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# Leibniz on Agential Contingency and Inclining but not Necessitating Reasons

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## Abstract

I argue for a novel interpretation of Leibniz's conception of the kind of contingency that matters for freedom, which I label 'agential contingency.' In brief, an agent is free to the extent that she determines herself to do what she judges to be the best of several considered options that she could have brought about had she concluded that these options were best. I use this novel interpretation to make sense of Leibniz's doctrine that the reasons that explain free actions are merely inclining and not necessitating.

**Keywords:** Freedom; contingency; inclining reasons; principle of sufficient reason

## Introduction

Leibniz says that freedom requires contingency: "I am of the opinion that our will is exempt not only from constraint but also from necessity" (T 34).<sup>1</sup> This is not an isolated remark; Leibniz frequently insists that contingency is one of three conditions for freedom.<sup>2</sup> He also insists that everything must satisfy the principle of sufficient reason (PSR). This is the principle that "nothing happens without a reason why it should be so rather than otherwise" (LC 2.1). Leibniz assures us that these commitments are perfectly compatible:<sup>3</sup> "the reasons that determine a free cause are never necessitating but only inclining, and to that extent the indifference or contingency in them is preserved" (G 3.36/LGR 297). This is Leibniz's doctrine of merely inclining reasons:<sup>4</sup> the doctrine that the reasons that explain free actions meet the demands of the PSR while allowing for the kind of contingency that matters for freedom.

Many scholars think that, for Leibniz, the kind of contingency that matters for freedom is mere metaphysical contingency:<sup>5</sup> something is metaphysically contingent if its opposite does not imply a contradiction (LC 5.10; Grua 479). Arguably, metaphysical possibility is the broadest kind of

<sup>1</sup>Translations are my own unless a translation is cited.

<sup>2</sup>The other two conditions are intelligence and spontaneity. (See G 3.36; A 6.4.1407; G 3.393; T 45, 65–67, 288.)

<sup>3</sup>Lovejoy was not convinced and insisted that Leibniz's merely inclining reasons doctrine was "manifestly without logical substance" ([1936] 1960, 172). Lin (2012) persuasively argues that Leibniz has good grounds for endorsing the PSR but not 'metaphysical necessitarianism'—the view that everything that is actual is metaphysically necessary.

<sup>4</sup>As far as I can tell, this doctrine has not received extensive attention in the secondary literature. Torralba (2005), Jorati (2017, 123–32), and Murray (2004) discuss this Leibnizian doctrine.

<sup>5</sup>See Armstrong 2017; Blumenfeld 1988; Burms and De Dijn 1979; Frankel 1984; McNamara 1990; Jorati 2017, chap. 5; and McDonough 2018. One of the most disputed topics in Leibniz scholarship is the topic of contingency. Many scholars think that Leibniz is a kind of necessitarian: see Mates 1972; Mondadori 1973, 1975, 1985; Frankel 1984; Griffin 1999, 2013. A few disagree: Hunter 1981; Murray 1996, 2004. And others are somewhere in between: Adams 1994; Baxter 2000; Lodzinski 1994; and Jorati 2017, chap. 5.

possibility,<sup>6</sup> so this interpretation reads Leibniz as advocating for the weakest conception of contingency as a condition for freedom. This standard interpretation has implications for understanding Leibniz's doctrine of merely inclining reasons: the reasons that explain free actions must not render those actions to be metaphysically necessary; doing so, this Leibnizian interpretation implies, *suffices* to preserve the kind of contingency that matters for freedom.

In this paper, I challenge this standard interpretation of Leibniz. I argue that Leibniz's conception of the kind of contingency that matters for freedom is more restricted than metaphysical contingency as such. I label this novel interpretation 'agential contingency' because, for Leibniz, it is required by the nature of free agency; or so I argue. The heart of my proposal is the following: an agent is free to the extent that she determines herself to do what she judges to be the best of several considered options that she *could have* brought about had she concluded that these options were best. With this conception of the kind of contingency that matters for freedom comes a new and more restricted understanding of Leibniz's doctrine of merely inclining reasons.

Here is the plan. In section 1, I argue against the standard reading that, for Leibniz, lack of metaphysical necessity suffices for the kind of contingency that matters for freedom. In section 2, I develop agential contingency in some detail. In section 3, I illustrate how agential contingency gives rise to a more restricted understanding of Leibniz's merely inclining reasons doctrine.

## 1. Leibnizian agency and powers to act

A standard interpretation in the secondary literature is that, for Leibniz, the kind of contingency that matters for freedom is just metaphysical contingency.<sup>7</sup> In this section, I provide some reasons against this standard interpretation. My main argument is that Leibniz's conception of free agency requires conditional powers to do otherwise which are grounded in wills existing during the agent's deliberation. If so, metaphysical contingency as such will not do, for it neither implies nor requires the existence of any such power to do otherwise nor the existing wills upon which these conditional powers are grounded; to this extent, this standard interpretation obscures or undermines Leibniz's conception of free agency.

### 1.a Leibniz on metaphysical contingency as condition for freedom

Reading Leibniz as thinking that the only kind of contingency that matters for freedom is metaphysical contingency is standard for good reasons. Leibniz says that freedom requires lack of metaphysical necessity:

I have shown that freedom ... consists in intelligence, which involves a clear knowledge of the object of deliberation, in spontaneity, whereby we determine, and in contingency, that is, in the exclusion of logical or metaphysical necessity. (T 288)

This is not an isolated remark (see CD 21; G 3.401; T230ff., 302; Ta 274). In this passage, Leibniz cites the three conditions of freedom—intelligence, spontaneity, and contingency—and appears to sketch the basic meaning of each of these. Importantly, the gloss on contingency only appeals to a lack of metaphysical necessity. It is thus not unreasonable to conclude that, as far as Leibniz is concerned, the only kind of contingency that matters for freedom is metaphysical contingency.

