

Moral Necessity, Possibility, and Impossibility from Leibniz to Kant

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Abstract: In all three of his major works on moral philosophy, Kant conceives of moral obligation, moral permissibility, and moral impermissibility in decidedly *modal* terms, namely in terms of moral necessity, moral possibility, and moral impossibility respectively. This terminology is not Kant's own, however, but has a rather long history stretching back to a group of Spanish Jesuit theologians in the early seventeenth century, and it was used in two contexts: first, in the context of divine and human action to explain how volition can be both metaphysically and physically free and yet *morally* necessary, and second in a deontic context to refer to moral obligation, permissibility, and impermissibility. In this paper, my first and primary aim is to sketch the way in which four of Kant's most important German predecessors, namely Leibniz, Christian Wolff, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, and Christian August Crusius, used the language of moral necessity, possibility, and impossibility in *both* the context of action *and* obligation. My second, more limited aim is to suggest that Kant's use of these terms can be clarified by taking this background into consideration.

Keywords: Baumgarten, Alexander Gottlieb; Crusius, Christian August; Kant, Immanuel; Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm; moral impossibility; moral necessity, moral possibility; obligation

1. Introduction

In all three of his major works on moral philosophy, Kant conceives of moral obligation, moral permissibility, and moral impermissibility in decidedly *modal* terms, namely in terms of moral necessity, moral possibility, and moral impossibility respectively. A particularly clear example is from the *Metaphysics of Morals*, where Kant claims that by means of “categorical imperatives certain actions are *permitted* or *forbidden*, that is, morally possible or impossible, while some of them or their opposites are morally necessary, that is obligatory” (6:221).¹ Kant implies this terminology in the *Critique of Practical Reason* as well, where, under the “Table of the categories of freedom”, he lists “The *permitted* and the *forbidden*”, “*Duty* and what is *contrary to duty*”, and “*Perfect* and *imperfect duty*”

¹ References to Kant's works cite the volume and page number of his *Gesammelte Schriften* (see Kant 1900–) except references to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which refer to the page numbers of the first (A) and second (B) edition. I follow the translations of Kant's texts available in the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* and I indicate where these translations have been modified. Translations of the Mrongovius II lecture notes on moral philosophy are from Jens Timmermann, whom I thank for making his draft available to me.

under the category of “modality” (5:66). Finally, the same language is implicit in the *Groundwork*, where, in a famous passage discussing the “canon” of moral judgment, Kant refers to both the “inner impossibility” of maxims that “cannot even be thought without contradiction as a universal law of nature”, as well as those maxims that lack this inner impossibility but are nevertheless “impossible to will” (4:424). In the *Mrongovius II* lecture notes on moral philosophy, which stem from the same period as the *Groundwork* (namely the Winter semester of 1784–5), these two kinds of impossibility are explicitly cast in terms of two ways in which an action is “morally impossible”, namely “1. if its maxim cannot take place as a universal law” and “2. if its maxim actually can, but we cannot will this” (29:608). Kant therefore uses modal language to describe a central feature of his moral philosophy, namely his conception of obligation, as well as one of its more controversial features, that is, the idea that moral impermissibility is decided by the presence of contradiction.²

The terminology of moral necessity, possibility, and impossibility is not Kant’s own, however, but has a rather long history. The language of ‘moral necessity’ in particular was invented by a group of Spanish Jesuit theologians in the early seventeenth century, such as Pedro Hurtado de Mendoza (1578–1641), who introduced the concept in order to explain how God’s will could be both metaphysically and physically free and yet must choose the best with *moral* necessity (*neccitas moralis*).³ Thus, in the first instance this language was used in the context of the metaphysics of action to describe a compatibilist conception of divine free will. The language of moral necessity was historically used in a second context as well, namely in a deontic sense to describe moral obligation. It has been argued that the use of the language of moral necessity in this deontic context has its roots in the same Jesuit tradition mentioned above, but at the very latest it can be found in the writings of Francisco Suarez, Hugo Grotius, and Samuel Pufendorf, the latter of whom, for instance, defines obligation as “that by which a Man is bound under a moral Necessity to perform, or admit, or undergo any thing” (1729 [1672], I.I.XXI).⁴

A good deal of scholarship exists on how the above-mentioned Jesuits used the language of moral necessity in their writings, especially within the context of the metaphysics of action.⁵ There is also a small body of scholarship that discusses the extent to which Leibniz was familiar with this tradition as well as evaluates whether or not his use of the language of moral necessity can be

² For a helpful overview of the various ways to interpret the contradiction(s) at issue, see Galvin (2009).

³ See Murray (1995, 106). Knebel (2000) is the most complete study of how these Jesuit thinkers used this terminology.

⁴ See Knebel (2000, 128 and 256) and the sources mentioned there.

⁵ See especially Knebel (1991; 2000) and Murray (2004). Knebel (2000, 195), for instance, explicitly states that it is “only for the sake of completeness” that he briefly deals with the deontic sense of these terms.

clarified in light of it.⁶ Additional literature discusses how the language of moral necessity was used by eighteenth-century British philosophers in the debate concerning liberty and necessity.⁷ By contrast, there is very little discussion of how eighteenth-century German philosophers after Leibniz understood this terminology in these two contexts.⁸ The hypothesis of this paper is that we cannot fully understand Kant's use of the language of moral necessity, possibility, and impossibility until we have a better understanding of the ways in which his most important German predecessors understood these terms.⁹ Accordingly, I have two aims in the following: my first and primary aim is to sketch the way in which four of Kant's most important German predecessors, namely Leibniz, Christian Wolff, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, and Christian August Crusius, used the language of moral necessity, possibility, and impossibility in *both* the context of action *and* obligation. My second, more limited aim is to suggest that Kant's use of these terms can indeed be clarified by taking this background into consideration.

I proceed as follows. In section 2 I summarize Leibniz's use of this terminology, which can be seen as the starting point of the subsequent discussion in eighteenth-century Germany.¹⁰ I show that Leibniz uses modal language in the context of both the metaphysics of action and obligation, but it is unclear whether, and if so how, the two contexts are related to one another. In section 3 I show how this changes for Wolff who makes an effort to systematically connect his philosophy of action and theory of obligation, and thereby unites the two contexts in which the language of moral necessity and impossibility are used. In section 4 I consider how Baumgarten further develops Wolff's theory. I illustrate that Baumgarten distinguishes between the "broader" and "stricter" senses of these modal terms to explicitly distinguish the two contexts from each other, and that he makes a sustained effort to show how various modalities (logical, physical, and moral) are related to one another. In section 5 I turn to Crusius who rejects the compatibilist conception of free choice common to Leibniz, Wolff, and Baumgarten, and therefore their conception of free action in terms

⁶ See Murray (1995; 1996; 2004; 2014), Adams (2005), and Sleight (2009).

⁷ See Harris (2005, 6–7) for a summary of how the language of moral necessity was understood by many eighteenth-century British philosophers.

⁸ To my knowledge, the existing literature deals with this terminology only in the context of a larger discussion of how Kant and his predecessors understood obligation. See e.g., Klemme (2018; forthcoming) and Schwaiger (2009).

