

## Research Statement

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I work primarily on the philosophy of Leibniz, in particular on his modal metaphysics and philosophical theology. My research is guided by the following question: What if Leibniz's system of philosophical theology was wrongly dismissed? Nearly every philosopher is familiar with the basic picture: God, understood as the most perfect being, surveyed all possible worlds and created the best one possible. And most philosophers are also familiar with a basic attendant metaphysical worry: God, being perfect, could not have created any other world but the best, and so our world turns out not to be contingent but necessary, which implies that there really are no other possible worlds and that all the events in our world happen necessarily.

What most philosophers are less familiar with is the fact that Leibniz himself was sensitive to this basic metaphysical worry, as he worked for the better part of his life on resolving it. At the same time, Leibniz's efforts were also guided by some other deeply held commitments, including the fact that God is robustly free and the most praiseworthy being. What my research shows is that it is inadequate to focus exclusively on securing the contingency of the actual world—as most other commentators have done—without being able to secure these other deeply held commitments.

In "Contingency in Leibniz's Philosophical Theology" (*Philosophy Compass*, under review) I introduce a distinction between strategies that try to account for contingency in Leibniz's system by locating some contingency in the objects of God's choice and strategies that try to locate some contingency in God's actions. What I argue is that the latter are far more promising than the former because it is only the latter that can clearly secure Leibniz's other deeply held commitments mentioned above. This is because, for Leibniz, for an action to be free and praiseworthy it cannot be necessary. And so, Leibniz's deeply held commitments require God's actions to be contingent, not just for there be some contingency in the objects of his choice.

### Contingent Divine Action

As it turns out, there are several strategies Leibniz interpreters could take to secure the contingency of God's actions. In "Contingency in Leibniz's Philosophical Theology," I go on to motivate a "moral necessity" solution. According to this solution, God's choice of the best, for Leibniz, is only morally necessary, meaning it is the choice that is in some sense required by his wisdom. But it is not metaphysically necessary, in the sense that it would imply a contradiction were God to choose a different, sub-optimal world.

On the interpretation of moral necessity that I defend, God's choice of the best agrees with *the principle of sufficient reason* (PSR), since, for Leibniz, God does nothing without a sufficient reason, and there is no reason for God to prefer a sub-optimal world to the best possible. It is therefore unintelligible to imagine God producing anything but the very best, since anything to the contrary violates the PSR, but this does not, on this view, rule out the metaphysical possibility of God doing otherwise. This is because choosing a sub-optimal world over the best possible, while it may be unintelligible, does not, strictly speaking, imply a contradiction, and it is, for Leibniz, metaphysically possible for God to do anything that does not imply a contradiction.

And so, the moral necessity solution that I defend has it that God's choice of the best is contingent because, although anything to the contrary violates the PSR, it remains metaphysically possible for God to do otherwise.

This raises several questions, including (i) whether an action that agrees with the PSR but for which negations are non-contradictory amounts to a genuine sense of contingency, and (ii) whether it is truly non-contradictory to suppose that God creates anything other than the very best. I am currently working on an answer to the first question. If it is all-things-considered possible for God to violate the PSR, then there does appear to be some sense in which God's actions are genuinely contingent, though this must be squared with the fact that God never in fact violates the PSR. As for the second question, I have defended an affirmative answer, to which I turn now.

### **Divine Perfection**

In "God Can Do Otherwise: A Defense of Act Contingency in Leibniz's Mature Period" (*History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 2022) I address the objection that says God's perfection rules out the metaphysical possibility of his doing otherwise. I do so in part by pointing out that the best argument on offer which tries to demonstrate this outcome (Adams, 1994) in fact begs the question against Leibniz. While God's essential perfections necessarily provide him with the strongest inclination to do the most good possible, it is not metaphysically necessary that God act on his strongest inclination. It would just be inexplicable, and a violation of the PSR, for him not to. God always in fact acts on his strongest inclination, but this does not rule out the metaphysical possibility of going against his strongest inclination.

To further address the objection from divine perfection, I contend that one must distinguish between God's goodness and God's praiseworthiness. For Leibniz, God's goodness is an inclination to do the most good possible, whereas God's praiseworthiness is a moral quality that God has depending on the manner in which he acts. The supposition that God act contrary to his strongest inclination for no reason, I suggest, implies not that God's goodness would be undermined (since he retains the inclination to do the most good possible), but rather it is his praiseworthiness that would be, since arbitrariness undermines praiseworthiness for Leibniz.