<sup>6</sup>The notion is comparable to what Plantinga refers to as 'broadly logical' modality (1974, I.1, IV). Plantinga utilizes this notion of broad logical modality to define possible worlds: a possible world is a maximal state of affairs that is possible in this broad logical sense (see 1974, IV). It is worth pointing out that one prominent reading of Leibniz on metaphysical modality differs from this. This is Robert Adams's interpretation of metaphysical necessity as proof-theoretic-demonstrability and metaphysical possibility as proof-theoretic-indemonstrability (1994, chap. 1).

<sup>7</sup>Armstrong 2017; Blumenfeld 1988; Burms and De Dijn 1979; Frankel 1984; McNamara 1990; Jorati 2017, chap. 5.

These kinds of texts are not the only considerations that support this standard reading. Another important philosophical consideration is that Leibniz rejects causally indeterministic conceptions of the kind of contingency that matters for freedom as misguided or not worth having (see T 175–76, 199, 232, 302; CD 77; A 6.4.1407–8; G 7.109–10). It is worth our while to look more carefully at Leibniz’s version of causal determinism and thus understand the kinds of philosophical constraints it imposes on any plausible interpretation of the kind of contingency required for freedom.

Leibniz thinks that every agent, or substance, is composed of substantial form and primary matter (G 3.458; GM 6.236–37). Leibniz characterizes these hylomorphic elements in terms of primitive forces.<sup>8</sup> In his important work *A Specimen of Dynamics* (1695), he writes: “Indeed, primitive [active] force (which is nothing but the first entelechy) corresponds to the *soul* or *substantial form*” (GM 6.236/AG 119; see also G 3.458; 4.478–79; 7.502). The substantial form of an agent is thus its primitive active force, and its primary matter is its primitive passive force (GM 6.236/AG 119–20). It is the primitive active force that is our main concern here. Leibniz describes a substance’s primitive active force as “a nature or an internal force that can produce in it, in an orderly way all the appearances or expressions it will have, without the help of any created being” (*New System*, G 4.486/AG 144) or as “the internal principle of a substance that brings about change, or the passages from one perception to another” (M 15; AG 215). A substance’s primitive active force is, for Leibniz, the inner principle of change which explains why the substance undergoes all the change it undergoes and has all the states it has.

These primitive forces, however, pertain “only to general causes, which are insufficient to explain phenomena” (GM 6.236/AG 119). Properly explaining the motions of agents, or the phenomena, requires citing *derivative forces*, which are just particular modifications or limitations of primitive forces (GM 6.236–37/AG 119–20; NE 169). It is this conception of primitive forces and derivative forces that helps elucidate Leibniz’s version of causal determinism: “And since every present state of a simple substance is a natural consequence of its preceding state, the present is pregnant with the future” (M 22). Thus, Leibniz’s version of causal determinism is driven by the substance’s primitive force: every state of the substance is brought about, and explained, by the preceding state together with the substance’s primitive force and its modifications. All free actions, then, are embedded in a series of such causal relations driven by the substance’s primitive force, spanning the entire history of the substance. Free actions or choices can only be contingent in a sense that is compatible with this account of causal determinism.

### **1.b Leibniz on power to do otherwise as a condition for freedom**

Despite endorsing causal determinism, Leibniz also argues for a kind of power to do otherwise as a condition for freedom. He writes: “For, absolutely speaking, the will is in a state of indifference, as opposed to one of necessity, and it has the power to do otherwise or even to suspend its action completely; these two alternatives are possible and remain so” (DM 30). Or: “When there are several paths, one has the freedom to choose... . But if one found oneself in a narrow street, between two high walls, there would only be one possible path, and this represents necessity. By this we see that ... freedom ... [requires] the faculty of choosing among several possibilities” (*Leibniz to Gerhard Wolter Molanus*, A 1.17.611). Leibniz insists that this power to do otherwise is a condition for freedom and moral responsibility:

The vestiges of the divine image consist in the innate light of reason as well as in the innate freedom of will. Both are necessary to render our actions virtuous or vicious: we must know and will what we are doing. It must be possible for us to abstain even from that sin which we actually are committing, if only a sufficiently strong effort were applied. (CD 98)

<sup>8</sup>Jorati (2018) argues that Leibniz *reduces* these hylomorphic elements to primitive forces.

Leibniz even insists God is justified in condemning a person to eternal damnation because he possesses “a freedom which renders him culpable and a power, albeit remote, of recovering himself, although it never passes into action” (T 269; see also T 369; COE 15; DM 13, 30; DPG 34a, 43a; T 369; NE 172). There are thus many passages in which Leibniz advances a power to do otherwise as a condition for freedom and moral responsibility. How are we to understand these powers to do otherwise? How do these powers fit with Leibniz’s version of causal determinism? How do these powers color Leibniz’s notion of the kind of contingency that matters for freedom?

The proponent of metaphysical contingency as the only contingency that matters for freedom can accommodate these powers to do otherwise in the following way. She can insist that, for Leibniz, to say that an agent *S* has the power to choose a possible-but-unchosen-option *O* is simply to say that it is metaphysically possible for *S* to choose *O*, or that the state of affairs *S*’s choosing *O* does not imply a contradiction. I call this kind of account a *reductive* account of powers to do or choose to do otherwise. Such reductive accounts do have the virtue of being compatible with the adumbrated account of causal determinism endorsed by Leibniz. Furthermore, such accounts have the additional virtue of harmonizing the meaning of the various Leibnizian texts: they take at face value the passages in which Leibniz appeals to metaphysical contingency as a condition for freedom and explain away the passages in which he demands a power to do otherwise.