⁹ To be clear: understanding how these German figures used the modal language that is the subject of this paper is a worthwhile undertaking in its own right and not only as a means to better understanding Kant. I structure my discussion around Kant due to the focus of this special issue. I should also mention that my discussion is far from complete: a full discussion would have to consider how numerous other eighteenth-century German figures use the language of moral necessity, possibility, and impossibility, such as G. F. Meier (see e.g., 1764 §65–9 and §137–8), I. G. Canz (see 1752, §69), and J. A. Eberhard (see 1781, §35). Thanks to Stefano Bacin for the reference to Canz.

¹⁰ Indeed, Knebel (2000, 129) argues that it is because of Leibniz that this language was used in post-Scholastic philosophy.

of moral necessity as well. I illustrate, however, that Crusius preserves the language of moral necessity in the context of obligation but thereby radically changes its meaning. I conclude in section 6 by considering how my analysis in the previous sections illuminates Kant's use of this terminology. I do not pretend to offer a full interpretation of Kant's use of this modal language in this paper. Rather, I outline one important example of how better understanding the way in which his predecessors used this language can illuminate his conception of moral obligation, permissibility, and impermissibility.

2. Leibniz

The primary way in which Leibniz uses the concept of 'moral necessity' is in the context of the metaphysics of action. The terminology appears over the course of his attempt to explain how God's will can both necessarily choose the best, such as the creation of the best of all possible worlds, but is nonetheless free in doing so. In the *Theodicy*, for instance¹¹, Leibniz states that one of his aims is to illustrate that "absolute necessity, which is called also logical and metaphysical and sometimes geometrical ... does not exist in free actions, and that thus freedom is exempt not only from constraint but also from real necessity" (T pg. 62–3).¹² As this passage indicates, one of the strategies¹³ Leibniz employs to explain how divine choice can be both necessary and free is to argue that the kind of necessity involved in God's choice of the best is distinct from *absolute* necessity. Leibniz defines absolute necessity as that whose opposite implies a contradiction, and thus whose opposite is (absolutely) impossible (T Prel. Disc. §2, §174, §367; see also UOT pg. 150 [Ger. VII, 302]). The kind of necessity involved in God's choice of the best, on the other hand, is what Leibniz

¹¹ While I refer to several of Leibniz's other writings in this section, I focus on the *Theodicy* for two reasons. First, the *Theodicy* was one of the few texts that Leibniz's eighteenth-century contemporaries, such as the ones I discuss in the following sections, would have had access to. Second, the language of 'moral necessity' is especially prominent in this text. Indeed, as Murray (2004, 2 and 2014, 168–9) has argued, Leibniz first begins using this language in the context of action shortly before the *Theodicy*.

¹² References to the *Theodicy* (T) cite either the section (§) or, if from the Preface, page number. I use the English translation in Leibniz (2007). References to Leibniz's other works cite either the section or page number of the translations contained in Leibniz (1989), and I use the following abbreviations: DM = *Discourse on Metaphysics*, FP = 'On Freedom and Possibility', OC = 'On Contingency', OF = 'On Freedom', UOT = 'On the Ultimate Origin of Things', LC = 'Letter to Cost, on Human Freedom'. Whenever possible, I also cite from the following standard editions: the series, volume, and page number of the Akademie Edition (A) of Leibniz's works (see Leibniz 1923); the Gerhardt (Ger.) edition (see Leibniz 1875–90); or Grua (Gr) (see Leibniz 1948).

¹³ Leibniz employs several strategies to account for the 'contingency' involved in freedom; contingency being one of the three conditions that are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for freedom, according to Leibniz, the other two being 'intelligence' and 'spontaneity'. See Jolley (2020, 151–6) for an overview of these strategies.

calls *moral* necessity.¹⁴ Leibniz argues that this kind of necessity is compatible with freedom because although “God fails not to choose the best” (T §45), it is not *absolutely* impossible for God to do so since God choosing less than the best does not involve a (logical) contradiction. Thus, God necessarily choosing the best is merely “certain” (see e.g., T §234, §310, §367 and DM §13). As long as the opposite of what God chooses is absolutely possible, then God’s choice is “contingent” (T §367, see also DM §13), which Leibniz defines simply as “that whose opposite is possible” (see T §282). Accordingly, only *metaphysical* necessity is opposed to freedom (T §232, §237), for Leibniz, whereas the *moral* necessity involved in God’s choice of the best is neither fatal (T §231), nor constrained (T §45, §230), metaphysically forced (T §201), nor compelled (T §235), and is exempt from coercion (*coaction*) (LC pg. 194 [Ger. III, 401]). A main argument of the *Theodicy* is therefore that those who claim that the necessity involved in God’s choice precludes freedom make the mistake of confusing *moral* and *metaphysical* necessity (see T §168, §180, and §249–50).¹⁵

Leibniz’s primary, and thus more familiar, distinction is that between *absolute* and *hypothetical* necessity, and moral necessity is a version of hypothetical necessity (see e.g. T §124 and §132). As indicated above, that which is absolutely necessary is defined as that whose opposite is not possible because it involves a contradiction. That which is merely hypothetically necessary, by contrast, is that whose opposite does not imply a contradiction and thus is only necessary “*ex hypothesi*” (DM §13), that is, necessary on the assumption of (i.e. on hypothesis of) something else, such as a condition or ground (see LC pg. 193 [Ger III, 400]). In the case of moral necessity, Leibniz makes the condition explicit: assuming that the best is necessarily chosen by God, what is morally necessary is only necessary on condition that God recognizes a given course of action as best (see OC pg. 30 [A VI.4.1652]). Interestingly enough, God’s choice of the best is also the condition or ‘hypothesis’ of physical necessity as well: for Leibniz, what is *physically* necessary is only necessary on the assumption of the laws of nature governing movement, and Leibniz is explicit that these laws are only morally necessary, that is, contingent on the world that God has created because he recognized it to be best (see T §349 and §351). Thus, for Leibniz “physical necessity is founded on moral necessity.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Sample passages where Leibniz uses this language in the context of the metaphysics of action are: T §124, §128, §132, §158, §168, §175, §180, §201, §230–1, §234, §310, §344, §350, §367, §374, and LC pg. 195 [Ger III, 402].

¹⁵ Leibniz’s compatibilist conception of divine free choice is interconnected with a number of other positions, especially the idea that divine foreknowledge of the future is compatible with freedom. See T §132, FP pg. 22 [A VI.4.1448], DM §13, and LC pg. 193 [Ger III, 400], as well as Murray 1995 for a discussion.

¹⁶ T Prel. Disc. §2. See also A VI.1.86 where Leibniz calls God the “founder [Conditor]” of the world. Thanks to Åsne Grøgaard for this reference.

As the discussion so far indicates, Leibniz's primary focus when discussing the concept of moral necessity is on the way in which *divine* choice necessarily chooses the best but is nonetheless free. It is important to note that Leibniz holds that *human* choice functions in the same way. The difference is that whereas God has "infallible intuition" (OF pg. 97) and thus wills in accordance with the *true* best, human beings are fallible and thus choose merely in accordance with what *appears* best (DM §13; LC pg. 194 [Ger III, 402]; see also T §310). In fact, Leibniz argues that God created all rational creatures, both humans and angels, in this way.¹⁷ The main point for my purposes is that the kind of necessity at issue in both divine and human choice is the same, namely both God and human beings necessarily choose either the true or apparent best with *moral* necessity.

