LEIBNIZ ON MORAL NECESSITY

[These are some of the passages in which Leibniz discusses moral necessity.]

[1] “Freedom excludes metaphysical necessity, the opposite of which is impossible, that is, implies a contradiction. However, it does not exclude moral necessity, the opposite of which is unfit. For although God cannot fall into error in choosing, and therefore always chooses what is most fitting, this is so little opposed to his freedom that it rather renders it more perfect. It would be incompatible with his freedom if there were only one possible objective of the will, that is, if only one aspect of the universe were possible. For in this case there would no longer be any choice nor any possibility of praising the wisdom and goodness of Him who acts” (Causa Dei, §21).

[2] “There are necessities, which ought to be admitted. For we must distinguish between an absolute and a hypothetical necessity. We must also distinguish between a necessity, which takes place because the opposite implies a contradiction; (which necessity is called logical, metaphysical, or mathematical;) and a necessity which is moral, whereby, a wise being chooses the best, and every mind follows the strongest inclination” (Leibniz’s fifth letter to Clarke, §4).

[3] “As for moral necessity, this also does not derogate from liberty. For when a wise being, especially God, … chooses what is best, he is not the less free upon that account: on the contrary, it is the most perfect liberty, not to be hindered from acting in the best manner. And when any other chooses according to the most apparent and the most strongly inclining good, he imitates therein the liberty of a truly wise being, in proportion to his disposition. Without this, the choice would be a blind chance” (Leibniz’s fifth letter to Clarke, §7).

[4] “moral necessity is a good thing, agreeable to the divine perfection; agreeable to the great principle of ground of existences, which is that of the want of a sufficient reason: whereas absolute and metaphysical necessity, depends upon the other great principle of our reasonings, viz., that of essences; that is, the principle of identity or contradiction: for, what is absolutely necessary, is the only possible way, and its contrary implies a contradiction” (Leibniz’s fifth letter to Clarke, §10).

[5] “although we have a freedom of indifference which saves us from necessity, we never have an indifference of equilibrium which exempts us [195] from determining reasons. There is always something which inclines us and makes us choose, but without being able to necessitate us. And just as God is always infallibly led to the best, even though he is not led to it necessarily (other than by a moral necessity), we are always infallibly, but not necessarily, led to what strikes us the most; since the contrary does not imply any contradiction, it was neither necessary nor essential that God created, nor that he created this world in particular, even though his wisdom and goodness led him to it” (Letter to Pierre Coste, 1707, AG 194f./G 3:402).

[6] “determination should not be confused with necessity: there is just as much connection or determination amongst thoughts as amongst motions (since being determined is not at all the same as being forced or pushed in a constraining way). If we do not always notice the reason which determines us, or rather by which we determine ourselves, it is because we are as little able to be aware of all the working of our mind and of its usually confused and imperceptible thoughts as we
are to sort out all the mechanisms which nature puts to work in bodies. If by 'necessity' we understand a man's being inevitably determined, as could be foreseen by a perfect Mind provided with a complete knowledge of everything going on outside and inside that man, then, since thoughts are as determined as the movements which they represent, it is certain that every free act would be necessary; but we must distinguish what is necessary from what is contingent though determined... Geometrical and metaphysical 'followings' necessitate, but physical and moral ones incline without necessitating. There is even a moral and voluntary element in what is physical, through its relation to God, since the laws of motion are necessitated only by what is best. God chooses freely, even though he is determined to choose the best. But since bodies do not choose for themselves, God having chosen for them, they have come to be called 'necessary agents' in common usage. I have no objection to this, provided that no one confounds the necessary with the determined and goes on to suppose that free beings act in an undetermined way. ... As for 'constraint', it is useful to distinguish two sorts: physical, as when a man is imprisoned against his will or thrown off a precipice; and moral, as for example the fear of a greater evil, in which case the action, although in a way compelled, is nevertheless voluntary. One can also be compelled by the thought of a greater good, as when a man is tempted by the offer of a too great benefit, although this is not usually called constraint.” (New Essays, p. 178f).