This kind of harmonization, however, does some violence to the straightforward meaning of the passages in which Leibniz appeals to a power to do otherwise. In the cited letter to Gerhard Wolter Molanus, for example, Leibniz relies on the imagery of a “narrow street, between two high walls” to illustrate the undermining of “the faculty of choosing among several possibilities” (A 1.17.611). To insist that a power to do otherwise or a faculty to choose among several possible options only requires lack of metaphysical necessity is to retract much of the persuasiveness underlying the imagery of the narrow street between two high walls. By contrast, the interpretation I favor presents a different way of harmonizing the various Leibnizian texts; my preferred harmonization avoids this kind of textual damage by taking seriously the passages in which Leibniz appeals to a power to do otherwise. Does that mean that I do violence to the texts in which Leibniz only appeals to metaphysical contingency as a condition for freedom? Not quite. In my reading, metaphysical contingency is indeed a condition for freedom, or, put differently, metaphysical necessity undermines Leibnizian freedom. However, as I see it, metaphysical contingency is by itself not sufficient for Leibniz’s conception of the kind of contingency that matters for freedom. There is, thus, no comparable damage to the straightforward meaning to the texts on my way of harmonizing them.

Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, such reductive accounts of powers to do otherwise weaken the persuasiveness of Leibniz’s insistence that sinners are culpable for their sins partly because they could have not sinned (CP 133ff.; CD 98; COE 15; T 95, 269, 369; NE 195). Leibniz endorses the principle that *ought implies can*, as philosophers say nowadays; he insists that “There is no obligation to do the impossible” (T 407; see also G 6:33; A 6.4.2153); however, to insist that sinners are culpable for their sin partly because they could have avoided their sin, but then to read this sense of ‘could’ as ‘it implies no contradiction’ is to retract much of the persuasiveness of the *ought implies can* principle.

The interpretation I prefer, by contrast, avoids detracting from the persuasiveness of the *ought implies can* principle. Finally, as I argue in the next subsection, my interpretation not only fits well with the adumbrated account of causal determinism, but it is required by Leibniz’s conception of the powers to act constitutive of his version of causal determinism.

### **1.c Leibniz on causal determinism and powers of agency**

As we have seen, Leibniz’s conception of causal determinism is one in which the primitive force of a substance serves as the inner principle of change that drives and explains all the changes undergone by the substance. Importantly, it is the modifications of this primitive force, or derivative forces, that

explain particular changes within the substance. I argue in this section that Leibniz's conception of derivative forces requires a kind of conditional power to do otherwise.

Leibniz insists that for substances to be legitimate agents, their powers to act, or derivative active forces, must be understood as in some sense between scholastic faculties or potentialities and scholastic actions or actualities. Explaining his *New System of Nature*, Leibniz writes:

This active force is different from a 'faculty' of the Schools, in that a faculty is only a proximate possibility of action, which in itself is dead, so to speak, and inactive unless it is excited by something from outside. But active force involves an 'entelechy', or an activity; it is half-way between a faculty and an action, and contains in itself a certain effort, or conatus. It is led by itself to action without any need of assistance, provided nothing prevents it. (UL vi.536/PT 141)

In this important passage, two central characteristics of Leibnizian active forces are presented. First, Leibniz's conception of active forces is different from the scholastic notion of power as a potentiality that can only be brought into actuality by something else already in actuality.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, a Leibnizian active force is an effort or striving that brings itself into action, provided nothing prevents it; as such, a Leibnizian active force is not in need of something external to itself to activate it, or 'excite' it, to transition into actuality or to act; the only requirement is that this active force not be impeded or prevented by other forces, and this is the second central characteristic of Leibnizian active forces.<sup>10</sup> The need for something external to the force itself to 'excite' it into action would undermine Leibniz's conception of agency for he insists that for substances to be agents, the principle of action must lie within the agent itself (PNG 2; M 11, 15), and Leibniz thinks that such a need for something external would undermine this condition of agency (G II.252; M 11).

Leibniz's conception of agency requires derivative active forces, or powers of agency, that bring themselves into action pending impediments; these are the powers by means of which the agent acts. These powers of agency are the causal powers whose exercise drives Leibniz's version of causal determinism. Importantly, these Leibnizian powers of agency ground the following kinds of conditionals: if power of agency *P*, which strives to bring about act *A*, is unimpeded, then *P* brings about *A*. I appeal to these conditionals from now onward, but it is important to note that they are elliptical for longer and more accurate conditionals: if agent *S* has power of agency *P*, as a derivative active force striving to bring about act *A* and there is no distinct force *F* that prevents *P*, then *S* brings about *A* by means of *P*. These kinds of conditionals are grounded in the powers of agency which drive Leibnizian causal determinism; however, it is only a subset of these powers of agency—namely, those grounded in the will—which ground the kinds of powers to do otherwise that matter for Leibniz's conception of freedom.

### 1.d Free agency and powers to do otherwise

Not all powers to do otherwise are relevant for freedom or moral responsibility. It is only the powers to do otherwise that are grounded in the will that matter here. According to Leibniz, all substances are agents (PNG 1), but only some agents are free agents. Free agents are agents that act with reason or intelligence (G VII.109; T 65). Leibniz describes freedom thus: "I therefore conclude that true freedom consists in the power that we have to reason carefully about things and to act according to what we have judged best" (A 6.4.1409/SLT 93). Freedom consists in an agent's ability to determine herself to action on the basis of her judgment of the best. This basic sketch of Leibniz's account of freedom is uncontroversial and often repeated in the secondary literature.<sup>11</sup> What is not often

<sup>9</sup>See Thomas Aquinas (ST I.2.3).