An important point that has been implicit in the discussion so far is that, at least in the context of the metaphysics of action, Leibniz primarily speaks of moral necessity and not of moral possibility or impossibility. Based on the above analysis, however, we can reconstruct what moral impossibility might mean in this context: morally impossible is any choice other than that which is represented (by either the human or divine mind) as best. For example: if a human being were to deem it best to cheat on an exam (even though this might not be what is *truly* best) it would be *morally impossible* for them to act otherwise, even though alternative courses of action are not absolutely or even physically impossible. Similarly, it would be *morally impossible* for God to choose to create anything other than the best of all possible worlds, even though other worlds are absolutely possible.

The category of moral possibility in the context of action, however, is more complicated. In the first instance, this concept seems to have no meaning, for as soon as a course of action is represented as best, no other courses of action are morally possible. As we will see below once we turn to Baumgarten, however, there is one way to make sense of this concept: morally possible (in the context of the metaphysics of action) is any course of action that is *possible* for us to represent as best. If this is what the concept means, however, it applies to human beings only: as we have seen, the divine mind has insight into the *true* best, that is, the divine mind cannot but recognize the one true best option as the best and (necessarily) choose accordingly. This implies, however, that the morally possible and the morally necessary are coextensive, i.e., it is not possible for the divine mind to recognize other options as best.¹⁸ In the case of the human mind, however, because it chooses

¹⁷ See OC pg. 29 [A VI.4.1651], DM §13, and T §45. This is consistent with Leibniz's claim that the human mind is a mirror of God (see Jolley 2020, 5).

¹⁸ This raises the issue of whether Leibniz's concept of divine choice really does allow for contingency. For a description of this issue, though approached from a different angle, see Jolley (2020, 153–6).

only in accordance with what *appears* best, it is morally possible for it to recognize other options as best, and these other possible ‘bests’ are what we might call ‘morally possible.’

The second context in which Leibniz uses the language of moral necessity, possibility, and impossibility is *deontic*, namely in the sense of what is morally obligatory, morally permissible, and morally impermissible. In a number of places, Leibniz conceives of the morally necessary as “what must be done” (A VI.4.2838), as well as what is “due” (see A VI.4.2778). He therefore regards obligation “as a kind of moral necessity” (A VI.4.2838), in the sense that it is “a necessity imposed on him who wants to keep the name of ‘a good man’” (Gr 608, see also A VI.4.2856–7).¹⁹ Similarly, Leibniz refers in various places to that which is “possible, impossible, and necessary for a good man, if he wishes to protect his name” (A VI.4.2863). What is morally possible in this sense is therefore that which is “lawful [Licitum]” (see A VI.4.2778), that is, possible for one to do without damaging one’s standing as a good person. And morally impossible is that which is “unlawful [Illicitum]” (see A VI.4.2778), that is, “that which it is not possible to do without committing a sin” (A VI.1.471). Leibniz also describes as morally impossible “those things which are done contrary to good manners” (A VI.4.2856–7) or “such things as are impossible for me to do rightly and as befits a good man” and thus as “unjust” (A VI.4.2855).²⁰ Accordingly, in the deontic context, what is morally necessary, possible, and impossible refer to what is morally required, permissible, and impermissible. This fits well with the idea that moral necessity is a type of hypothetical necessity, for what is morally necessary, possible, and impossible in this sense only holds on a specific supposition, namely so long as one wishes to be a good person and does not want to sin.²¹

By way of conclusion to this section, it is important to note that, at least at first glance, the two contexts in which Leibniz uses the language of moral necessity, possibility, and impossibility seem distinct.²² In the case of human choice, at least, the two contexts can come apart: what a human being chooses with moral necessity (i.e., what appears to be best) might in fact be that which is morally impossible in the sense of the morally impermissible; in other words, that which appears best might be truly bad, as in the above example of cheating on an exam. In the case of divine

¹⁹ For a discussion of Leibniz’s conception of the ‘good man’ or ‘*vir bonus*’, see Johns (2014).

²⁰ Leibniz provides the interesting example of a protestant either asking or obtaining permission to marry from the pope. Leibniz argues that since it would be impious for a true protestant to ask for or receive “dispensation” from the pope, it would be morally impossible for them to do so, and thus that such marriages are valid without such dispensation (see A IV.1.471).

²¹ For further discussion of these modal concepts in the deontic context see Johns (2006/2007).

²² Murray, for instance, argues that the contexts of action and obligation are “two quite different contexts, with two quite different meanings” (2004, 1).

choice, however, the two contexts always overlap: since God’s intellect cognizes not merely what appears to be best but what is truly best and he acts in line with such cognition with (moral) necessity, God always acts in accordance with perfect goodness, and thus in line with what a “good man” would do. It is therefore no surprise that Leibniz describes duty (*officium*) as “whatever is necessary in the perfectly just” (Leibniz 1903, 517); put differently, human beings *ought* to do what God *necessarily* does.

Much more can be said about Leibniz’s conception of obligation, as well as the way in which that which is obligatory is instantiated in the divine and human mind.²³ For my purposes, the important point to emphasize here is that the two contexts in which Leibniz uses the language of moral necessity, possibility, and impossibility seem distinct in the human case, but not in the divine case. In the next section we will see that Wolff’s conception of obligation brings the two contexts into systematic connection with one another, especially with respect to human choice.²⁴

3. Wolff

To see how Wolff uses the language of moral necessity and impossibility in the context of the metaphysics of action, we need to take a brief look at his conception of willing and choice. In contrast to Leibniz, Wolff focuses on human choice and defines the will as the “inclination of the mind towards a thing, on account of the good that we think to find in it” (DM §492).²⁵ Representing something as good therefore functions as a reason for action (*Bewegungs-Grund*) or motive (*motivum*).²⁶ Merely representing something as good and being inclined towards it is not sufficient for *choice*, however, that is, actually pursuing the attainment of what we represent as good and thus *acting*. In order for the latter to be possible, we not only need to represent something as *good*, but as *better* or *best* compared to the other options available to us. Wolff makes this idea clear with his analogy of the scale (*Wage*): if our reasons for acting (representations of the good) are equal on both sides (two alternative choices), the scales do not tip, and we do not act (DM §509). In order to act, the scales

²³ For a recent discussion of Leibniz’s conception of obligation, see Brown (2016).

²⁴ It should be noted here that Wolff is not necessarily the first one to accomplish this. Knebel (2000, 257), for instance, argues that Suarez’s doctrine of prudence makes it possible for him to systematically connect the two contexts.

²⁵ All translations of Wolff are my own. I cite the volume, section, and occasionally page number of the following works: Anm. = *Remarks to the German Metaphysics* (see Wolff 1724), DE = *German Ethics* (see Wolff 1720b), DM = *German Metaphysics* (see Wolff 1720a), GNV = *Grundsätze des Natur- und Völkerrechts* (see Wolff 1754), PPU = *Philosophia practica universalis* (see Wolff 1738–9), TN = *Theologia naturalis* (see Wolff 1736–7).

²⁶ In the first Index (*Register*) of the *German Metaphysics* Wolff lists *Bewegungs-Grund* as his German translation for the Latin *motivum* (DM, unpaginated).

must be tipped on one side. One way in which this could take place is if a given option is represented as not only good, but as *better* than the other course of action. Similarly, representing something as *worse* than an alternative course of action leads to us ‘nilling’ or ‘not-willing’ (*nicht wollen*) something, that is, positively seeking to avoid or avert it.

