

Leibniz and Spinozist Necessitarianism

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Abstract

It is sometimes argued that Leibniz's metaphysical commitments lead to Spinozist Necessitarianism, i.e., the view, in Spinoza's words, that "Things could not have been produced by God in any way or in any order other than that in which they have been produced". Leibniz comments on this passage as follows: "This proposition may be true or false, depending on how it is explained". I suggest in this paper that what Leibniz means by this comment can be fleshed out by making a distinction between what could have been actual and what is possible. I also address some potential objections to this distinction and attempt to elaborate it by means of comparing Leibniz's and Alvin Plantinga's approaches to modality.

Keywords: God, Leibniz, Necessitarianism, Possibility, Spinoza

1. Introduction

It is sometimes argued¹ that Leibniz's metaphysical commitments are bound lead to *Spinozist Necessitarianism*, i.e., the view Spinoza expresses in his *Ethics* in the following ways: "Things

¹ See, e.g., A. O. Lovejoy: *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*, New York 1936, pp. 173–175.

could not have been produced by God in any way or in any order other than that in which they have been produced” (E1p33);² “In Nature there is nothing contingent; all things have been caused by the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way” (E1p29). On the other hand, Leibniz himself as well as many Leibniz scholars deny that Leibniz advocates such a view.

Leibniz comments on E1p33 as follows: “This proposition may be true or false, depending on how it is explained” (A VI, 4, 1776 / L³ 204, 1678?). I suggest in this paper that

² E = B. Spinoza: *Ethics*, in: *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Vol. I*, ed. & trans. E. Curley, Princeton 1985.

³ Abbreviations of Leibniz’s writings (other than the standard ones):

AG = *Philosophical Essays*, ed. & trans. R. Ariew & D. Garber, Indianapolis 1989.

CP = *Confessio philosophi: Papers Concerning the Problem of Evil, 1671–1678*, ed. & trans. R. C. Sleigh, Jr., New Haven 2005.

DSR = *De Summa Rerum: Metaphysical Papers 1675–1676*, ed. & trans. G. H. R. Parkinson, New Haven 1992.

L = *Philosophical Papers and Letters* (2nd ed.), ed. & trans. L. Loemker, Dordrecht 1969.

LC = Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence, G VII, 345–440. Engl. trans. AG 320–346 (partial) and L 675–717. Cited by letter and section number.

LDB = *The Leibniz-Des Bosses Correspondence*, ed. & trans. B. C. Look & D. Rutherford, New Haven 2007.

NE = *Nouveaux essais sur l’entendement humain*, A VI, 6, 43–527. Engl. trans. *New Essays on Human Understanding*, ed. & trans. P. Remnant & J. Bennett, Cambridge 1981.

SLT = *The Shorter Leibniz Texts: A Collection of New Translations*, ed. & trans. L. Strickland,

what Leibniz means by this comment can be fleshed out by making a distinction between what could have been actual and what is possible. I also address some potential objections to this distinction and attempt to elaborate it by means of comparing Leibniz's and Alvin Plantinga's approaches to modality.

2. Leibnizian Certaintarianism vs. Spinozist Necessitarianism

Spinozist Necessitarianism has been characterized by phrases such as “the actual world is the only possible world”⁴ and “only the actual world could have been actual”⁵. Even though

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T = *Essais de Théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal*, G VI, 6, 21–462. Engl. trans. *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*, ed. A. Farrar, trans. E. M. Huggard, Chicago 1985. Cited by section number (where possible), with the abbreviations: p = *Préface*, d = *Discours préliminaire*, a = *Abrégé*, h = *Reflexions sur l'ouvrage que M. Hobbes ...*, k = *Remarques sur le Livre de l'origine du mal ...*, c = *Causa Dei*. (E.g. ‘T 173’ refers to Section 173 of the main essays, and ‘T a’ to Section 8 of *Abrégé*.)