<sup>10</sup>For more details on Leibniz's account of force, see Jorati (2018).

<sup>11</sup>See Jolley (2005, chap. 6); Imlay (2002); Forman (2008); and Jorati, (2017, 52–53).

noticed, and what I want to highlight here, is the fact that coming to the judgment of the best requires undergoing a process of deliberation and, importantly, that, for Leibniz deliberation itself, requires that the agent have a kind of power to bring about each of the several options under consideration.

As Leibniz sees it, deliberation involves two elements: an intellectual and an appetitive element. He writes: “A measure of freedom is necessary for punishments and rewards, and this is why there is an intellect that compares and weighs good and evil against each other and also a faculty of inclining and willing in accord with one’s deliberations” (DPG 42c). This intellectual element involves the intellect identifying, comparing, contrasting, and forming judgments regarding the different kinds and degrees of goods and evils of each of the options under consideration. When all goes well, the result or culmination of this intellectual process is the judgment regarding which considered option is best. It is unsurprising that deliberation involves, or consists of, such activities by the intellect. What is more distinctive of Leibniz’s account of deliberation is the appetitive element. Leibniz insists that deliberation itself involves a struggle or competition between different rational inclinations or wills. Regarding God, Leibniz writes: “Now this consequent will, final and decisive, results from the conflict of all the antecedent wills, of those which tend toward good, even as of those which repel evil; and from the concurrence of all these particular wills comes the total will” (T 22). Regarding human agents he insists:

Nevertheless, as very often there are diverse courses to choose from, one might ... compare the soul with a force which puts forth effort on various sides simultaneously, but which acts only at the spot where action is easiest or there is least resistance ... Thus do the inclinations of the soul extend over all the goods that present themselves: they are antecedent acts of will; but the consequent will, which is their result, is determined in the direction of that which touches most closely. (T 325)

As Leibniz sees it, then, the appetitive element in the process of deliberation is a kind of dynamic struggle between antecedent wills or rational strivings aiming to bring about the different options under consideration. When all goes well, the result or culmination of this appetitive struggle is the consequent will; it is this consequent will that settles the action for the agent. Both of these elements align: the consequent will is the rational inclination to act on the basis of the judgment of the best.<sup>12</sup>

As I see it, it is this appetitive element in deliberation that grounds a kind of conditional power to do otherwise in Leibniz’s account of freedom. The appetitive element is essentially a struggle of rational strivings, or wills. For Leibniz, a will just is an effort or striving to bring about an option because this option is judged good by the intellect. In his mature work *Theodicy*, Leibniz writes: “the essence of the will” is to be “an effort to act in accordance with the judgment” of the intellect (T 311). In his short work *On Free Will*, Leibniz writes: “The will is an effort that one makes to act, because one has found it good. From which it follows that one never fails to act when one wills to ... , assuming there is nothing preventing it” (A VI.iv.1407/SLT 92). Thus, for Leibniz, wills are rational strivings. Rational strivings are particular kinds of powers of agency. Like other powers of agency, wills bring themselves to action provided nothing prevents them. Leibniz brings these points together in his mature work *New Essays on Human Understanding*. In it, the character representing Locke’s views, Philalethes, writes: “We find in our selves a power to begin or forbear, continue or end several actions of our [soul], and motions of our bodies, ... This power ... is that which we call the will” (NE 172). Theophilus, representing Leibniz’s views, responds: “That all strikes me as sound and true. However, to speak more directly and perhaps to go a little deeper, I shall say that volition is the effort or endeavour (*conatus*) to move toward what one finds good and away from what one

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<sup>12</sup>This characterization is a bit simplistic. As Leibniz sees it, several rational inclinations can come together to give rise to a new complex inclination (T 22), or nonrational inclinations can get in the way of rational inclinations (T 305), or consideration of general principles can play a role in deliberation (T 337), etc. I will ignore these complexities for the purposes of this paper.

finds bad ... This definition has as a corollary the famous axiom that from will and power together, action follows; since any endeavour results in action unless it is prevented" (NE 172). Thus, for Leibniz, wills are powers of agency that ground conditionals along the following lines: if agent S possesses will W, which is a rational striving to bring about action A, and if there is no force F impeding W, then S will bring about A by means of W.

The main move for this section is to note that these observations hold for both consequent and antecedent wills. For Leibniz, the nature of both antecedent wills and consequent wills is the same: they are both rational strivings, which are kinds of powers of agency. What distinguishes them is the accidental fact of which rational striving manages to triumph in a given appetitive struggle or deliberation. Thus, given that the appetitive element in the process of deliberation involves multiple antecedent wills struggling with each other to become the consequent will, this appetitive element requires several conditional powers grounded in each existing antecedent will in this struggle. That is, every antecedent will involved in the process of deliberation is such that by itself it would have become the consequent will, if unimpeded. Or more informatively, given the parallels between the intellectual and appetitive elements in Leibniz's account of deliberation, had the agent concluded that a given considered option is best, its corresponding antecedent will would have become the consequent will. Therefore, Leibniz's conception of deliberation requires conditional powers to do otherwise grounded on the antecedent wills that strive to bring about options under consideration but fail to become the consequent will in that deliberation.

The standard reading obscures or undermines these facts about Leibniz's understanding of powers of agency. Metaphysical contingency is satisfied when the opposite does not imply a contradiction; the mere existence of a consistent state of affairs in which the agent does otherwise suffices here. This consistent state of affairs, however, neither requires nor implies the mentioned conditional powers to do otherwise nor the existing antecedent wills, as powers of agency, that ground them. To this extent, then, this standard interpretation obscures important facts about Leibniz's conception of free agency and the kinds of powers to act that this notion requires.