As the physical analogy of the scale makes apparent, Wolff, too, holds that representing an object as better or best results in a human being *necessarily* pursuing it. He claims, for instance, that “for a human being who cognizes something as better, it is *impossible* for them to prefer the worse, and as such it *necessarily* happens that they choose the better” (DM §521, my emphasis). Divine choice works the same way and is distinct from human choice just as it was for Leibniz: whereas humans necessarily choose what *appears* to be best, God chooses in line with the *true* best (see DM §984). Like Leibniz, Wolff seeks to explain how the necessity involved in both human and divine choice is compatible with freedom by claiming that what is involved here is a particular “kind of necessity (which one has called the *necessity of morals* [*Nothwendigkeit der Sitten*])” (DM §521).²⁷ Wolff’s most general distinction is also that between what is “*absolutely* [*schlechterdings*] necessary” (DM §575), namely that whose opposite contains a contradiction (see DM §36) or is “necessary in itself” (DM §575) and what is hypothetically necessary, that is, necessary “only under a certain *condition*” (DM §575, see also Anm. §198). Wolff says that absolute necessity is also called “*geometrical necessity*” or “*metaphysical*” necessity, “because it is to be found in things that belong to geometry and partially also metaphysics” (DM §575). Hypothetical or ‘conditional’ necessity, on the other hand, is of two kinds (see Anm. §198). The first is “the *necessity of nature*, because it has its ground in the present course of nature, that is, in the present connection of things” (DM §575). The second is “the *necessity of morals*”, that is, the kind that “is found in freedom” (DM §575) or free choice. Freedom is compatible with this latter kind of necessity because Wolff defines freedom simply as the capacity (*Vermögen*) of the soul “to choose from two equally possible things that which pleases it the most” (DM §519).²⁸ Thus, similar to Leibniz, necessarily choosing what we represent as best is compatible with freedom, for Wolff, because alternative courses of action are “equally possible”, that is, *absolutely* possible or possible in themselves. Wolff also explains that, in choosing the best necessarily, we are not forced or constrained (*gezwungen*) to choose the best (DM §510), since alternative courses of action are still

²⁷ *Nothwendigkeit der Sitten* is Wolff’s German rendering of *necessitas moralis* (DM, first Register, unpaginated).

²⁸ Wolff places emphasis on pleasure here because pleasure is what necessarily arises in us when we have an intuition of the good (DM §404) and he defines ‘the good’ as that which makes us and our state more perfect (DM §422). Accordingly, acting freely can also be defined as choosing that which we cognize to be best, because what we cognize as best is, by definition, that which pleases us the most.

(absolutely) possible; there is no constraint here because if we were to prefer an alternative, i.e., represent it as best, we could and would necessarily choose it. Accordingly, and once again in line with Leibniz, Wolff states that it is only “certain [*gemiß*]” that we necessarily choose what we represent to be best and not, strictly or absolutely speaking, necessary (DM §517, see also §578).

As this brief sketch of Wolff’s theory of the will and choice, and the *moral* necessity involved therein, makes clear, Wolff’s position is broadly similar to that of Leibniz. As is the case for Leibniz, the primary modal concept in the context of the metaphysics of action is that of the morally necessary. As mentioned above, however, Wolff does also say that “for a human being who cognizes something as better, it is *impossible* for them to prefer the worse” (DM §521, my emphasis); in other words, choosing the worse is *morally* impossible for a human being who cognizes something as better. Wolff does not mention the concept of ‘moral possibility’ in the context of action, but if it has meaning here, it is likely similar to that mentioned in the previous section, namely ‘morally possible’ is a course of action that it is possible for us to represent as best. What is distinct from Leibniz, and which will be my focus for the remainder of this section, is Wolff’s conception of obligation. As we will see, Wolff’s novel theory of obligation allows him to bring the concepts of the morally necessary and the morally impossible within the contexts of action and obligation into systematic connection with each other.

Wolff considers himself to have offered a theory of obligation “of the sort that one has not had before” (Anm. §137, pg. 395). One of the ways in which it is unique is on account of the fact that it is grounded in his theory of the will.²⁹ Consider Wolff’s definition of obligation in the *German Ethics*: “Obligating someone to do, or omit, something is nothing other than connecting a motive of volition or nolition to it” (DE §8). Wolff gives the example of a sovereign obligating subjects to refrain from stealing by connecting the punishment of hanging to the action (DE §8). Although perhaps not immediately apparent, this fits with Wolff’s theory of the will in the following way: if human beings necessarily act on the basis of what they judge to be best, obligating a human being to act involves giving them a reason to do something, i.e., connecting a motive to an action.³⁰ It is not sufficient, of course, to provide a human being with just any reason: although Wolff does not make

²⁹ For Wolff’s explicit statement of this claim, see TN I §973. This can also be gleaned from Wolff’s procedure in the *German Ethics*: in the Preface to the first edition (see DE, *Vorrede*, unpaginated), Wolff clarifies that he proceeds in line with the mathematical method, according to which everything that comes later is grounded on what comes before, and the first chapter of part one proceeds by first discussing his theory of the good (§2–5) and theory of the will (§6–7) before moving to his theory of obligation (§8–11).

³⁰ I focus on the case of action for the sake of simplicity, but there can also be obligations not to act as well, which Wolff calls “privative [*privativae*]” in contrast to “positive [*positivae*]” obligations (see PPU I §118).

this point clear, successfully obligating a human being involves connecting a strong enough reason to an action such that, if they were to cognize this reason, they would represent the action as *better* or *best* and thus *necessarily* act accordingly. Put differently, obligation involves giving human beings a *sufficient* reason to act in a particular way.³¹

‘Obligating’ in the above sense, namely connecting a (sufficient) motive to an action, is what Wolff later calls ‘active’ obligation, in contrast to ‘passive’ obligation, that is, being obligated to act in a certain way (see PPU I §118, GNV §37, TN I §973). Wolff also distinguishes between three types of obligation based on the source of the connection between a motive and an action: if the connection is grounded in nature we are speaking about natural obligation; if God is the source, divine obligation; and if human beings, civil obligation (see DE §18). The point I wish to emphasize for the purposes of this paper, however, is that connecting a (sufficient) reason to an action involves *making it necessary* that a human being act in a certain way. This is significant, because it allows us to see how Wolff connects the two senses of ‘moral necessity’ with one another: if human beings act in accordance with what they cognize to be better or best with *moral* necessity, it makes sense to refer to obligation as moral necessity as well, since obligation amounts to *making it* morally necessary that a human being act in a certain way. Thus, in the *Theologia naturalis*, which contains Wolff’s most important discussion of moral necessity, possibility, and impossibility, he states that “active obligation is nothing other than the connection of a motive with an action” such that the “moral necessity to do something” is “passive” obligation (TN I §973). There he also defines what is “impossible in a moral way” as “what cannot happen without damaging the correctness of the action or through which the action become incorrect” (TN I §952). Wolff gives the example of helping a thief break open doors: one does not act against goodness if one does not help such a thief, because “it is morally impossible or contrary to good morals, insofar as it offends against justice or is impermissible for a righteous person to do something that does not befit a just man” (TN I §699). What is morally possible, by contrast, is “what can indeed happen, without an action thereby becoming incorrect” (TN I §952).³² Wolff gives the example of eating an amount of food that is not

³¹ Other conditions need to be satisfied here as well, such as it must be possible for human beings to discover and know what their obligations are in the first place. For a discussion of this condition see Walschots (2024). See also Walsh (2024) for a recent interpretation of Wolff’s conception of obligation more generally.

