

## A CRITICISM OF LEIBNIZ'S VIEWS ON THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

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### 1 Introduction

Leibniz's favorite argument for God's existence is the argument from contingency. The point of departure here is the existence of things and the axiomatic nature of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR). Things exist and there must be a reason for their existence, as there must be a reason for the existence of every being (from PSR). Now, since things could have been not and may not exist in the future their is a contingent existence; they are not necessary. This means, according to Leibniz, that the reason for their being is not intrinsic or part of a thing's individual essence, hence it must be extrinsic. Accordingly, a thing must obtain its ontological substantiation (its sufficient reason for being) from an individual existent other than itself, which may be either contingent or necessary; were it contingent the situation would be reiterated and the substantiating existent would itself need ontological substantiation. No matter how long, a regressive series of contingent existents relating to each other in a substantiating fashion, cannot serve to account for the being of a given contingent existent; for it would still be the case, were we to stop at any individual in the series, that it would require a reason outside itself for its existence. The sufficient reason for the existence of contingent things must, therefore, be a necessary being. Its substantiating function is sufficient for it itself is intrinsically substantiated. God is



the necessary being whose existence is in this manner warranted by the existence of contingent things.<sup>1</sup>

The argument from contingency requires the concept of the "necessary being," as that whose essence includes the note "existence." Indeed, the distinction between necessary and contingent existence results from the conceptual schema upon which the Ontological Argument (OA) rests, whence that whose essence includes "existence" may be shown existent a priori through the mere inspection of what its essence contains. It must be emphasized, however, that Leibniz's argument from contingency is not the ontological argument. Whereas St. Anselm proceeded from essence to existence, Leibniz goes from contingent existents to a necessary existent. He does not derive the existence of God from His essence immediately.

One would expect, from the explanation of Leibniz's argument from contingency we have offered, his acceptance of the OA. His reservations regarding it may hence come as a surprise. It was the case, nonetheless, that Leibniz suggested that as formulated by both St. Anselm and Descartes the OA could not be accepted as conclusive. Passages similar to the one below, from his "Critical Remarks Concerning the General Part of Descartes' Principles," can easily be found in his writings:

The demonstration of the existence of God derived from the concept of God seems to have first been invented and proposed by Archbishop Anselm of Canterbury, in his book, *Contra Insipientem*, which is preserved. It has been criticized several times by the Scholastic theologians and by the Aquinate himself, from whom Descartes, who knew him very well, seems to have borrowed it. This argument is not without a certain beauty; yet it is imperfect. It runs as follows. Whatever can be demonstrated by inference from the concept of a thing, can be attributed to that thing. Now, from the concept of the most perfect or greatest being its existence can be inferred. *Ergo*, existence can be attributed to the most perfect being (God), or God exists. The minor of the syllogism is demonstrated as follows. The most perfect or greatest being contains all perfections, therefore also existence, which undoubtedly belongs among the perfections, since to exist is more and

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<sup>1</sup> G. W. Leibniz, "On the Ultimate Origination of Things", in *Monadology and Other Philosophical Essays*, translated by Paul Schrecker and Anne Martin Schrecker, (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc, 1976), p. 84-94.



greater than not to exist. So far the argument. But without introducing perfection or magnitude, one can form an argument which would be even more rigorous, and strict, in the following way: The necessary being exists (or the Being to whose essence existence belongs, or again the being *a se*, exists), as is manifest by the terms themselves. Now, God is such a being, by definition, therefore God exists. These arguments are valid provided it is taken for granted that the most perfect Being or the necessary Being is possible and does not imply a contradiction, or, which comes to the same, that an essence from which existence would follow is possible. But so long as that possibility has not been demonstrated, the existence of God cannot be admitted as perfectly demonstrated by such an argument.<sup>2</sup>

Leibniz does not simply reject the OA, but rather suggests that its basic thrust is correct though its conclusion requires of something not contemplated in it. The argument is good insofar as "existence" is, indeed, a note included in the essence of God, but not conclusive, for existence may not be affirmed in a definitive fashion of an entity whose "possibility" has not been established. The OA remains, for Leibniz, a forceful argument in that the essential attribution of the predicate "existence" holds, wherefrom, by adding to the OA a demonstration of God's possibility existence would be immediately demonstrated. To the passage above Leibniz adds:

Nevertheless, this argument reveals the exalted privilege of the divine nature, that He need only be possible in order to exist, while for all other things possibility is insufficient to prove existence. To demonstrate geometrically the existence of God, it remains only, therefore, to demonstrate the possibility of God accurately and with geometrical rigor.<sup>3</sup>

I believe that Leibniz's criticism of the OA contains a serious flaw. In what follows I will attempt to show the extent and the bases of the

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<sup>2</sup> G. W. Leibniz, "Critical Remarks Concerning Descartes' Principles", in *Monadology and Other Philosophical Essays*, translated by Paul Schrecker and Anne Martin Schrecker, (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc, 1976), pp. 27-28.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 28-29.



problem. I must first, however, provide additional information regarding Leibniz's characterization of the issue.

## 2 Possibility and Individual Essence

The view that all essential predicates can be attributed to an object is basic to the OA. But Leibniz's criticism of this argument stems from the claim that one essential predicate, "existence," cannot be attributed definitively to the object whose essence is being considered without answering first the question about its possibility. This claim is grounded on the recognition that possibility is a condition of existence, wherefrom, for Leibniz, an a priori consideration of existence requires beforehand, or in addition, an a priori consideration of possibility. Since possibility is defined by Leibniz, as non-contradiction, one may not affirm that a substance exists if it may be that the concept of the substance, by which it is conceived as possible and individually defined, may contain a contradiction. The possibility of impossibility of the being that presumably exists essentially precludes an a priori sufficient determination of its existence on the basis of its concept. Leibniz often explains that:

In general, as I have once pointed out, it should be remembered that from a definition nothing can be inferred with certainty concerning the defined thing unless it is established that what is thus defined is possible. For if it happens to imply a hidden contradiction, some absurdity may be deduced from it.<sup>4</sup>

Possibility, according to Leibniz, can be established a priori by considering completely or exhaustively the definition or individual essence of a substance and showing on this basis that the concept in question does not include a contradiction. An apprehension of the "complete concept" of a substance, its individual essence, provides what Leibniz calls a "real definition." He frequently contrasts the nature of "nominal definitions" with that of "real definitions" by stressing that it is only

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<sup>4</sup> G. W. Leibniz, "Critical Remarks Concerning Descartes' Principles", in *Monadology and Other Philosophical Essays*, translated by Paul Schrecker and Anne Martin Schrecker, (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc, 1976), p. 28.



through the latter "by which the possibility of the defined notion is established."<sup>5</sup>

For Leibniz, the "complete concept" of a substance individuates it insofar as it includes all its existential predicates, which in conformity with the Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles, determine no other substance.<sup>6</sup> An infinite intellect, through omniscience, has an intuitive grasp of complete concepts, whereby it knows a priori all possible substances. No such privilege is open to finite intellects. Their knowledge of the attributes individual substances have can only be a posteriori; and it is never, in any fashion, exhaustive. This entails, for Leibniz, that in order to show the possibility of a substance, such as God, a finite intellect must establish that it does not include a contradiction on a basis other than thinking exhaustively this substance's individual concept. This then is the challenge those who want to complete the OA must meet.

### 3 Critical Remarks

My contention, that there is a defect in Leibniz's treatment of the OA, is grounded on the fact that he does not reject the OA but treats it as valuable in a way that makes it salvageable through a reformulation which adds the need of demonstrating God's possibility. There is on the part of Leibniz partiality in favor of the OA, suggested by the claim, cited above (footnote number 3), that as reformulated it stills marks God as an exceptional being, which in the traditional argument was unique inasmuch as its existence could be shown from its essence, and in the reformulated argument is unique in that it can be shown existent by being shown possible. But in claiming that this reformulation saves the OA Leibniz misses an important point. The whole meaning of the OA is based on the view that essence may suffice to establish existence; to claim otherwise is to reject the OA altogether, and there are not two

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<sup>5</sup> G. W. Leibniz, "Reflections on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas", in *Monadology and Other Philosophical Essays*, translated by Paul Schrecker and Anne Martin Schrecker, (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc, 1976), p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> "This being so, we are able to say that this is the nature of an individual substance or of a complete being, namely, to afford a conception so complete that the concept shall be sufficient for the understanding of it and for the deduction of all the predicates of which the substance is or may become the subject". G.W. Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics, Correspondence with Arnauld, Monadology*, translated by George Montgomery (Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1988), p. 175.



possible ways about this,. Either essence, in the case of the *ens perfectissimum*, entails existence or it does not. But Leibniz wants it both ways. It does, and hence once possibility is established it is demonstrated that God exists. It does not, and hence the OA as stated by St. Anselm and Descartes is not conclusive. It does, and we may say that God's essence includes "existence." It does not, and we may not say that it demonstrates existence. Here, in characteristic Leibnizian fashion, what appears as unreconcilable is treated as reconcilable; but I believe that this is one instance where Leibniz's attempt at reconciliation fails.