### 1.e Leibniz on freedom of the will

I would like to end this section by briefly locating my interpretation within Leibniz's most extensive taxonomy of freedom, as presented in his *New Essays*. In this work, Leibniz distinguishes between *freedom in law* and *freedom in fact*. A slave lacks the former and the latter "consists either in the power to do what one wills or in the power to will as one should" (NE 175). Leibniz also divides this latter notion into *freedom to do* and *freedom to will*. The former comes in "different degrees and varieties," but the general idea is that "a man is free to do what he wills in proportion as he has the means to do so" (NE 175). It is *freedom to will*, however, that is our main concern here. Leibniz writes:

The *freedom to will* is also understood in two different senses: one of them stands in contrast with the imperfection or bondage of the mind ... like that which the passions impose; and the other sense is employed when freedom is contrasted with necessity. Employing the former sense ... one's mind is indeed not free when it is possessed by a great passion, for then one cannot will as one should, i.e., with proper deliberation ... this is a kind of freedom which pertains strictly to our understanding. But the freedom of the mind which is contrasted with necessity pertains to the bare will ... It is what is known as 'free will': it consists in the view that the strongest reasons or impressions which the understanding presents to the will do not prevent the act of the will from being contingent... (NE 175)

Here Leibniz further divides the *freedom to will* into two senses: one sense of freedom grounded in the understanding and another sense grounded in the will. The former requires deliberation and the

latter requires contingency. It appears that, for Leibniz, these two senses of *freedom to will* are conceptually independent: the understanding is free when it deliberates without oppressive influence of the passions and the will is free when its acts are not necessitated by the judgments of the intellect. However, Leibniz's notion of the will is conceptually interconnected with his notion of the understanding; no agent can possess a will that does not possess an understanding,<sup>13</sup> for a will is just a rational inclination to bring about what the understanding judges as good. The sense in which the will is free, thus, cannot be conceptually independent from the understanding. One of the advantages of my account is that it illustrates how these two senses of *freedom to will* are interconnected in Leibniz's picture: the understanding is free when it deliberates without the oppressive influences of the passions, and the will is free when the judgments of the intellect do not deprive it of its role in the appetitive element of deliberation or undermine the conditional powers it grounds in deliberation.

## 2. Leibniz on agential contingency

In this section, I develop my interpretation of the kind of contingency that matters for freedom in Leibniz's system; I call this conception 'agential contingency' because it is required by Leibniz's notion of free agency. In brief, an agent is free to the extent that she determines herself to do what she judges to be the best of several considered possible options that she could have brought had she concluded that these options were best.

### 2.a Robert Adams and Leibniz's reality of choice strategy

The interpretation I want to develop builds upon what Robert Adams has labeled "the reality of choice strategy" (1994, 20–24); this is one of Leibniz's strategies to try to retain contingency in his system.<sup>14</sup> As Adams sees it, the reality-of-choice strategy involves two crucial ingredients. First, choice is itself explanatorily relevant. Given that choice is an act of the will, and that the will is a rational inclination toward the apprehended goodness of the object of choice, the fact that choice is explanatorily relevant enables Leibniz to include teleological explanations as legitimate explanations regarding created reality (20–22). More specifically, the divine choice to create the best is a crucial part of the explanation of why created reality is the way it is and not otherwise. This first ingredient in the reality-of-choice strategy enables Leibniz to distance his views from the *blind* necessitarianism of Spinoza,<sup>15</sup> a necessitarianism that is guided neither by any goodness in creation nor by the wisdom of the Creator responding to this goodness.

According to the second ingredient of this strategy, a choice counts as contingent because the considered options not selected are not rendered impossible by the making of this choice (20–23). Leibniz insists: "The decree to create is free: God is prompted to all good; the good, and even the best, inclines him to act; but does not compel him, for his choice creates no impossibility in that which is distinct from the best; it causes no implication of contradiction in that which God refrains from doing" (T 230). More precisely, then, a choice is the result of practical deliberation, which essentially involves weighing the goodness of multiple options under consideration, and this choice is contingent because the considered but unchosen options are not rendered impossible by the making of this choice.

<sup>13</sup>Leibniz considers the conceptual possibility of a being with an understanding but no will (T 34). See Jorati (2014, 758ff.; 2017, chap. 6) for interesting implications of this.

<sup>14</sup>This Leibnizian strategy is discussed by Curley (1972), Jorati (2017, 123–32), Lin (2012), and Lagerlund and Myrdal (2006).

<sup>15</sup>Leibniz utilizes this terminology in T 168, 173, 189, 349, 351.



## 2.b The reality-of-choice and agential modality

My main proposal for this paper is to develop both elements of Leibniz's reality-of-choice strategy as presented by Robert Adams. I label the resulting developed account 'agential modality.'

### 2.b.1 The first element and options being open to an agent

The first element in the reality-of-choice strategy is that choice is itself explanatorily relevant, and because the will is a rational striving toward apprehended goodness, the goodness of the object of choice is thereby explanatorily relevant in cases of free action. Given Leibniz's conception of deliberation this is tantamount to the claim that when an agent's intellect and will settle her action, she is free, and when factors external to the agent's intellect and will settle her action, her freedom is compromised or undermined. Leibniz writes: "For the more we act according to reason, the more we act according to the perfections of our own nature, and insofar as we allow ourselves to be carried away by passions, we are slaves to external things, which act upon us" (G 7.110/ SLT 94).

A different way of making this point is to note that an agent's freedom is compromised when causal factors external to the innerworkings of her intellect and will settle her action. As I read Leibniz, the freedom of an agent is also diminished by malfunction of the innerworkings of the faculties of intellect and will. Leibniz writes: "as if it were not the highest freedom to use our own intellect and will perfectly and, accordingly, for the intellect to be constrained by things to recognize true goods, and for the will to be constrained by the intellect to embrace them" (CP 135). I read passages like this one as insisting that an agent is most free when her intellect and will are working properly and settle her action.