[7] “Mr. Hobbes refuses to listen to anything about a moral necessity either, on the ground that everything really happens through physical causes. But one is nevertheless justified in making a great difference between the necessity which constrains the wise to do good, and which is termed moral, existing even in relation to God, and that blind necessity whereby according to Epicurus, Strato, Spinoza, and perhaps Mr. Hobbes, things exist without intelligence and without choice, and consequently without God. Indeed, there would according to them be no need of God, since in consequence of this necessity all would have existence through its own essence, just as necessarily as two and three make five. And this necessity is absolute, because everything it carries with it must happen, whatever one may do; whereas what happens by a hypothetical necessity happens as a result of the supposition that this or that has been foreseen or resolved, or done beforehand; and moral necessity contains an obligation imposed by reason, which is always followed by its effect in the wise. This kind of necessity is happy and desirable, when one is prompted by good reasons to act as one does; but necessity blind and absolute would subvert piety and morality” (Reflections on Hobbes, §3).

[8] “This fitness of things has also its rules and reasons, but it is the free choice of God, and not a geometrical necessity, which causes preference for what is fitting and brings it into existence. Thus one may say that physical necessity is founded on moral necessity, that is, on the wise one’s choice which is worthy of his wisdom; and that both of these ought to be distinguished from geometrical necessity. It is this physical necessity that makes order in Nature and lies in the rule of motion and in some other general laws which it has pleased God to lay down for things when he gave them being.” (Preliminary Dissertation [part of the Theodicy], §2)

[9] “one is always more inclined and consequently more determined on one side than on another; but one is never necessitated to the choice that one makes. I mean here a necessity absolute and metaphysical; for it must be admitted that God, that wisdom, is prompted to the best by a moral necessity. It must be admitted also that one is necessitated to the choice by a hypothetical necessity, when one actually makes the choice” (Theodicy §132).
[10] “The decree to create is free: God is prompted to all good; the good, and even the best, inclines him to act; but it does not compel [necessity] him, for his choice creates no impossibility in that which is distinct from the best; it causes no implication of contradiction in that which God refrains from doing. There is therefore in God a freedom that is exempt not only from constraint but also from necessity. I mean this in respect of metaphysical necessity; for it is a moral necessity that the wisest should be bound to choose the best” (Theodicy §230).

[11] “[God] was certainly prompted [to choose as he did], he was determined, or rather he determined himself thereto: but that which is certain is not always necessary, or altogether irresistible; the thing might have gone otherwise, but that did not happen, and with good reason. God chose between different courses all possible: thus, metaphysically speaking, he could have chosen or done what was not the best; but he could not morally speaking have done so. Let us make use of a comparison from geometry. The best way from one point to another (leaving out of account obstacles and other considerations accidental to the medium) is one alone: it is that one which passes by the shortest line, which is the straight line. Yet there are innumerable ways from one point to another. There is therefore no necessity which binds me to go by the straight line; but as soon as I choose the best, I am determined to go that way, although this is only a moral necessity in the wise” (Theodicy §234).

[12] “The decrees of God are always free, even though God be always prompted thereto by reasons which lie in the intention towards good: for to be morally compelled by wisdom, to be bound by the consideration of good, is to be free; it is not compulsion in the metaphysical sense. And metaphysical necessity alone, as I have observed so many times, is opposed to freedom” (Theodicy §237).

[13] “It is therefore only necessary to understand fully some distinctions, such as that I have very often urged between the necessary and the certain, and between metaphysical necessity and moral necessity. … It may be said in a certain sense that it is necessary that the blessed should not sin; that the devils and the damned should sin; that God himself should choose the best; that man should follow the course which after all attracts him most. But this necessity is not opposed to contingency; it is not of the kind called logical, geometrical or metaphysical, whose opposite implies a contradiction. … It is considered impossible that a wise and serious magistrate, who has not taken leave of his senses, should publicly commit some outrageous action, as it would be, for instance, to run about the streets naked in order to make people laugh. It is the same, in a sense, with the blessed; they are still less capable of sinning, and the necessity that forbids them to sin is of the same kind” (Theodicy §282).

[14] “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. The more nearly creatures approach this, the closer do they come to perfect felicity. Moreover, necessity of this kind is not the necessity one endeavours to avoid, and which destroys morality, reward and commendation. For that which it brings to pass does not happen whatever one may do and whatever one may will, but because one desires it. A will to which it is natural to choose well deserves most to be commended; and it carries with it its own reward, which is supreme happiness” (Appendix to Theodicy, Huggard p. 386).