The problem can better be appreciated if we take into consideration Leibniz's treatment of possibility relative to a posteriori evidence of existence. The passage that follows is ideally suited to our needs. Leibniz says:

*Possibility can be known either a priori or a posteriori... We know the possibility a posteriori when we know by experience that the thing actually exists; for whatever actually exists or has existed is certainly possible.*<sup>7</sup>

When we know a posteriori that a substance exists the question about its possibility need not be raised. For Leibniz, a posteriori evidence of existence is by itself evidence of possibility. Clearly, he accepts the metaphysical principle which says, "that which exists is possible." But a priori evidence of existence does not establish "existence" such that it is covered by this principle. It is clear then that "existence" has two different meanings in Leibniz: one that obtains in the context of essentialism, where it does not include "possibility;" and another which belongs in the context of a posteriori evidence, which "existence" involves "possibility." Had Leibniz dealt in his a priori consideration of "existence" with the full import of this notion, i.e., its existentialist a posteriori import, he could have accepted the OA by simply accepting a priori evidence of existence as if on the same footing as a posteriori evidence, wherefrom the predicate "existence" in the essence of God would have imported possibility and the argument would have been conclusive.

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<sup>7</sup> G. W. Leibniz, "Reflections on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas", in *Monadology and Other Philosophical Essays*, translated by Paul Schrecker and Anne Martin Schrecker, (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc, 1976), p. 7.



Leibniz's treatment of "existence" relative to the essence of a substance as a predicate which yet does not warrant the attribution of existence is an inconsistency, with two alternative solutions, neither of which was entertained by Leibniz. As suggested above, he had the option of treating a priori existence in the manner of a posteriori existence as including possibility; or he could have realized, in the manner of Hume and Kant, that essential predicates do not serve to establish factuality, i.e., that "existence" is not an essential predicate, or what amounts to the same, that there is no other existence than the factual one, which can never be evinced in an a priori fashion. Rather than opting for one of these alternatives, Leibniz advanced a view based on an ambiguous use of the word "existence" which obtains from the rejection of the universality of the principle which asserts that that which exists is possible (let us call this principle EP).

I believe that in spite of the fact that Leibniz's suggestion regarding the reformulation of the OA is grounded on the restriction of the universality of EP, it is by no means clear that his intent is to diminish the extension of this principle as required by his position. The ambiguity of his treatment of this issue suggests that he wants to retain the universality of the principle and also wants to defend the view that essential "existence" is "true existence." But he cannot attain the first goal and question OA; nor can he treat a priori existence as true existence which yet admits the possibility of discovering that the perfect being is impossible.

We must realize that much more than the OA was ultimately at issue here. Leibniz's argument from contingency was also at risk, and, it stood at the basis of his confidence regarding the capacity and the value of reason as a trustworthy instrument of metaphysico-theological knowledge. In order to appreciate this let us advance to our last part, under the heading, "The Root of the Problem."

#### **4 The Root of the Problem**

The OA was conceived by St. Anselm in the context of the platonic conception of essence, as that which affords the necessary attributes of a being, i.e., those which define it in terms of what qualifies all members of the species. In opposition to the essence, thus conceived, accidental attributes belonged in the description of the individual and were not considered necessary. Though we get the impression that the being de-



defined in the OA, as that greater than which none may be thought, is an individual (God), we must realize that a definition in the platonic tradition concerns always the species, of which the individual is an instance. The question, What is God? inquires about the universal, and the answer qualifies the individual only insofar as it is an instantiation of the universal. The fact that in the case of God the species has one instance brought about the confusion between what really pertains to the universal and what pertains to the individual, and gave rise to the mistake of attributing what was being thought in the framework of specific essences to the individual. In this fashion the "necessity," which appropriately qualifies the universal, was predicated of an individual. Thus was the concept of the "necessary existent" arrived at.