A good way of making sense of what it is for these faculties to work properly is to see when they malfunction. The intellect can malfunction by misapprehending the correct level of goodness in possible objects of choice. Leibniz writes:

It is an imperfection in our freedom that makes us capable of choosing evil instead of good, a greater evil instead of a lesser evil, the lesser good instead of the greater good. That arises from the appearance of good and evil, which deceive us; whereas God is always prompted to the true and the greatest good, that is, to the absolutely true good, which he cannot fail to know. (T 319)

Here Leibniz emphasizes how misapprehending the goodness of an option diminishes the freedom of the agent. God is freer partly because he is not deceived about the goodness, or evil, of the possible objects of choice.

Leibniz also thinks that freedom requires being appropriately motivated to act on the basis of the judgments of the intellect. Put differently, Leibniz thinks that failure to be motivated to act in a way that is proportionate to the apprehended degree of goodness in the object of choice is a malfunction of the will. He laments that sometimes the motivational strength of an agent, or strength of her will, is weaker than the apprehended goodness of the object of choice partly because such apprehension is more "faint" (T 311) or less "vivid" (NE 185–86) than it should be or than the passions.<sup>16</sup>

In sum, Leibniz thinks that freedom is diminished by both (i) misapprehensions of the goodness of the object of choice, and (ii) diminished or inadequate motivational strength of the will. These are two ways in which the intellect and will malfunction. By contrast, then, what it is for the intellect to work properly is to adequately identify the goodness of the various possible objects of choice under consideration in deliberation, and what it is for the will to work properly is to be inclined proportionately to the apprehended level of goodness of the relevant object of choice. These observations give rise to a notion crucial for my account of agential contingency. This is the notion of a course of action being *open* to an agent in a way that matters for freedom: what it is for an option

<sup>16</sup>Jorati (2017, 169–70) has argued for a similar conclusion.

to be *open* to an agent is for this option to be the sort of thing that is taken into consideration by her in practical deliberation; more informatively, what it is for an option to be *open* to an agent is for her to recognize it as good in some way and for her to be rationally motivated to bring it about on the basis of this perceived goodness.<sup>17</sup>

This notion of what it is for an option to be open to an agent can capture the mentioned ways in which the intellect and will malfunction and thus diminish freedom. In nonideal cases, an option is *imperfectly open* to an agent when she apprehends some goodness in it and has a rational inclination toward it, but she is in some way mistaken about the goodness in it or her rational inclination fails to be proportionate to the degree of goodness in it. In the ideal case, an option is *perfectly open* to an agent when she apprehends the correct degree of goodness in it, and when she possesses a rational inclination with strength proportional to the degree of goodness she apprehends in it. The gradeability of this notion, thus, captures some of the ways in which freedom itself is gradable, for Leibniz.

### 2.b.2 The second element and agential modality

In this subsection I develop the second element of the reality-of-choice strategy. As described by Adams, this second element is the fact that considered-but-not-chosen alternatives remain possible after a choice has been made. I elaborate the sense in which these considered-but-not-chosen alternatives remain *possible*.<sup>18</sup>

My suggestion is to explicitly introduce the conclusions from section one regarding Leibniz's conception of powers of agency into his reality-of-choice strategy. My interpretation of Leibniz's reality-of-choice strategy is thus the following: in a case of an agent S deliberating between options A and B, S's choice to bring about A is contingent because (i) S has the power to bring about B, which is a rational inclination striving to bring about B, (ii) had S concluded that B was best, S would have chosen B, and (iii) the state of affairs *S's choosing B* is metaphysically consistent.

Here is, then, the basic sketch of my account of agential modality. I say that it is *agentially possible* for an agent to choose an option when it is open to her *and* there is a metaphysically possible deliberation in which she concludes that it is best. The first condition is based on previously mentioned considerations for the reality-of-choice strategy, so it implies that if an agent were to conclude that an option open to her is best, she would determine herself to bring about this option. The second condition is grounded in the many texts in which Leibniz insists that metaphysical necessity precludes freedom. Because agential possibilities have two conditions, there are two ways in which an option can fail to be agentially possible for an agent. I say that it is *agentially impossible* for an agent to choose an option if either (a) it is not open to her, or (b) there is no metaphysically possible deliberation in which she concludes that it is best. There are also two corresponding ways in which an option can be agentially necessary for an agent. I say that it is *agentially necessary* for an agent to choose an option if either (a) it is the only option open to her, or (b) it is metaphysically necessary for her to choose it; or, put differently, there is no metaphysically possible deliberation in which she does not conclude that this option is best. Finally, I say that an agent's choice to bring about an option is *agentially contingent* if she chooses it in a deliberation involving at least another option agentially possible for her. Agential contingency is the kind of contingency that matters for freedom in Leibniz's system, I suggest.

### 2.c More texts

Thus far, I have presented my interpretation as a synthesis of many different ideas Leibniz puts forth: a power to do otherwise as a condition for freedom, his account of the reality-of-choice, his

<sup>17</sup>I include inaction as an 'option.'

<sup>18</sup>Adams (1994, 21–22) thinks that it is per se possibility that Leibniz has in mind here.

version of causal determinism, and his account of the nature of the powers of to act required for free agency. In this section, I present other texts in which Leibniz seems to bring these various considerations together.