YLC = *The Labyrinth of the Continuum: Writings on the Continuum Problem, 1672-1686*, ed. & trans. R. Arthur, New Haven 2001.

⁴ E.g., M. V. Griffin: “Necessitarianism in Spinoza and Leibniz”, in: C. Huenemann (ed.): *Interpreting Spinoza: Critical Essays*, Cambridge 2008, p. 71; N. Jolley: *Leibniz*, London 2005, p. 144; O. Koistinen: “Spinoza's Proof of Necessitarianism”, in: *Philosophy and*

according to the contemporary received view of modality these could be considered as equivalent, it seems to me that Leibniz, in effect, seeks to make a distinction between these characterizations in what follows the passage quoted in the previous section – “On the hypothesis that the divine will chooses the best or works in the most perfect way, certainly only this world could have been produced; but, if the nature of the world is considered in itself, a different world could have been produced” (A VI, 4, 1776 / L 204, 1678?) – as well as in the following texts:

“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. But [an opponent will say] God cannot will it to exist. I concede this, yet, such a thing remains possible in its nature, even if it is not possible with respect to the divine will, since we have defined as in its nature possible anything that, in itself, implies no contradiction, even though its coexistence with God can in some way be said to imply a contradiction.” (A VI, 4, 1447 / AG 21, 1680–84?)⁶

Phenomenological Research 67 (2003), p. 287.

⁵ Cf. Griffin, p. 73 (see note 4); Koistinen, p. 293 (see note 4); J. Bennett: *Learning from Six Philosophers: Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Vol. 1*, Oxford 2001, p. 175; D. Garrett: “Spinoza’s Necessitarianism”, in: Y. Yovel (ed.): *God and Nature: Spinoza’s Metaphysics*, Leiden 1991, p. 192.

⁶ See also, e.g., A VI, 3, 463 / DSR 7 (1675), A VI, 4, 1378 / CPS 119 (1677).

“Everything is possible for God except what includes imperfection.

Imperfection includes sin, for instance to damn someone innocent.

The damnation of an innocent man is indeed possible in itself, i.e. it does not imply a contradiction, but is not possible for God. More correctly, the eternal damnation of an innocent man seems to be from that number of things of which the essence does not in fact imply a contradiction because it can be completely understood, but nevertheless its existing implies a contradiction.” (A VI, 4, 1453 / SLT 107–108, 1680–4?)

Thus, Leibniz seems to accept the view that only the actual world could be actual. The justification for this is that God in His essential perfectness chose the best possible world, and thus could not have chosen any other than the best or most expedient world (see, for example, T a8). Nevertheless, it is by Leibniz’s lights incorrect to say that the actual world is the only possibility (or that all truths are necessarily true): there are other worlds, each of which is possible “in itself” (*in se*) or “through itself” (*per se*) or “in its own nature” (*in sua natura*).⁷ Perhaps Leibniz’s position could be expressed by saying that other worlds, even though they could not have been actual, do not involve a contradiction and, thus, were *actualizable* (e.g., by an imagined agent who is powerful enough but less good than God – cf. A VI, 4, 1452 / SLT 107 (1680–84?), where Leibniz speaks of a “supposed another omniscient being”). Let us call

⁷ R. M. Adams, in particular, has emphasized the importance of this “possible in itself” conception to Leibniz. See R. M. Adams: “Leibniz’s Theories of Contingency”, *Rice University Studies* 63 (1977) (page references are to the reprint in M. Hooker (ed.): *Leibniz: Critical and Interpretive Essays*, Minneapolis 1982) and R. M. Adams: *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist*, Oxford 1994, Ch. 1.

the view accepted by Leibniz – that there are many possible worlds, but only the actual world could have been actual – *Leibnizian Certaintarianism*, and reserve the term Spinozist Necessitarianism for the doctrine denied by Leibniz – that there is only one possible world (or that all truths are necessarily true). In these terms, I gather, Spinoza’s statement in E1p33 is according to Leibniz true if taken to express Leibnizian Certaintarianism but false if taken to express Spinozist Necessitarianism.