With Leibniz's use and distinction of specific and individual essences we are placed in the position of recognizing, as Leibniz himself did not, the confusion at the basis of the OA. This confusion is also at the root of the problem found in Leibniz's attempt at salvaging it. By treating the issue in the manner we have explained, Leibniz stood at the threshold of the solution of the problem. He never, however, saw the solution.

One has to suspect that the historical development of philosophy which brought about the conception of individual essences, as found in Leibniz, must have had the OA at its basis inasmuch as here was the first consideration of an essence as if qualifying an individual. That individual essences of finite substances were conceived by Leibniz as without the predicate "existence" suggests that the notion of the necessary existent, indeed, worked as the frame of reference relative to which this basic non-predicate of finite individual essences was conceived. Contingency was, accordingly, established as resulting from the distinction between the existent whose individual essence includes "existence" and existents whose individual essences do not. Since the latter, out of contingency, were not eternal and, for the same reason, were ontologically dependent, a distinction between their status as possible and as real became important in Leibniz's metaphysics. Non-eternality and ontological dependency required a linkage to the necessary existent in the manner explained in the argument from contingency, wherefrom creation was frequently conceived by Leibniz as the relation by which ontological substantiation is provided to contingent existents. Furthermore, Leibniz never renounced the role of God as efficient cause in creation, and was prompted, especially by the distinction between the efficient cause as antecedent and its effect as consequent in a temporal sense, to view pos-



sibility as the first condition of the existence of contingent beings, in conformity with EP.

Leibniz's definition of possibility as non-contradiction made the conception of an individual essence by the infinite mind of the necessary existent the foundation of creation, inasmuch as it was the criterion for possibility. An individual essence of a contingent existent does not establish existence, but is appropriate to establish possibility. Now, while this is correct with regard to contingent individual essences, it does not fit the individual essence of the necessary being. Its necessity entails eternal actuality and is incompatible with the manner of being of an entity which moves from an ontological state where it is not but is possible, to a state where it is, having being actualized. Moreover, the metaphysical status of a pure act, which Leibniz, in Aristotelian fashion, ascribes to God, should have forewarned him against this mistake, as the domain of possibilities in the intellect of God made up of individual essences involves a degree of reality whereby the possibles stand to existents in a manner similar to that of what is potential to what is actual. God as possible would hence possess a dimension of potentiality not compatible with the nature of a pure act.

What Leibniz has done is to extend a condition resulting from contingency to the necessary existent out of the inclination towards considering all individual substances contingent. The hybrid nature of the concept of God (necessary in the manner of a universal, individual in the manner of contingent existents) led Leibniz to this mistake. Its occurrence shows the fundamental difficulty entailed by considering God's essence in the manner of a complete concept, hence an individual essence, which as such, would need to be characterized in metaphysical terms appropriate to individuality and contingency, while having arrived at this individual essence from the conceptual schema that affords specific essences, which have the attributes of an universal.

If we now reconsider the meaning and extent of EP it is clear that it originates in a conception of existence as universally contingent. It cannot hence be accommodated to the notion of a necessary existent. This is the reason we are left with the impression that Leibniz wants EP (as he wants all individual existents to answer the question of possibility, God included) but cannot admit the universality of EP (for he wants "existence" to be an essential predicate of the necessary being in the OA, and, perhaps without fully realizing it, treats "existence" as the content of a specific essence which has no bearing on the "possibility" of an



individual existent). Thus he ends up with the contradictory claim that the necessary being essentially exists but must be shown possible, which is grounded on the absurd view that it is possible for an entity to exist and to be impossible, inasmuch as that of which "existence" may be essentially predicated (specific essence) can be contradictory and thus impossible.

Leibniz's reflection on the OA should have conduced him to the recognition that a metaphysics with EP has no room for essential existence. It should have prompted also the realization that existence is not a predicate and cannot hence be part of the concept of any being. Moreover, his distinction between specific and individual essences could have brought about the view that what is factual, is in all cases individual and contingent, wherefrom the recognition of the confusion in the OA between what is universal and what is individual could follow. But the collapse of the OA meant the rejection of the notion of the necessary being and ultimately, for this reason, the collapse of the argument from contingency, and this was too much for one whose theology stood at the basis of his most cherished convictions.

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