A distinctive element in my interpretation is a conditional power to do otherwise grounded in the agent's will: had the agent willed to do otherwise, she would have acted otherwise, and the only impediments to her having willed to do otherwise are internal to her deliberation at the time. In his important work *Confessio Philosophi*, Leibniz brings all these elements together: "Hence, the sense [of true freedom] will be: even if all the aids for action are at my disposal, I can nevertheless omit the action, if in fact I will not do it. Nothing is truer, nothing less opposed to my position" (CP 133; see also CP 135). Here Leibniz insists that all the conditions for action external to the will (and thus by implication the agent's intellect in deliberation) being fixed, it is possible for the agent to act or not to act by willing one way or the other. Put differently, holding fix all the conditions for action external to the agent's deliberation, (i) it is possible for the agent to bring about various courses of action, (ii) which course of action is taken depends upon the result of her practical deliberation, and (iii) were the agent to conclude otherwise she would act otherwise. All of this is as my account of agential contingency would have it.

Leibniz also relies on something like my account of agential contingency when he is explaining why God is justified in condemning some agents: "they are never damned in such fashion that they could not stop being worthy of damnation if they willed it" (CP 139). Here Leibniz insists that culpability requires a conditional power to do otherwise grounded in the will: had the agent willed not to sin, she would not have sinned, and thus not be guilty or culpable. Now, given that the will is a rational inclination toward apprehended goodness, the agent would have willed not to sin only if she had deliberated appropriately and concluded that not sinning was best. All of this is as my account of agential contingency would have it.

Additionally, agential contingency is also operative in the following text in which Leibniz presents his views on divine foreknowledge of human free actions:

[We can] solve the problem without difficulty, for since God foresees contingent things from his own free decrees, he will also know from those what the state of a free mind deliberating about some choice will be at any given time, i.e., how the arguments for each side will appear to it. Therefore he knows on which side of those presented the greater good or evil will be found, and hence what a mind will freely but certainly choose. From this it is also straightforwardly obvious how God knows what any free mind would choose if it were to find itself in any situation which nevertheless will not actually occur. (A 6.4.2318/LGR 75)

Here Leibniz insists that God knows what a free agent would freely do "in any situation which nevertheless will not actually occur" precisely because God knows "the state of a free mind deliberating" which would include "how the arguments for each side [i.e., option under consideration] will appear" to the agent. Leibniz here insists that an agent will in fact make a particular choice because it seems best to her, but had she deliberated differently, and had she concluded that a different option was best, she would have chosen that option instead. Again, all of this is what my account of agential contingency demands.

#### **2.d A potentially problematic text**

There is another text that merits attention.<sup>19</sup> In a letter to Basnage de Beauval in 1697, Leibniz presents Mons. Jaquelot's version of freedom thus: "He says that freedom means a power to do what one wants, and because one wants it, such that if one were not to want it, one would not do it; one would even do something completely different from what one does, if one wanted" (G 3.133). Mons.

<sup>19</sup>I wish to thank an anonymous referee for insisting that I address this text.

Jaquelot's conception of freedom has important structural similarities to agential contingency, so it is worth our while to look at Leibniz's response to it. On the one hand, Leibniz unequivocally accepts it: "I believe that the most obstinate adversaries of human freedom are obliged to confess that we are free in this way" (G 3.133). If the text ended here, it could be seen as sympathetic to my account. However, the passage continues: "And I do not know if Spinoza himself ever denied it" (G 3.133). This last claim complicates matters for it is now reasonable to read Leibniz as ultimately critical of Mons. Jaquelot's account: if even Spinoza can accept this account, and Spinoza's necessitarianism undermines Leibnizian freedom, then Mons. Jaquelot's account cannot establish the kind of contingency that matters for Leibnizian freedom.<sup>20</sup>

What are we to make of this passage? Let us read it as Leibniz dismissing Mons. Jaquelot's account of freedom as ultimately *unhelpful*. Does this mean that Leibniz is also dismissing agential contingency in this text? Not quite. Here is my brief proposal.

Accounts of conditional powers are compatible with the exercise or nonexercise of these powers being *causally determined* (that is one of the reasons why some compatibilists prefer them, and one of the reasons why I think agential contingency is a credible candidate to capture Leibniz's complex account of freedom). These accounts postulate conditionals like 'If *X* were the case, agent *S* would *phi*' that are compatible with it being causally determined that *X* is not the case, and that *S* does not *phi*. By the same token, these conditionals can be compatible with it being *metaphysically necessary* that *X* is not the case, and that *S* does not *phi*. Thus, accounts of conditional powers may be compatible with the exercise or nonexercise of these powers being *metaphysically necessary*. This is, presumably, what Leibniz is signaling in his reference to Spinoza.

As I see it, however, this is not a reason to read Leibniz as rejecting all accounts of conditional powers. After all, as I argued in section one, Leibniz's conception of free agency requires conditional powers. Rather, I think this is a reason for insisting that credible interpretations of Leibniz's conception of freedom must make room for metaphysical contingency. Accounts of conditional powers that *analyze* or *reduce* powers of agency to conditionals will not do. But agential contingency is not one of these accounts. Agential contingency postulates wills, or powers of free agency, as modally irreducible<sup>21</sup> Leibnizian active derivative forces that ground conditionals. Furthermore, agential contingency *requires* metaphysical contingency: it not only specifies what an agent would do if she were to conclude otherwise, but also requires that it be metaphysically possible for her to do otherwise and that it be metaphysically possible for her to conclude otherwise.<sup>22</sup>

Leibniz may think that Mons. Jaquelot's account of freedom is ultimately unhelpful because, as stated, it is compatible with Spinoza's necessitarianism. This criticism, however, is not transferable to agential contingency for *it* is incompatible with metaphysical necessitarianism. Thus, Leibniz's letter to Basnage de Beauval in 1697 need not be seen as problematic for my interpretation.