3. Objections

There is a controversy between Spinoza scholars whether or not Spinoza accepts, or could consistently have accepted, other possible worlds (or in Spinozist terminology, “alternative possible systems of finite modes”).⁸ This internal dispute in Spinoza scholarship does not concern Leibniz’s views (and it would surely be alright with Leibniz if Spinoza agreed with him that E1p33 could be understood in two ways, one of which makes it false). Some Spinoza scholars have expressed their mutual disagreement in terms of *determinism*: For example, Edwin Curley and Jonathan Bennett say that the world is according to Spinoza deterministic

⁸ Garrett (see note 5), pp. 192 and 214, and Koistinen: “Spinoza’s Proof” (see note 4), pp. 288-290, and O. Koistinen: “On the Consistency of Spinoza’s Modal Theory”, *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 36 (1998), p. 76 note 3, list authors who think that Spinoza does not really promote Spinozist Necessitarianism. (Koistinen and Garrett themselves hold, in their mentioned writings, that these writers are mistaken.)

but contingent, or at least that Spinoza's writings are compatible with such an interpretation.⁹ It seems to me that determinism is here merely an insignificant side issue, unlike the distinction I have made between Leibnizian Certaintarianism and Spinozist Necessitarianism: Spinoza is, of course, a determinist (as is Leibniz), but does Spinoza advocate Leibnizian Certaintarianism rather than Spinozist Necessitarianism?

Leibniz himself holds that Spinoza does champion Spinozist Necessitarianism: We have Leibniz's testimony in T 371–372 (and elsewhere, e.g. T 173–174) that his unactualized possibilities are not available in Spinoza's system. Is it credible that Leibniz misconstrues Spinoza in such a simple issue? As Leibniz (T 371) states, a crucial difference between him and Spinoza is the conception of God's intellect and will: For Leibniz, all possibilities, even unrealized ones, are to be found as ideas in the divine intellect, and His will makes a choice between these. (Accordingly, Leibniz is a representative of that "anthropomorphic" approach Spinoza denounces in E1p17s and elsewhere.)

Some have doubted whether Leibniz accepts Leibnizian Certaintarianism in his later period.¹⁰ However, Leibniz writes in his *Théodicée* (1710) that God "could not have failed to choose this world" (T 416). Even though such direct statements supporting Leibnizian Certaintarianism are rather rare in the later Leibniz, arguably he still advocates Leibnizian

⁹ For recent statements, see Bennett (see note 5), pp. 174–176, and E. Curley & G. Walski: "Spinoza's Necessitarianism Reconsidered", in: R. Gennaro & C. Huenemann (ed.): *New Essays on the Rationalists*, Oxford 1999.

¹⁰ See, for instance, R. C. Sleigh, Jr.: *Leibniz and Arnauld: A Commentary on Their Correspondence*, New Haven 1990, 82–83.

Certaintarianism by making a distinction between *moral* and *absolute* (or metaphysical) necessity (he sometimes calls the former ‘certainty’ – hence ‘Certaintarianism’). For example, in T 234–235 Leibniz writes that

“that which is certain is not always necessary, or altogether irresistible; the thing might have gone otherwise, but that did not happen, and with a 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. [...] In a word, when one speaks of the *possibility* of a thing it is not a question of the causes that can bring about or prevent its actual existence: otherwise one would change the nature of the terms, and render useless the distinction between the possible and the actual. [...] That is why, when one asks if a thing is possible or necessary, and brings in the consideration of what God wills or chooses, one alters the issue. For God chooses among the possibles, and for that very reason he chooses freely, and is not compelled; there could be neither choice nor freedom if there were but one course possible.”¹¹

So, no other than the actual world could be actual, because God’s (essential) attributes entail that it is morally necessary for Him to choose to create this (best) world; nevertheless, the actual world is not absolutely necessary, because in creation God had alternatives (viz., other, less expedient worlds). As indicated above, we can think of these other worlds as being *realizable* in the sense that an imagined sufficiently powerful being could have actualized

¹¹ See also, for example, GP VII, 304 / AG 151 (1697); NE 2.21.49; T 45, 171, 174, 228, 230–232, 367, 374, d2, a8, k14; GP II, 419 / LDB 201 (1711); LC 5.4, 5.8–9, 5.76.

them.

