

Handout 15: Leibniz's Account of Freedom

Philosophy 322: Modern Philosophy
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1. Here is a catalog of possible views of the relation between human freedom and God's power:

Two questions about the relationship between God's power and human freedom:	1. Did God causally determine every free human act?	2. Does God have foreknowledge of every free human act?
<i>Divine Determinism</i>	Yes	Yes
<i>Molinism / Arminianism</i>	No	Yes
<i>Open Theism</i>	No	No

2. Note that each view on the table endorses the claim that humans *do* act freely. They differ on their claims about what is required for that to be possible:

- (a) Divine determinists think that an act's being free is compatible with its being causally determined and known in advance by God.
- (b) Molinists hold that an act's being free is compatible with its being known in advance by God, but not with its being causally determined.
- (c) Open theists think that an act's being free is incompatible both with its being known in advance by God and with its being causally determined.

3. Leibniz is a divine determinist. So he needs an explanation for how a causally determined and known-in-advance act could nonetheless be free.

4. In *Discourse 13*, he distinguishes between something's being *absolutely* necessary and its being *hypothetically* necessary. His main line of defense will be to argue that human acts are merely hypothetically necessary, not absolutely necessary, and that an act's being hypothetically necessary doesn't imply that it wasn't free.

- (a) *Absolute necessity.* p is absolutely necessary = $\neg p$ is or implies a contradiction. (E.g. '2 + 3 = 5', 'Squares have three sides')
- (b) *Hypothetical necessity.* p is hypothetically necessary = p is absolutely necessary given some additional assumption or hypothesis, but $\neg p$ itself implies no contradiction. Leibniz equates merely hypothetical necessity with contingency.

Hypothetical necessities can be "certain", Leibniz says—meaning that God knows them in advance—but still contingent.

5. Consider the following true proposition:

(C) Caesar crossed the Rubicon.

The PCP tells us that if C is true, then crossing the Rubicon is part of Caesar's complete concept. So it is absolutely necessary that if Caesar actually exists, then Caesar crossed the Rubicon. But the negation of C itself is no contradiction, since Caesar's complete concept does not involve existence. Hence C is merely hypothetically necessary.

6. In general, truths of the form 'S did A' will only be necessary on the assumption that S exists, and so not absolute necessities. Ultimately, all truths about what people do are hypothetically necessary given the assumption that God created the actual world:

For it will be found that the demonstration of this predicate of Caesar is not as absolute as those of numbers or of geometry, but that it supposes the sequence of things that God has freely chosen (Leibniz, p. 14).

7. Let's grant that C is only hypothetically necessary and so "contingent". Is that enough for Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon to be a free act? In his book *Theodicy* (not in our textbook) Leibniz says that freedom consists of three things:

- (a) *Intelligence*. By this Leibniz means reasonableness or understanding; S does A intelligently if S does A on the basis of some reason, understanding what she is doing.
- (b) *Spontaneity*. By this Leibniz means that "we have within us the source of our actions": S does A spontaneously if whatever causes S to do A comes from within S herself.
- (c) *Contingency*. We've already seen what Leibniz means by this.

Even if an act is determined and foreknown by God, it can still be intelligent, spontaneous, and contingent in Leibniz's sense. Thus if Leibniz is right about what is involved in freedom, his divine determinism is vindicated.

8. There are two potential problems with the sort of contingency Leibniz has in mind. The first is that given the PCP my complete concept contains everything that I have ever done and ever will do. So it's impossible for me to exist without doing everything I have ever done and ever will do. So while it's true that my actions are contingent in the sense of *not being absolutely necessary*, it's not the case that I could have existed without performing them. Is that the sort of contingency that genuine freedom requires?
9. The second is that we might wonder whether Leibniz can really assume that our actions are merely hypothetically necessary. Remember that this is the best of all possible worlds. Each of our actions is contingent upon God's free choice to create this world. Was it possible for God to choose to create a different world, or not to create a world at all? If not, then the truth upon which our actions are contingent—God's creation of the best of all possible worlds—is necessary, and so (it would seem) our actions could no longer be viewed as being contingent in any sense. Leibniz skirts up against this issue when he writes that "what is less than perfect does not imply a contradiction" (Leibniz, p. 14).