## 2.e More potentially problematic texts

There is at least another reason for thinking that agential contingency should not be attributed to Leibniz. Leibniz sometimes explicitly says that the not-chosen alternatives are incompatible with the agent's will. For example, regarding God's decision to create the world, Leibniz insists that a not-chosen possible world "remains possible in its own nature, even if it is not possible with respect to the divine will" (Grua 277/AG 21). Passages like this one can reasonably be read as saying that there is no room in Leibniz's system for something like agential modality as I describe it. Properly understood, however, these passages are compatible with my interpretation.

Here is my proposal. For Leibniz, to say that unchosen alternatives are incompatible with the agent's will is to say that it is not possible for an agent to *will* to act contrary to its *consequent will* in

<sup>20</sup>I wish to thank an anonymous referee for pointing out this possible interpretation of the text.

<sup>21</sup>By 'modally irreducible,' I just mean that these powers are not reduced to nonmodal properties or facts.

<sup>22</sup>Elsewhere (Garcia 2019) I provide an account that explains how Leibnizian agents could conclude otherwise.

any particular deliberation. In other words, Leibniz is denying a conception of the nature of the will as a self-determining faculty with the ability to choose any of the alternatives under consideration even after the intellect has judged one best. This alternative conception of the nature of the will is the ‘voluntarist’ conception.<sup>23</sup> Leibniz denies this conception of the will (T 22, 311, 325), and, importantly, agential modality does not require it. The metaphysically possible deliberations postulated by agential modality involve deliberations situations in which different antecedent wills become consequent wills. The nature of the will as a rational inclination is preserved in this account.

### 3. Merely inclining reasons and agential contingency

We are finally in a position to address Leibniz’s doctrine of merely inclining reasons. For Leibniz, ‘merely inclining reasons’ are reasons that explain but do not necessitate that which they explain. Leibniz applies this doctrine widely: all contingent events (see CD 105; Grua 302–6; G 7.302–7); some causal connections (see CD 105; DPG 14d, 16a, 48b; DM 13, 30); some connections between truths (see DM 13; Grua 302–6); and free actions (see DPG 11e, 16a, 35b; DM 13, 30; T 288, 371). It is not clear whether Leibniz intended to endorse a unified sense of ‘nonnecessitation’ grounded in a unified account of merely inclining reasons that applies to all these different cases. I do not wish to settle this question here. The more modest goal for this paper is carving a sense of nonnecessitation which applies to explanations of free actions.

For Leibniz, the rationality of an agent together with her judgment of the best (lacking impediments)<sup>24</sup> suffice to adequately explain her free rational actions. Put differently, the well-functioning rational capacities of the agent are the reasons that explain her free rational actions. As I see it, the kind of rationality that Leibniz postulates here is similar to contemporary accounts of reason-responsiveness rationality (see, for example, Fischer and Ravizza 1998). For Leibniz, the reasons agents must be responsive to just are the goodness of the different objects of choice as apprehended by them. Put differently, what it is to possess the kind of rationality that grounds freedom is for an agent to be responsive to the goodness of different objects of choice.

Leibniz’s conception of reason-responsiveness rationality has two main parts: (i) the agent’s possessing an intellect with which she can recognize, or apprehend, the different kinds and degrees of goodness in the various possible objects of choice; and (ii) the agent’s possessing a will with which she can be appropriately motivated to bring about various possible objects of choice to the extent that she judged these good. For Leibniz, then, citing these two elements of an agent’s rationality along with her judgment of the best suffices to explain her action qua free rational action.

Importantly, these kinds of explanations do not entail necessitation: the *explanans* do not necessitate the *explanandum*. This is so, I suggest, because these explanations require something like agential contingency. To say, then, that the reasons that explain free rational action *incline* the agent to action is to say that the reason-responsiveness rationality of the agent, together with the particular judgment of which considered option is best, *settles* the action for the agent. Also, to say that the reasons that explain free rational action *do not necessitate* the action is to say the reason-responsiveness rationality of the agent together with her particular judgment of the best *do not make it agentially necessary* for the agent to act. On the contrary, as I have argued, Leibniz’s conception of freedom requires agential contingency.

Consider an example. María is deliberating about what career path to take. She loves both music and economics, and she recognizes the value in pursuing either path: a career in the music world would afford her more opportunities for artistic development, appreciation, and expression; and a career in economics would afford her a more monetarily prosperous future and the goods that are

<sup>23</sup>See Kent (1995, esp. chap. 3) and Murray (1996, 2004, 2005).

<sup>24</sup>I will omit this qualification from now onward.

associated with it. Upon careful deliberation, she concludes a career in music would be best for her and she acts accordingly.

How do we explain María's action? By Leibniz's lights, I submit, citing María's reason-responsiveness rationality together with her judgment that a music career is best *suffice* to explain her free action. Her choice is nonetheless agentially contingent, for it was agentially possible for her to choose a career in economics instead: she had a rational inclination striving to bring about this alternative, which grounded a conditional power to do otherwise, and the state of affairs of her choosing a career in economics is metaphysically consistent. A career in economics was a real option for her, but her reason and judgment of the best settled her free action to pursue a career in music instead. María's reason-responsiveness rationality together with her judgment of the best *inclined* her to act, that is *settled* her action, but they *did not necessitate* her act, that is *did not make it agentially necessary*.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have advanced a novel way of understanding Leibniz's account of contingency as a condition for freedom. I have argued that Leibniz's reality-of-choice strategy can be developed into a kind of modality governing what agents can choose; I have labeled this kind of modality 'agential modality.' The basic idea is that an agent is free to the extent that she determines herself to do that which she deliberately judges to be the best from several options that she could have brought about had she come to the conclusion that these options were best. I have illustrated how this account carves a sense in which reasons merely incline and do not necessitate the free actions that they explain.

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