R. M. Adams¹² has managed to find in Leibniz's writings (or should we rather say, in his private speculations) four passages,¹³ in which Leibniz apparently ventures to deny the second premise of the following familiar argument:

(P1) Necessarily, God chooses the best world.

(P2) Necessarily, this world is the best world.

Therefore,

(C) Necessarily, God chooses this world.

In these passages Leibniz appeals to his obscure account of infinite analysis,¹⁴ that is, to indemonstrability: "So, although one can concede that it is necessary for God to choose the best, [...] it does not follow that what is chosen is necessary, since there is no demonstration that it is the best" (A VI, 4, 1652 / AG 30, 1689?). I take these Leibniz's speculative attempts to deny the premise (P2) as an indication that he wasn't perhaps entirely happy with being obligated to accept Leibnizian Certaintarianism.

¹² "Leibniz's Theories", pp. 254–257, and *Leibniz*, pp. 23–25 (see note 7).

¹³ Namely, A VI, 4, 1652 / AG 30 (1689?), Grua 336 (1691–95?), Grua 351 (1695), Grua 493–494 / SLT 114 (1706?).

¹⁴ See, e.g., Adams: *Leibniz* (see note 7), 25–30 .

Also, as Adams¹⁵ has noticed, it seems that Leibniz never abandons his notion of in-itself-possibility. If so, it might be asked, *why* this is the case if Leibniz has at his disposal what Adams¹⁶ calls a “more ambitious theory”, viz., the explication of alethic modalities by means of infinite analysis. That is, why still appeal to in-itself-possibility if a more satisfactory conception of possibility is available?

4. Elaboration

Most present-day philosophers are so accustomed to theories of modalities based on the concept of possible worlds that they may tend to shun the purported distinction between “is a possible world” and “is a world that could have been actual”. According to Alvin Plantinga, a *possible world* is a maximal (or complete) possible state of affairs, that is, a possible state of affairs W such that for every state of affairs S, if W obtains, then S either obtains or fails to obtain. Further, in Plantinga’s conception a *proposition* p is true in a world W whenever p corresponds to some state of affairs of W, and the *book* on the world W is the set of propositions true in W.¹⁷

Even though Plantinga in his definitions does not refer to actualizability, he appears, without giving any justification at all, to identify the concepts “is possible” and “could be

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 19 and 23.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 20.

¹⁷ A. Plantinga: *The Nature of Necessity*, Oxford 1974, pp. 44–46.

actual”.¹⁸ Given Plantinga’s definition of “possible world”, whence does it follow that any possible world could have been actual? Also, and even more relevantly with respect to Leibniz, Michael Griffin first characterizes necessitarianism as “the position that everything actual is necessary, or, that the actual world is the only possible world” and then derives from Leibniz’s (early) views the conclusion, “it is necessary that the best of all possible worlds is actual”,¹⁹ obviously taking it for granted that “is a possible world” and “is a world that could have been actual” are equivalent. However, as indicated above, Leibniz is by no means obligated to the view that something is not a possible world unless it could have been actual.