³² Wolff’s inclusion of the concept of ‘moral possibility’ in the deontic context here is noteworthy: in the earlier *German Ethics*, Wolff not only argues that actions and omissions are good and evil in themselves and by nature on account of the consequences they have on the internal and external states of human beings (see DE §2–5), but he also claims that *all* actions and omissions are good or evil in this way, such that no action is morally indifferent, that is, merely permissible (see DE §3). Wolff seems to have changed his mind in the Latin works, as the inclusion of the ‘morally possible’ indicates. See Favaretti Camposampiero (2024) for a discussion.

contrary to health (TN I §952). As an example of something morally necessary, Wolff gives the example of a rich person giving alms to the needy (see PPU I §116).

There are two features of this view that deserve attention. First, Wolff is explicit that both kinds of moral necessity, i.e., both in the context of the metaphysics of action and in the deontic sense, are versions of hypothetical necessity, and as such are not absolute but are based on a condition: action is only morally necessary on the condition that we recognize something to be best (Anm. §198), and what is morally necessary in the deontic sense is only necessary “under the condition that the action must be right” (PPU I §116). The second feature is that Wolff seeks to bring the language of moral necessity and impossibility in both contexts in line with his broader theory of modality, according to which what is necessary is that whose opposite is impossible, and the impossible is that whose opposite is necessary (see DM §36). Thus, when, by means of (active) obligation, it is made morally necessary that a human being act in a certain way, alternative courses of action are thereby made morally impossible, and vice versa (see TN I §972 and PPU I §115). As we will see in the next section, Baumgarten refines the systematic nature of Wolff’s theory in two ways: first, by explicitly distinguishing between the two contexts, and second by relating these modal terms to other kinds of modalities.

4. Baumgarten

Baumgarten offers a broadly Wolffian conception of willing³³, according to which human beings merely desire what they perceive to be good (BM §665) and choose in line with what they perceive to be best or, as Baumgarten puts it, what they “prefer” (BM §726, §697).³⁴ More specifically, Baumgarten argues that in order for choice and action to take place, the good that we perceive to be involved in a given course of action must be “overriding” (BI §13, §15) or “weigh” more (BM §697) compared to the good that speaks in favour of alternative courses of action. Baumgarten therefore agrees with Leibniz and Wolff that choice is “*determined* according to preference” (BM §726, my emphasis), and thus that we choose what we perceive to be best with *necessity*. The necessity of choice is compatible with freedom for the same reason as well, namely because alternatives to what we choose are still (absolutely) possible (see BM §102), and thus choice

³³ For a discussion of some important differences between their views, see Schwaiger (2000 and 2011, ch. 4 and 5).

³⁴ References to Baumgarten’s works cite the section number of his *Metaphysics* (BM) and *Elements of First Practical Philosophy* (BI) and I use the English translations from Fugate and Hymers (see Baumgarten 2013 and 2020).

takes place not with absolute necessity but with mere hypothetical necessity (see BM §102, §724, and BI §139). Baumgarten conceives of divine choice along the same lines as Leibniz and Wolff as well: whereas human beings act in accordance with what they *perceive* to be best, whether this be true or false, the divine intellect is only capable of distinct cognition and is thus never wrong about what is good (see BM §863 and §890).

Baumgarten also offers a broadly Wolffian conception of obligation³⁵, according to which it takes place by means of connecting “overriding impelling causes with a free determination” (BI §13, 15). The language of ‘impelling causes’ (*causas impulsivas*) is Baumgarten’s equivalent for what Wolff called ‘motives’ (*Bewegungs-Gründe*)³⁶ and thus captures the idea that there is always a reason for what we desire, which for Baumgarten is knowledge of the good (see BM §669, §665, and §100).³⁷ Thus, although Baumgarten’s terminology is different, the position is largely the same as Wolff’s: obligation takes place by connecting a motive (or impelling cause), e.g., that it is good, with an action (or free determination). What is interesting about the above definition is that Baumgarten makes explicit what was only implicit in Wolff, namely that obligation does not merely require the connection of any motive with an action, but an “overriding” motive, namely one that is sufficient to *determine* the will. Put differently, obligation requires that a sufficiently strong motive be connected to an action such that, as long as the obligated agent distinctly cognizes the motive and its connection to the action, they will necessarily act accordingly. Thus, for Baumgarten as well, obligation involves *making it necessary* that a human being act in a certain way, and Baumgarten even coins a new Latin term to capture this idea, namely *necessitatio* (necessitation/*Nötigung*)³⁸, which he defines as “the alteration of something from contingent to necessary” (BM §701). Baumgarten therefore conceives of obligation as “moral necessitation” (BM §723).³⁹

Given the broad similarities between the ways in which Wolff and Baumgarten conceive of the necessity involved in both choice and obligation, it should come as no surprise that Baumgarten

³⁵ See Schierbaum and Walschots (forthcoming) for some important differences between their views, especially with respect the ways in which constraint (*Zwang*) and reluctant (*ungern*) action are compatible with obligation.

³⁶ Some details are important here: in his German writings, Wolff uses the term *Bewegungs-Grund* to capture both rational and sensible representations of the good (see e.g., DE §190), but in the Latin writings he reserves *motivum* for reasons for action that are rational only (see PE §890 and §670 and Schierbaum 2022 for a discussion). We might therefore say, with Schwaiger (2011, 120fn.343), that Baumgarten’s “impelling causes” are broader than Wolff’s Latin conception of “motives” since the former encompasses both rational and sensitive motives alike.

³⁷ Importantly, Baumgarten conceives of the impelling causes of desire as “incentives of the mind [*elateres animi/Triebfedern des Gemüths*]” (see BM §669 and §342). See Walschots (forthcoming) for the argument that the way in which Baumgarten understands incentives had an influence on Kant.

³⁸ See Schwaiger (2009, 69–70) and Schwaiger (2011, 119).

³⁹ See Klemme (forthcoming) and Schierbaum and Walschots (forthcoming) for a discussion of obligation as necessitation in Baumgarten and Kant.

uses the language of *moral* necessity in both contexts as well. What is new in Baumgarten, however, is that he makes the two contexts explicit by distinguishing between moral necessity, possibility, and impossibility in the “broader sense” and in the “stricter sense” (see esp. BM §723). The “broader sense” refers to the context of action: what is morally necessary in the broader sense is “that whose opposite is only impossible through freedom, or in a substance insofar as it is free” (BM §723); what is morally impossible in the broader sense is “that which cannot be done solely on account of the freedom in a free substance” (BM §723); and what is morally possible in the broader sense is “that which can only be done through freedom, or in a free substance as such” (BM §723). Although Baumgarten’s language places emphasis on freedom here, he defines moral necessity and moral impossibility in the context of action in largely the same way as Wolff: when I choose with moral necessity (which is compatible with freedom) on the basis of my representation of what is best, it then becomes morally impossible for me to (freely) choose its opposite. What is new in the above is Baumgarten’s explicit inclusion of the category of the morally possible: for Baumgarten, morally possible in the context of action, that is, in the “broader sense”, is what “*can* only be done through freedom” (my emphasis); in other words, morally possible is that which it is possible for me to represent as best and thus do freely and yet with moral necessity. In the previous two sections, I suggested that this was indeed one possible way in which to understand the category of moral possibility in the context of action for Leibniz and Wolff as well.

