For example, see Griffin, *Leibniz, God, and Necessity*.

to create the best possible world make the actual world's existence necessary and every other possible world's existence impossible? That would imply that divine volitions *can* change a possible world's modal status to necessary or impossible, a capacity of divine volitions that Leibniz steadfastly rejected.

Of course, it is one thing to assert that every possible world's modal status is unaffected by God's willing the best possible world to exist and it is another to show how that is the case. Here we might discern a deeper connection between some of the details of Leibniz's *per se* analysis and his alternative intellectualist grounding account. The core of Leibiniz's positive grounding thesis is that the nature and structure of possibility is rooted in the intentional structures and contents of the divine intellect. This grounding of modality in intentional entities could in turn explain why modal facts exhibit the more fine-grained conceptual variability that, I suggested in section 2.1, Leibniz's per se analysis seems to require. That is, his intellectualist grounding account explains why the structure of modal facts mirrors relations among God's ideas, which in turn provides him the concept-sensitive, fine-grained machinery that his *per se* defense of contingency needs to challenge [3] of the Necessitarian Argument.

This still allows Leibniz to deny that God's bringing about of the world involves a value-neutral act of non-purposive or "blind" causation, but it better explains how and why God's will is informed by God's wisdom and intellect, as his moral necessity analysis claims it must be. By itself, this rich combination might not wholly vindicate Leibniz's anti-necessitarian project. But at least for those sharing Leibniz's goals, it serves as a fresh reminder why his wide-ranging modal thinking is worth our continued attention.

Abbreviations

References to Leibniz's works are cited by page number and abbreviated as follows:

CP   *Confessio Philosophi: Papers Concerning the Problem of Evil*, 1671–1678, trans. and ed. by Robert C. Sleigh Jr. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005)

GR   *Textes inédits*, ed. by Gaston Grua. 2 vols. (Paris: PUF, 1995a)

L   *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, trans. and ed. by Leroy E Loemker, 2nd ed. (Dordrecht and Boston: Reidel, 1969)

PE   *Philosophical Essays*, ed. and trans. by Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989)

T   *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*, trans. by EM Huggard (Chicago: Open Court, 1985).