Plantinga²⁰ introduces *world-indexed* properties (and corresponding predicates): for example, Alpha-snubnosedness means snubnosedness in the actual world Alpha. According to Plantinga,²¹ all world-indexed properties are essential to their bearers: for if, say, Socrates is Alpha-snubnosed, he is Alpha-snubnosed in, or with respect to, all worlds (or at least in those in which he exists), irrespective of whether he is or is not snubnosed in those worlds. Here becomes evident the excessive coverage of Plantingan worlds: “each book contains every other book in this sense: if *B* is the book on some world, then for any book *B'* and proposition *p*, if *p* is a member of *B*, then *B'* contains the information that *p* is a member of *B*”.²² As I shall bring

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp. 53–54.

¹⁹ Griffin (see note 4), pp. 71 and 73, respectively.

²⁰ Plantinga (see note 17), pp. 55 and 62–65.

²¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 63.

²² *Op. cit.*, p. 55.

up shortly, Leibniz's conception of possible worlds is not like this, and, what is more significant, the relation between God and the world is in Leibniz entirely different from what it is in Plantinga.

It is clear that in Plantinga's approach we can make a natural distinction between a possible world's *internal* properties (and truths), which *really* pertain to a given world, and its *external* properties (and truths): for example, Alpha-snubnosedness, while an internal property in the actual world Alpha, is only an external property with respect to all other worlds. Likewise, "Socrates is Alpha-snubnosed" is internally true only with respect to the actual world Alpha; with respect to all other worlds it is, while true, only externally so.

Plantinga²³ appears to hold that "God exists" is with respect to each world either internally true or internally false.²⁴ Of course, also Leibniz maintains that "God exists" is true with respect to the actual world (as well as with respect to all other worlds). However, because Leibniz holds that the world is a "collection of finite things" (GP VII, 302 / AG 149, 1697), whereas God is an extramundane infinite substance,²⁵ "God exists" is from Leibniz's vantage

²³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 213–216, and cf. pp. 169–170.

²⁴ According to Plantinga's well-known argument, if "God exists" is possibly true (true in some world), it is necessarily true (true in all worlds). See Plantinga (see note 17), Ch. X.

²⁵ See, for example, A VI, 3, 392 / DSR 45 (1676), A VI, 4, 567 (1683–85?), A VI, 4, 1509 / YLC 287 (1684–86?), GP VII, 302–305 / AG 149–152 (1697), Grua 396 (1698), T 7, T c15, LC 2.10, LC 2.12, LC 5.79. Also, Leibniz holds that (although God necessarily exists) it was an open possibility not to create any world at all: see, e.g., Grua 494 / SLT 114 (1706?); T 8, 201, 416, a1 – thus, God would have existed even if no world didn't.

point only externally true (with respect to all worlds). So, if we apply Plantinga's approach to Leibniz, we are in trouble: other worlds, which are worse or less expedient than the actual world indeed appear as inconsistent (that is, impossible worlds or no-worlds), if God is assumed so to speak to be among the furniture of these worlds, i.e., if "God exists" is internally true in them. This may explain why some take Leibniz as a Spinozist (or even inconsistent): perhaps some sort of Plantingan approach hovers in their minds, rather than Leibniz's position, according to which there is no contradiction between the plurality of worlds and the existence of God (with His essential properties).

This brings us back to Spinoza and Spinozist Necessitarianism. Even though Plantinga's approach is of course entirely different from Spinoza's, they seem to share a crucial conviction – that God is not extramundane – which distinguishes them from Leibniz. Accordingly, other worlds seem in Spinoza's system impossible, for as Spinoza in the proof of proposition E1p33 states, positing them means, absurdly, positing several gods.

5. Conclusion

If Spinoza does not advocate Spinozist Necessitarianism ("the actual world is the only possible world" or "all truths are necessarily true") but, rather, Leibnizian Certaintarianism ("there are many possible worlds, but only the actual world could have been actual"), Leibniz and Spinoza can agree for example on the contents of E1p33 – that is, that it is true when understood properly. If, on the other hand, Spinoza subscribes to Spinozist Necessitarianism, Leibniz strongly disagrees with him, because Leibniz emphatically defends the existence of other possible worlds (as actualizable ideas) and the contingency of (many) truths.