The “stricter” sense of moral necessity, possibility, and impossibility therefore refers to the deontic context. The morally necessary in the stricter sense is “that whose opposite is impermissible”, i.e., “moral necessitation” or “obligation” (BM §723); the morally impossible in the stricter sense is the “morally impermissible” or “that which is impossible through the freedom that must be determined in conformity with moral laws” (BM §723); and the morally possible in the stricter sense is the “morally permissible”, i.e. “that which can only be done through freedom determined in conformity with moral laws” (BM §723). As Baumgarten explains in the *Elements*, moral laws are simply those that “morally necessitate free determinations”, that is, they are “obligatory propositions” which “express a determination in conformity with overriding impelling causes” (BI §60). This description of moral laws highlights an important point about his view: not just any overriding impelling cause is truly obligatory, for this would imply that anything a human being cognizes as best is not only something they *will* do with moral necessity in the broad sense, but also something they *ought* to do. To make this point, Baumgarten (and Wolff, see PPU I §117) distinguishes between “true” and “apparent” obligations (see BI §23). Thus, when a human being

perceives a given course of action as best (whether they are right or wrong), it only *appears* to them to be what they are obligated to do.⁴⁰ We would only know our true obligations at all times if our intellect were infallible and we were only capable of distinct cognition, as is the case for God, as mentioned above. Thus, in the above definitions, Baumgarten presumably has “true” obligations in mind, such that the morally possible or permissible is that which *does not* conflict with our true obligations, and the morally impossible or impermissible that which *does* conflict with our true obligations.

An important feature of Baumgarten’s conception of the two kinds of moral necessity, possibility, and impossibility that I wish to highlight is the relationship he sees as existing between various modalities.⁴¹ Like Leibniz and Wolff, Baumgarten distinguishes between what is “necessary in itself”, i.e., what is necessary “metaphysically, intrinsically, absolutely, geometrically, [or] logically”, and what is “hypothetically necessary” (BM §102), that is, what is necessary only “respectively, relatively, extrinsically, through another, [or] qualifiedly” (see BM §16). What is absolutely necessary is “that whose opposite is impossible in itself” (BM §102); in other words, it is that whose opposite implies or involves a contradiction, when considered in itself and not in relation to anything else. Similarly, the absolutely possible is that which does not involve a contradiction, when considered by itself (BM §8). And the absolutely impossible is that which *does* involve a contradiction, when considered by itself (see BM §7, 9, 15). What is hypothetically necessarily, possible, and impossible, by contrast, is that which is such when considered in relation to something else or on hypothesis of something else. Baumgarten distinguishes between two kinds of hypothetical necessity, possibility, and impossibility. The first is moral in its two varieties discussed above, and the second is physical or natural. Baumgarten defines what is physically possible as “whatever can be actualized by a certain nature” and whatever cannot be so actualized is “physically impossible” (see BM §469). The physically necessary is the opposite of what is physically impossible (BM §469) and, as Baumgarten explains elsewhere, it is what a substance is “necessitated” to do “by their own essence alone” (BM §710). These are all only hypothetical because they describe things that are necessary, possible, and impossible only for, i.e., on condition of, a certain nature. To illustrate what these terms mean with

⁴⁰ Strictly speaking, even a human being perceiving something as best does not always mean they regard it as obligatory: Baumgarten makes room for various sorts of reluctant action, such as when a human being takes something to be good only insofar as it is the lesser of two evils. In such a case, one takes something to be better while simultaneously regarding it as evil in itself. For an extended discussion of Baumgarten’s conception of reluctant action, see Schierbaum and Walschots (forthcoming).

⁴¹ To be sure, the ‘hierarchy’ that I proceed to explain below can be found in Wolff as well (see e.g., TN §699; PPU I §115, §209, §264), but it is especially apparent and more detailed in Baumgarten.

some examples: it is physically necessary that a human being breathe, because their essence makes it impossible for them not to do so (without ceasing to be the kind of thing that they are); it is physically impossible, all things being equal, for a human being to lift 5,000kg above their head; and finally, it is physically possible, again all things being equal, for a human being to lift 5kg above their head.⁴²

Distinguishing between these varieties of necessity, possibility, and impossibility leads Baumgarten to explain that a certain hierarchy exists among them such that, in the first instance, something is only physically possible if it is also absolutely possible (BI §11). The correlate here is that if something is absolutely impossible it cannot be physically possible (see BM §469). For example, it is physically impossible to draw a four-sided triangle *because* a four-sided triangle is absolutely, i.e., intrinsically or conceptually, impossible. Similarly, what is morally possible in the broad sense, i.e., possible for me to recognize as best and therefore do freely, must first be *both* absolutely possible *and* physically possible (see BI §131). The correlate of this is that if a given action is physically impossible, for instance, I cannot freely choose to do it. Finally, Baumgarten argues that actions that are morally necessary and possible in the stricter sense, i.e., morally obligatory and permissible, must not only be absolutely and hypothetically possible, but also morally possible in the broader sense, i.e., possible for me to freely choose (see BI §10 and §43). If I cannot first freely choose to do an action, i.e., represent it as the best course of action, I also cannot be obligated to do it. At the same time, Baumgarten makes clear that the reverse relationships do not always hold: absolute possibility does not guarantee physical or moral possibility (in either sense), nor does physical possibility guarantee moral possibility (in either sense) (see BM §469). Similarly, and going in the opposite direction, physical impossibility does not always imply absolute impossibility, nor does moral impossibility (of either sort) always imply physical or absolute impossibility (BM §469). Indeed, the relationships holding between all these modal terms is complex, since what is physically necessary does not imply that it is absolutely necessary (see BM §469 and §102), and what is physically necessary of course *excludes* moral possibility and necessity in both the broader and stricter senses (see BM §708).

It would be worth exploring the above-identified hierarchy that Baumgarten sees as existing between these various modalities in more detail. The point I wish to emphasize for my purposes in this paper is that this hierarchy amounts to a relatively elaborate conception of the relationship

⁴² The latter two examples are like those given by Wolff in PPU I §115.

between ‘ought’ and ‘can’: we can only be obligated to do what we (absolutely, physically, and morally in the broad sense) *can* do, and what we (absolutely, physically, and morally in the broad sense) *cannot* do, we cannot be obligated to do (see especially BI §11). In the Conclusion to this paper, I will suggest that this is a feature found in Kant’s use of the language of moral impossibility in particular.

