

## God, Action, and Possible Worlds

### *Introduction*

Gottfried Leibniz believed that God could only actualize one possible world, the best of all possible worlds. His position prompts the question: how can it be that a particular world is impossible to actualize but is still considered possible? Before this question can be answered, we must ask whether it is even reasonable to consider that there are logically possible worlds that an omnipotent God cannot actualize. Numerous arguments can be made to support such a position, but one argument in particular—arguments for the incoherence of libertarian free will—coincides with Leibniz's thinking and provides one of the strongest reasons to believe that there are such worlds. Although detailed argument for this thesis must be cut in the interests of space, I will roughly sketch the general position here. Libertarian free will, by definition, is incompatible with a determinist system. However, there have been convincing arguments that it is also incompatible with indeterminism. If an action is not determined by anything, it occurs by chance. If it occurs by chance, it is not free. Thus, a free action can not avoid being determined. Because determined actions are not free in a libertarian sense, it follows that no actions are free in a libertarian sense, and that the only free actions belong to the sort of freedom that is compatible with determinism. Although God does not strictly act within a standard causal system, an analogical pseudo-causal argument can be applied to Him. If His nature does not determine how He will act, He acts randomly and is unfree. Thus, in order to believe that God is free, we must believe that God's actions are determined by His nature. This suggests that Leibniz is correct, and that God can only actualize one possible world.

*Does Leibniz's argument yield necessitarianism?*

But if a possible world cannot be actualized, how is it still, strictly speaking, possible? Initially, it would seem that a world that cannot be actualized is impossible and is therefore not actually a possible world. Peter van Inwagen, in his argument against the Principle of Sufficient Reason, appears to agree with this initial opinion. His argument assumes that if the actual world has a sufficient reason for its being actual, it is the only possible world that can be actualized. If it is the only possible world that can be actualized, there are no other possible worlds.<sup>1</sup> This conclusion runs so counter to his intuitions that he would rather reject the Principle of Sufficient Reason than accept that there are no other possible worlds.

Leibniz, on the other hand, believes that there are possible worlds that cannot be actualized. In order to understand the reasons behind his assertion, we must first understand how he defines a possible world. Unfortunately, Leibniz never rigorously defined his concept of a possible world, making it more difficult to understand why he believed that some worlds that cannot be actualized are still possible. His idea of possible worlds is that of a set of all contingent futurities; he claims that “the idea of [a] possible world represents that which would happen in [x] case.”<sup>2</sup> However, careful to avoid the counterintuitive idea that there is only one possible world, he draws a distinction between certainty and necessity. He is a determinist, but he understands determinism in such a way that “the will is always more inclined towards the course it adopts, but that it is never bound by necessity to adopt it. That it will adopt this course is certain, but it is not necessary.”<sup>3</sup> This allows him to say that “objective certainty or determination does not bring about the necessity of the determinate truth.” He further claims that “All philosophers acknowledge this [that determination does not imply necessity], asserting that the

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<sup>1</sup> Van Inwagen, Peter. *Metaphysics*. Second ed. Westview Press: Boulder, Colorado, 2002, 119

<sup>2</sup> Leibniz, Gottfried. *Theodicy*. Ed. Farrer, Austin. Trans. Huggard, E.M. Open Court: La Salle, Illinois, 1985, 146.

<sup>3</sup> IBID, 147.

truth of contingent futurities is determinate, and that nevertheless they remain contingent. The thing indeed would imply no contradiction in itself if the effect did not follow; and therein lies contingency.”<sup>4</sup> He then applies this idea of determinism to God, saying “God fails not to choose the best, but he is not constrained to do so: nay, more, there is no necessity in the object of God’s choice, for another sequence of things is entirely possible.”<sup>5</sup> Putting these ideas together, he concludes that:

“All is therefore certain and determined beforehand in man, as in everywhere else, and the human soul is a sort of *spiritual automaton*, although contingent actions in general and free action in particular are not on that account necessary with an absolute necessity, which would be truly incompatible with contingency. Thus neither futurity in itself, certain as it is, nor the infallible prevision of God, nor the predetermination either of causes or of God’s decrees destroys this contingency and this freedom.”<sup>6</sup>

Because of this distinction between certainty and necessity, Leibniz understands that something can be certain to occur or to not occur and still be contingent; a world can be certain not to be actualized and still be possible. Even though God “must needs have chosen the best,”<sup>7</sup> His choice is not metaphysically necessary. If it were, it could hardly be considered a choice. His reasoning behind this claim requires further examination. When making his claim that all philosophers agree with his idea of determinate contingency, he claims that there would be “no contradiction in itself if the [determined] effect did not follow.”<sup>8</sup> Initially, that seems strange. If a

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<sup>4</sup> IBID, 147.

<sup>5</sup> IBID, 148.

<sup>6</sup> IBID, 151.

<sup>7</sup> IBID, 128.

<sup>8</sup> IBID, 147.

set of circumstances C causally determine an effect E, it seems that there *would* be a logical contradiction if C occurred and E did not. However, upon further examination, this situation is *not* logically necessary, at least in the strict sense, because the implication is only conditionally necessary. So is Leibniz correct in making the distinction? It depends entirely on whether the condition holds in all possible worlds. If God were a necessary being with a necessary nature, each world has the same first cause. Because God acts from His nature, which is necessary, it would initially seem like His actions are necessary. With this “first glance” result in hand, let us further consider the implications so as to determine where our metaphysical intuitions will lie.

Is the conclusion that there is only one possible world absurd? Is van Inwagen right in claiming that this conclusion is so unbelievable that one of the premises, even an intuitively strong premise, must be rejected? He is certainly right in claiming that necessitarianism is counterintuitive. It is natural to assume that things could have been different than the way they are. It is a common Christian doctrine that God was not compelled to create anything at all. Has Leibniz’s defense of the Christian idea of God against the argument from evil ultimately undercut His freedom not to create? Furthermore, what of modal logic, which relies on the idea of possible worlds? With only one possible world, logical absurdities arise. Van Inwagen notes that in this case:

“it would follow from the fact that Stockholm was the capital of Sweden that Mars had two moons and that spiders had eight legs and that British forces under the command of Lord Elgin burned the Summer Palace at Peking in 1860 and that. . . well, *everything*—everything true, that is—would follow. It would be absolutely

impossible for Stockholm to be the capital of Sweden and for any of these things to be false. And that is absurd.”<sup>9</sup>

This swift and violent attack of intuition against necessitarianism demands a response. Is there a way to maintain the conclusion that there is only one possible world and avoid these absurdities? Or must intuition be rejected—either by affirming necessitarianism or denying one of the premises that led to it?

When given a second look, the idea runs much less counter to intuition than originally expected. Consider the intuition of branching possible worlds. It is common to make a statement such as “Consider the possible world *W* that is identical to the actual world until 1918 but in which the Germans took Paris before running out of supplies.” The speaker then goes on to consider the subsequent differences between this possible world and the actual world. However, given determinism, although it is common to speak of such possible worlds, *W* is not causally possible. If the circumstances (including the causal structure) up until 1918 are the same in two worlds, the effects of those circumstances—being causally determined by the circumstances—must be the same. More generally, if two worlds are identical until any time *t*, those worlds are identical; two different worlds cannot stem from the same initial conditions and deterministic natural laws. Thus, the intuitive idea of branching worlds is not only precluded by necessitarianism but by determinism in general. The necessitarian thesis, as it follows from Leibniz’s best of all possible worlds argument, simply goes one step further by saying that, because an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good God exists necessarily, there is only one set of initial conditions. The intuitive consequences are worse than those of determinism, but not worse by as wide a margin as one might have expected.