Finally, I also argue that given Leibniz's account of the nature of praiseworthiness—in which necessity also undermines praiseworthiness—it makes the most sense to say that divine praiseworthiness is an inessential, or contingent, perfection of God. And so, God's essential perfections are retained even in the counterfactual scenario in which God chooses a sub-optimal world over the best. For in that case, it would only be a contingent perfection that is denied.

### **Divine Simplicity**

But doesn't even the metaphysical possibility of failing to be praiseworthy undermine divine simplicity? Divine simplicity, at least classically understood, rules out any sense in which God could fail to have any of his perfections, including praiseworthiness, since on the classical account God is identical to each of his attributes. This is an objection that needs to be taken seriously since Leibniz himself appears to be an explicit proponent of divine simplicity.

In "Composition without Parts: Leibniz on Divine Simplicity" (in progress), I argue that, while Leibniz is a proponent of divine simplicity, he nonetheless rejects the classical understanding of the doctrine. Through one of his objections to Spinoza, we see that Leibniz must deny the identity of every divine attribute, because if God's intellect and will were identical, then this would, for Leibniz, rule out the reality of divine choice. And this would in turn undermine God's freedom, praiseworthiness, and the contingency of creation.

By rejecting the classical understanding of divine simplicity, Leibniz is then able to say both that God is meaningfully simple and yet it is metaphysically possible for God not to be praiseworthy. This is because simplicity, for Leibniz, amounts to lacking parts, and what is characteristic of parts for Leibniz is that they are homogeneous with the entities that they are a part of and separable from them. So, God is simple in the sense that he is not composed out of parts in this sense. However, this does not rule out forms of complexity and composition—such as having distinct faculties and Leibniz’s version of a substance-mode composition—in God which are not partite, but which allow for the possibility of free choice and not being praiseworthy.

One of the most exciting aspects of this project on divine simplicity in Leibniz has been discovering, independently of answering the objection from divine perfection, that Leibniz has an attractive and promising view of divine simplicity that deserves to be taken seriously in its own right. This is because Leibniz’s version of divine simplicity is still arguably compatible with many of the original motivations behind the classic doctrine, including motivations from divine aseity and greatness. If that is right, then Leibniz has a version of divine simplicity that respects many of the original reasons for embracing the classic doctrine, but which also enables a robust sense in which God is free, which is something proponents of the classic doctrine have struggled to explain.

### **Future Projects**

In addition to working out the extent to which moral necessity amounts to a genuine sense of contingency, I am also working out how this account of divine agency that I develop relates to human agency for Leibniz. It may seem that it cannot be the case for Leibniz that all truths are essential to human agents (i.e. the doctrine of Superessentialism) if freedom requires the metaphysical possibility of contrary action. What I am working on is an interpretation of Leibniz that says while a complete individual concept comprehends all truths of some individual human agent, past, present, and future, complete individual concepts also comprehend modal and counterfactual truths as well. So, despite some strong textual support to contrary, Leibniz in fact, at least towards the very end of his life, embraces a version of trans-world identity.

In addition to this, I am also interested in bringing out the connection for Leibniz between love of God, the happiness of minds, and the best possible world. It is not well understood what the connection is between the happiness of minds and Leibniz’s other good-making criteria for worlds, such as plentitude and parsimony. It is the love of God that follows when a rational mind discovers the order and harmony of our world that is the source of our greatest happiness. This is the missing link that explains why the most plentiful and parsimonious world also includes the greatest possible happiness for minds. I would like to bring out how this connection informs Leibniz’s social and political philosophy as well as his soteriology (or theory of salvation).

In general, my aim is to contribute to a better understanding of Leibniz’s philosophical theology. This is crucial both for better understanding a pivotal period in the history of the philosophy, and for addressing substantive theological issues that Leibniz addressed.

Beyond my research interests in Leibniz, I am also interested in the following topics from both a historical and contemporary perspective: God’s nature, God’s existence, God’s activity, the problem of Evil, the status and implications of the PSR, freedom, modality, and soteriology (from both western and non-western philosophical perspectives).