5. Crusius

Crusius also makes a fundamental distinction between absolute and hypothetical necessity, and he does so in the following way: absolute necessity is when “something absolutely cannot be otherwise” and hypothetical necessity is such that “on supposition of certain circumstances, something cannot fail to happen, or could happen differently” (E §125).⁴³ Crusius states that these kinds of necessity are not arbitrary, but are in accordance with the end of using of language, for there is an important difference between them, namely “hypothetical necessity is supposed to leave the possibility of the moral imputation of our actions open in such a way that we can nonetheless perform virtue, or incur blame, or deserve punishment or reward” (E §126). Significantly, however, Crusius argues that the distinction dissolves if

in the series of causes, on which that which is hypothetically necessary is based, one does not at some point arrive at the kind of cause that could have omitted its action in precisely the same circumstances, such that its action was not, not even hypothetically, necessary. For, if all the causes, in the circumstances where they have acted, could not have omitted acting, then the opposite of no action was truly possible, §56. Consequently, they were all necessary. (E §126)

Accordingly, whether the series of causes continues into infinity or one arrives at something immediately necessary, Crusius argues that the effects in both causes are absolutely (*schlechterdings*) necessary, “and must, at the time they exist, be just as necessary as if their opposite could not have been thought, both immediately and in general” (E §126). Accordingly, Crusius argues that if we want to make use of this distinction in accordance with the use of language and to make room for

⁴³ All translations of Crusius are my own and I cite the section numbers of his *Guide to Living Rationally* (A, Crusius 1744) and *Sketch of the Necessary Truths of Reason* (E, Crusius 1745).

moral imputation, “hypothetical necessity must in the end be grounded on first, free, foundational activities” (E §126).⁴⁴

In this context Crusius makes an interesting point. He argues, namely, that “each and every hypothetical necessity is a *necessitas consecutionis* [consequential necessity], but such a one that has an end somewhere and is grounded on something that is not necessary” (E §126). Continuing, he explains that “not every *necessitas consecutionis* is a *necessitas hypothetica*, rather, when in the series of that which one sets as the condition, everything is again necessary, then it remains an absolute necessity” (E §126). This leads Crusius to make an implicit critique of Wolff’s conception of hypothetical necessity: Crusius argues, namely, that if one were to think that necessity remains hypothetical simply because the consequent inevitably follows from a preceding condition, then one is confusing *necessitas consecutionis* with *necessitas hypothetica*; put differently, if one thinks this way one cannot deny that there is ultimately no difference in the effects of both kinds of necessity. Crusius claims that this is the essence of fate (*fatum*), that is, when one does not presuppose a foundational activity of freedom as the origin of the series of consequences (see E §126).

In the *Guide to Living Rationally*, Crusius explicitly links this critique to the Wolffian conception of the metaphysics of action, where he argues that “if one were to permit those actions [to be free], to which the effecting substance would be determined by its own representations and desires ... then the action would not thereby stop being necessary, because everything that is determined is necessary, insofar as it is determined” (A §40). Crusius therefore explicitly rejects using the language of moral necessity in the context of the metaphysics of action: “Some consider moral necessity in a different sense, namely in one such that it is a species of *necessitas consecutionis*. Namely, moral necessity is for them the kind where a rational spirit is determined to do something by means of certain representations of the good” (E §131). Crusius argues that these philosophers entirely remove the possibility of true moral necessity, namely the kind on which virtue is grounded: “one therefore sees quite well that they only preserve the word and have made the meaning more doubtful, by virtue of which they believe the same *necessitas consecutionis* in all the events of the world” (E §131). Indeed, Crusius notes that although these philosophers try to distinguish between physical and moral necessity, he argues that this distinction ends up collapsing because both are versions of *necessitas consecutionis*, in either bodies or spirits; put differently, both physical and moral necessity are,

⁴⁴ This is likely a critique of the Wolffian conception of hypothetical necessity, but it should be noted that Leibniz accounts for exactly that which Crusius demands here. In the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, Leibniz argues that contingent truths, i.e., those that are hypothetically necessary, are grounded on “God’s first free decree always to do what is most perfect” (DM §13).

for these philosophers, subspecies of a more general kind of necessity and are therefore, at root, the same (E §131). This destroys the possibility of true freedom, for Crusius, which he conceives as *incompatible* with determinism.⁴⁵

Crusius criticizes Wolff's conception of obligation on similar grounds, namely he says that it is an "error [*Fehler*] that cannot be excused" when "some completely confuse the grounds of physical actuality or possibility with moral grounds, and thus believe to have explained obligation when they provide a series of efficient causes, which follow upon each other in the soul and determine the effect, e.g., how certain representations excite the will and this subsequently breaks out into action" (A §164). As this passage indicates, Crusius rejects conceiving of obligation in terms of *making* an action necessary, primarily because he thinks that in doing so one confuses or equates physical and moral grounds, and thereby conceives of human action as determined rather than free. Although Crusius rejects the conception of the necessity of action we find in Leibniz, Wolff, and Baumgarten, he continues to use modal language in the context of obligation. But because both Wolff and Baumgarten offer a conception of obligation that relies on their theory of the will, the way in which Crusius uses this modal language is therefore importantly different.

In order to understand how Crusius uses the language of moral necessity, possibility, and impossibility in the deontic context, we need to look at a distinction Crusius implies in the passage quoted above, namely that between "physical" and "moral" existence: whereas physical or "true" existence is attributed to a thing insofar as it "actually exists [*wirklich vorhanden sey*]", moral existence is "that constitution of thing, by virtue of which one can say of it that it *should* happen" (E §131, my emphasis). In general, Crusius defines the word 'moral' as "that which can be accomplished by the will of a rational and free spirit in such a way that this spirit thereby strives for known ends" (E §131). In line with this definition, moral existence is given the following, more precise definition: "Now, if one has insight into certain reasons why something should be done by a rational spirit on account of certain presupposed ends, then one ascribes to that which should happen a moral existence" (E §131). Crusius conceives of moral necessity in the same way and thereby equates moral existence and moral necessity: "*moral necessity* is the relation of an action or omission to certain presupposed ends, by virtue of which it should happen" (E §131, see also A §160). Moral necessity is thus obligation: "That state, in which a moral necessity to something exists, is called *obligation* in

⁴⁵ For an account of Crusius's conception of free will, see Walschots (2021).

the broad sense” (E §131 and A §160). Moral impossibility and possibility are understood as impermissibility and permissibility:

Similarly, one calls *moral impossibility* that constitution of a thing, on account of which it is not permitted to happen. But *moral possibility* is when one can claim of something that is subjected to the voluntary actions of a rational spirit neither that it should happen, nor also that it should not happen, and thus merely that it is permitted to happen, and that it is up to one. (E §130)

Accordingly, since moral necessity is defined as what *should* happen, moral possibility and impossibility are defined in terms of what *should not* and *may* happen.

The salient feature of Crusius’s use of this language is that moral necessity, possibility, and impossibility relate to “certain presupposed ends” (E §131). Crusius distinguishes between two kinds of obligations based on the source of these ends:

The presupposed ends, on the basis of which moral necessity can be grasped, are either laws and therefore ends of the legislator, or they are ones that we give [*vorsetzen*] to ourselves, and which we therefore do not regard in relation to a law. On this basis there arise *two kinds of moral necessity*, namely *statutory obligation* [*gesetzliche Verbindlichkeit*] and the *obligation of prudence* [*Verbindlichkeit der Klugheit*], which must be treated in practical philosophy. (E §131)

As hinted at here, Crusius offers additional insight into the necessity involved in these two kinds of obligation in the *Guide*. There, he explains that, on the one hand, that “on which the moral necessity of an action or omission is grounded ... is to be sought ... in certain ends already desired by us”, that is, the “essential ends of human nature according to the thelematology” (A §162).