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<sup>9</sup> Van Inwagen, Peter. *Metaphysics*. 121

What about the idea that God—or any other agent—could have acted differently? This problem is also shared by determinism and necessitarianism. The problem stems from ambiguity in common terms like “can” and “possible.” Consider Daniel Dennett's famous argument in favor of a compatibilist understanding of free will. When Martin Luther stood up against certain practices of the Catholic Church, he said “Here I stand, I can do no other.” Luther is speaking literally here. His beliefs are so strong that they will not allow him to back down. However, when asked “could Luther have recanted” or “was it possible for Luther to recant,” almost everyone will naturally answer in the affirmative. But Luther's circumstances and mental states have causally determined that he would stand firm. Thus, under conditional necessity, he could not back down. To do so would bring about the truth of both C and not-E in a situation where C implies E, a contradiction. So is it wrong to assert that Luther could have recanted? Yes and no. It is wrong in the causal sense. However, the word “can” is typically not meant in such a strict causal sense. When someone says “Luther could have recanted,” or “it was possible for Luther to recant” he means “Luther could have recanted *if he wanted to.*” This idea can be similarly applied to the question of whether or not God had to create. God could have refrained from creating *had He wanted to.* The fact that He, by conditional necessity, could not refrain from creating is no limit to His omnipotence because He was not compelled to create *by anything apart from Himself.*

Suddenly, it appears that necessitarianism and intuition have declared a ceasefire. But the loss of an infinite number of possible worlds has still dealt a serious blow to the current concept of modality. However, modality can be saved in much the same way that intuition was saved. The key is drawing Leibniz's distinction, although with a more precise justification. Leibniz's intuition was accurate in that something can be certain yet contingent. His justification, however,

failed to mesh with the initial understanding of possibility as understood from the point of view of conditional necessity, in which a certainty's failure to occur would be impossible. However, Leibniz understood contingency differently: a certainty is contingent because it could have failed to occur *if relevant agents had acted differently*.

Under this view, although God's creation of the actual world was determined by His nature, there exists an infinity of other worlds that he could have created *if He wanted to*. The existence of these worlds is not threatened by their failure to meet the requirements of conditional necessity; only logical necessity is needed.

#### *Implications in causality*

An interesting feature of Leibniz's understanding of a possible world is that the causal determinism he is so committed to in the actual world does not hold in all possible worlds. Actions can be understood like this: an agent A in circumstances C is causally free to do  $x$  iff "A could do  $x$  if he wanted to" is true. Even though it is not conditionally possible for Luther to recant, he could imagine himself recanting in the situation, which shows that it was within his power in the relevant sense (he could have done it if he had wanted to). If human agents can conceive of acting differently than they do, surely God can do the same. Thus, although it was not causally possible for God to actualize a world other than the one he actualized, given that He must always create in accordance with His nature, He could conceive of actualizing another world. Although conceivability may not prove logical possibility, it is enough to elucidate the sense in which possibility is being discussed. In this sense, causally determined actions, both those of humanity and the pseudo-causal actions of God, are not necessary.

However, without any sort of necessary causal structure, causality turns out looking pretty strange in other possible worlds. Arguments against indeterminism rely on the fact that

decisions made by an agent are based on *something*—the beliefs, desires, and circumstances of the agent. These beliefs, desires, and circumstances are in turn caused by something else.

Basically, decisions are made for a reason, and circumstances arise for a reason. It would seem that this account of causation, where events progress logically and occur for a reason, should generalize over all possible worlds. It does, after all, apply to God. However, as noted above, Leibniz's possible worlds schema run counter to this intuitive notion of causality. This should come as no surprise; if God's decision of which world to actualize is determined by His nature, all worlds but one are causally impossible. Yet they are still logically possible and are thus still possible worlds.

How does this work? If Jones is in a position to choose to do A or B (that is, it is within his power to do A if he wanted to or to do B if he wanted to), there is a possible world (say, W) in which he does A and a possible world (say, W\*) in which he does B. But the situation in which he makes the choice is identical in both possible worlds, and so the deterministic causal relationship can only hold in one of the two worlds (at most).