‘Thelematology’ is Crusius’s “doctrine of the will” (A §1), and the essential ends of human nature that he describes in that section of the *Guide* include the foundational desires for our own perfection (A §111) and perfection in general (A §122). The obligations based on these essential ends are the obligations of prudence, and their necessity is grounded in *instrumental rationality*. Consider the following passage:

the *obligation of prudence* in moral science is that relation of an action or omission to certain ends, which we desire on account of our nature and therefore to the extent that we desire them, which makes it such that when we do not proceed in such and such a way, the same ends cannot be attained. (A §162)

The necessity involved in obligations of prudence is therefore grounded on instrumental rationality in the following way: given we necessarily desire certain things as a matter of nature, we ought to

undertake certain actions and omissions as *necessary* means to attaining these ends. Indeed, as the above passage indicates, if we do not undertake certain actions and omissions, the ends in question would not be achieved, i.e., it would be impossible for us to attain them. As such, alternative courses of action become either *morally impossible*, that is, impermissible, or *morally possible*, that is permissible, on the condition that we actually want to attain our ends.

At first glance, obligations of virtue, which Crusius calls “obligation in the narrow sense” (A §162), seem to be somewhat different. In contrast to obligations of prudence, Crusius argues that an “*obligation of virtue* is the relation of an action or omission to a divine law, which makes it such that, if we do not proceed in such and such a way, the law will be infringed upon” (A §162). Conceiving of obligations of virtue in this way seems to suggest that they are not founded on an end, and thus their necessity is not grounded in instrumental rationality either. However, a closer look reveals that this is not the case. After all, Crusius defines moral necessity in general, not just obligations of prudence, as “the relation of an action or omission to certain presupposed ends, by virtue of which it should happen” (E §131, see also A §160). In addition to the foundational desires for our own perfection and perfection in general mentioned above, the third and final foundational desire in human beings is the “*drive of conscience [Gewissenstrieb]*”, that is, “the natural drive to cognize a divine moral law, that is, to believe in a rule of human action wherein it is determined what God demands be done or omitted out of obedience and for the sake of our dependence on him and which he would otherwise punish” (A §132). The key here is dependence: Crusius argues that “we depend on God in every respect” (A §133), where dependence is defined as “the kind of relation ... that implies a moral necessity to fulfill a law, insofar as it is a law, even if we were not to consider our own advantage or disadvantage” (A §165). Crusius argues that it is “the representation of dependence, by means of which it is made efficacious in us that it drives us to obedience, because there is a foundational desire in us to act in accordance with it” (A §165). Accordingly, in the case of obligations of virtue, “the ground of moral necessity lies in a law and in our indebtedness [*Schuldigkeit*] to fulfill it” (A §162). In that our obedience to divine law is ultimately grounded on a foundational drive, obligations of virtue are grounded on an end that we necessarily desire as well, namely our foundational drive to obey God’s commands, and the necessity involved here can therefore similarly be said to be grounded in instrumental rationality.⁴⁶ In sum: for Crusius the moral necessity of obligation is

⁴⁶ For a recent and more extensive discussion of Crusius’s attempt to ground moral obligation, but with a different focus than mine here, see Schierbaum (2024).

grounded in the fact that it would be instrumentally *irrational* not to choose the necessary means to our ends.

6. Conclusion

The preceding discussion of the ways in which some of the most central figures in eighteenth-century German philosophy used the language of moral necessity, possibility, and impossibility reveals that this terminology underwent an interesting development: whereas for Leibniz the two contexts in which the terminology was used were somewhat distinct, Wolff brought them into systematic relation to one another, which was then refined and developed further by Baumgarten. Crusius's use of this language is a turning point because he rejects conceiving of free action as necessary in the way common to Leibniz, Wolff, and Baumgarten. Yet he continues to utilize these modal terms in the context of obligation and thereby redefines the sense of necessity involved therein. The situation for Kant is similar to that of Crusius: he ridicules the psychological determinism found in Leibniz (and Wolff and Baumgarten) that "is driven by representations" as "at bottom...nothing better than the freedom of a turnspit, which also, once it is wound up, accomplishes its movements of itself" (5:97; see also 28:267–8 and Allison 2006, 388). It is therefore not surprising that Kant only uses the language of moral necessity, possibility, and impossibility in the context of obligation.

Kant's understanding of obligation, and of moral permissibility and impermissibility as well, is far too big a topic to treat here in any detail. By way of conclusion, however, I wish to illustrate an important way in which the foregoing sections can help clarify Kant's use of modal language in the deontic context. As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Kant distinguishes between two kinds of moral impossibility, and these correspond to the two ways in which maxims can fail the requirements of the formula of universal law, namely when maxims "cannot even be thought without contradiction as a universal law of nature", and when maxims lack this inner impossibility but are nevertheless "impossible to will" (4:424). Now, although Kant distinguishes between these two kinds of moral impossibility, he argues that, at root, there is just one criterion: he claims that "the canon of judging" a maxim morally is that one "must *be able to will* that a maxim of our action become a universal law" (4:424). What this means is that a 'contradiction in conception', as Onora O'Neill famously described the first kind of moral impossibility (see O'Neill 2013, 136–93), implies a 'contradiction in the will', but not vice versa (see Klemme 2017, 158). In other words, some maxims

are such that they cannot be willed as a universal law, even though there is nothing contradictory or impossible about conceiving the maxim itself as a universal law (a contradiction in the will, but *not* a contradiction in conception). But other maxims are such that we cannot will them as universal laws *because* it is impossible to conceive of them as universal laws (a contradiction in the will *because* a contradiction in conception). In both cases the ultimate test is whether a maxim can be willed as a universal law, as Kant says in the passage above. But there are two separate ways in which it is impossible to do so.

What the preceding discussion reveals, I would like to suggest, is *why* this is the case. As Baumgarten makes especially clear, a certain hierarchy exists among various kinds of necessity, possibility, and impossibility, such that what is physically possible, for instance, must first be absolutely possible, even though absolute possibility in turn does not guarantee physical possibility, etc. For Kant things are similar: according to perhaps his most central distinction between kinds of possibility, *logical* possibility is merely what is possible in thought, that is, merely when a concept does not contradict itself, but for *real* possibility “something more is required” (see e.g., B xxvi). The important point for my purposes, which this passage reveals, is that in order for something to be really possible, it must first be logically possible, but logical possibility does not guarantee real possibility. The same holds for moral possibility in the sense of moral permissibility: it must first be conceptually possible for a maxim to be a universal law if it is possible for us to will as a universal law, but just because a maxim is conceptually possible as a universal law, this does not in turn imply that we can will it as one. I contend this is what is happening in Kant’s two cases of moral impossibility: according to the first, a maxim is morally impossible *because* it is conceptually (i.e., logically) impossible as a universal law. And according to the second, even if a maxim is (logically) possible as a universal law, this is not guarantee it is morally possible, i.e., that we can will it as one.

As I hope this brief conclusion reveals, taking a more in-depth look at Kant’s conception of moral necessity, possibility, and impossibility in light of how some of his more important predecessors used this language would be a very worthwhile undertaking. With the above sketch of how some of his most important predecessors used this language now in hand, we are in a much better position to do so.⁴⁷

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