In fact, if God's nature determines that he actualize the actual world, the deterministic pseudo-causal relationship does not apply to Him in *any* possible worlds other than the actual world. If it still applied to Him in those worlds, they would be no different than this world. If determinism applied to God in a world other than the actual world, that world would not exist. Thus, it is clear that this pseudo-causal determinism in which God must act according to His nature only applies to God in the actual world.

With regard to human action, determinism may still apply to some possible worlds, but it clearly cannot apply to all possible worlds. Thus, if determinists are correct in stating that a proper understanding of causality precludes indeterminism, causality does not function properly

in all possible worlds. That is, there are worlds in some which actions are uncaused, at least in the sense of causality as it is understood by determinists. For example, there are worlds in which my circumstances dictate that I ought to desire to stay in this room and finish this paper and furthermore dictate that I actually act on those desires and do stay in the room and finish this paper; however, in at least one of these worlds, I inexplicably leave the room. It is unclear whether my desires in some way do not follow deterministically from my circumstances or whether I simply act against my desires; either will suffice to produce an action that is impossible under causal determinism.

But underneath this causal strangeness, there is something more going on. In fact, given that God's actions only follow from His nature in the actual world, it follows that the Principle of Sufficient Reason only holds regarding the actual world. This is the strange sort of result that prompted van Inwagen to reject PSR entirely. If there is sufficient reason that the actual world came into being, then there could not have been sufficient reason for any of the other options, and it is not conditionally possible that any of them came into being.

However, rather than causing us to reject PSR, I propose that this should help us understand how it ought to be used. As I have argued, it does not hold in other worlds. Sufficient reason for  $W$  precludes sufficient reason for  $W^*$ . We may initially think that this problem only occurs with this global use of PSR to justify why one world was actualized rather than another, but the problem runs deeper. If there is a sufficient reason for me to remain at my computer and type this essay, then there is no sufficient reason for my action in the world that only differs from this one in that I do not remain at my computer and type this essay. However, rather than thinking of this as a problem with our possible worlds schema or with our notion of reasons, we should simply accept this as the function of PSR. PSR makes the claim that there is a sufficient

reason that something happened and its alternative did not. But we must remember that the alternative *did not* happen. There is a possible world (call it  $W^*$ ) where it did happen, but that possible world is not actual. Thus, to give sufficient reason that the alternative happened instead of what actually happened would amount to giving a reason that  $W^*$  is actual. But  $W^*$  is not actual, so no reason need be given for its actuality. The Principle of Sufficient Reason does not hold in  $W^*$ , but it is not designed to.

This strangeness of causality and explanatory reasons in other possible worlds is difficult to understand, it is the price to pay for maintaining a possible worlds schema that is robust enough to do what it needs to do. If an action follow from certain circumstances in  $W$ , the contrary action performed in  $W^*$  cannot have followed deterministically from the same circumstances. So speaking of  $W^*$  at all requires speaking of it as not being determined in the same way as  $W$ . Were we to require all possible worlds to behave more nicely, we would be left with only one.

### *Conclusion*

Because Leibniz defines possible worlds in terms of broadly logical possibility, the possible worlds schema has room for his argument for worlds that are possible but cannot be actualized. The confusion on that score comes from the multiple ways in which the word “possible” can be used, but it can be overcome with relatively simple thought experiments regarding what can be done by a given agent in a given circumstance. Although the modal schema is not damaged by Leibniz’s argument, his argument does have at least one strange result: the idea of causality becomes quite difficult to understand in all possible worlds other than the actual world. However, despite this difficulty in understanding, the idea that causality works strangely in other possible worlds must be accepted. Its acceptance is simply less damaging than

the alternatives; possible worlds with some anomalous behavior is preferable to only one possible world.

## Works Cited

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