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Leibniz on free and responsible wrongdoing

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ABSTRACT

According to intellectualists, the will is a rational inclination towards apprehended goodness. This conception of the will makes its acts intelligible: they are explained by (i) the nature of the will as a rational inclination, and (ii) the judgement of the intellect that moves the will. From this it follows that it is impossible for an agent to *will evil as such* or for its own sake. In explaining wrongdoing intellectualists cite cognitive error or the disruptive influences of the passions; these considerations, however, seem involuntary and at least partly exculpatory. The intellectualist needs an account that renders wrongful actions *intelligible* without undermining their status as *responsible*. I argue that Leibniz has the theoretical tools to provide at least part of an answer to this problem. In sum, an agent is *directly responsible* for her wrongdoing if the cognitive error or the disruptive influence of the passions that help explain this wrongdoing do not completely undermine her acting freely; an agent is *indirectly responsible* for her wrongdoing if she is directly responsible for previous actions which partly resulted in her wrongdoing, even if the presence of cognitive error or disruptive influence of the passions completely undermines her acting freely.

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1. Introduction

As Leibniz sees it, “the essence of the will” is to be “an effort to act in accordance with the judgement” of the intellect (G 6:301/T 311).¹ Put differently, the nature of the will is to be a rational inclination or tendency towards the goodness of an object of choice as apprehended by the intellect. From this conception of the essence of the will it follows that: “we can only will what we think good” (G 5:166/NE 2.21.19) or “The will is never prompted to action save by the representation of the good, which prevails over the opposite representations” (G 6:128/T 45; see also G 6:115–6/T 22; G 6:287/T 287; G 6:309/T 325). Proponents of this conception of the will I label ‘intellectualists’.²

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¹Translations are my own unless a translation is cited.

²Near the end of the thirteenth century important philosophical discussions regarding the nature of freedom, agency, and moral responsibility centered around the interdependence and relative importance

An important theoretical motivation for intellectualists is explaining or rendering *intelligible* acts of will: acts of will are explained by (i) the nature of the will as a rational inclination towards the apprehended goodness of the object of choice, and (ii) the relevant judgement of the intellect that moves the will to act. These explanations of acts of will are central for explanations of human actions. This is most straightforward in cases of rightful action.³ An agent doing the right thing is explained by her judgement that a particular action is right and her will to bring about that action precisely because it is judged right. Citing an agent's intellect and will working properly – i.e. attaining their respective proper objects, truth and goodness – *suffices* to explain the rightful action of a rational agent, intellectualists insist. For Leibniz, the proper functioning of reason is so intimately connected with rightful action that he defines 'virtue' as "a disposition to act in accordance with reason" (G 5:89/NE 1.2.19). Furthermore, the proper functioning of reason is also intimately connected to freedom. Leibniz writes: "*The more we act according to reason, the freer we are*" (G 7:110/SLT 94; emphasis in original). Thus, for Leibniz, the actions of an agent whose rational faculties are working properly are not only intelligible but also the fullest manifestation of both virtue and freedom.

Another important implication of conceiving the will as a rational inclination towards apprehended goodness is that it is impossible for an agent to *will evil as such* or for its own sake.⁴ Thus, in contrast to rightful action, wrongful action cannot be explained by an agent simply willing to do the wrong thing. Rather, wrongdoing must be explained by appealing to factors like cognitive error or the disruptive influence of the passions on deliberation or action.⁵

These considerations give rise to a problem I wish to address in this paper. It seems that both cognitive error and the disruptive influence of the passion are involuntary and at least partly exculpatory.⁶ The extent to which these factors are seen as exculpatory partly depends on various theoretical

of the faculties of will and intellect. Addressing these discussions, historians have used the label 'intellectualism' to cover a cluster of interrelated views stressing the relative importance of the intellect over the will, and 'voluntarism' to cover an opposing cluster stressing the relative importance of the will over the intellect. For an insightful history of intellectualism and voluntarism see Kent (*Virtues of Will*); the history of similar philosophical considerations is traced by Bourke (*Will in West*), Dihle (*Will in Antiquity*), and Frede (*A Free Will*); Murray ("Leibniz and His Precursors") also provides insightful historical details of this philosophical controversy closer to Leibniz's time. Irwin ("Who Discovered the Will?") and Penner ("Suarez on the Will") also provide interesting discussions on these topics. I will not enter the intricacies of these controversies in this paper; rather, I will use the word 'intellectualist' to refer to any philosopher that endorses the conception of the will highlighted in the main text.

³I move directly from the 'goodness' apprehend by the intellect to 'rightful action'. This is an abrupt transition that jumps over many important philosophical issues. These issues, as far as I can tell, however, are orthogonal to the purposes of this paper, so I will ignore them.

⁴See Aquinas ST I-II.8.1; *De Malo* 3.12 ad 1. It is thinkers like Ockham, a paradigmatic voluntarist, who think wrongful actions ultimately must be explained by agents willing evil as such or for its own sake (*Opera Philosophica* 319–21).

⁵*De Malo* 3.6; 3.9; 3.11; 3.12.

⁶In general, intellectualists tend to think that either voluntariness or freedom is a necessary condition for culpability (Aquinas: ST I-II.71.5; I-II.71.6 ad 2; *De Malo* 2.2; 3.8; Leibniz: DPG 42c; G 6:139/T 67; G 6:143/T 75; G 6:288/T 288; G 6:453/CD 97–8; Grua 368/AG 117).

commitments. In Leibniz's case, the influence of the passions diminishes the agent's freedom: "there is so much more servitude the more we act in accordance with the passions" (G 7:110/SLT 94; emphasis in original), and freedom is intimately connected to moral responsibility: "A measure of freedom is necessary for punishments and rewards" (DPG 42c), or more fully: "yet, strong as man's corruption and depravity may be, they are not sufficient to render him excusable, nor to exempt him from culpability, as though he acted without sufficient freedom and spontaneity" (G 6:453/CD 97).⁷ The clear implication of the last clause, I take it, is that had an agent acted without sufficient freedom she would not be culpable or responsible for her action. Thus, in Leibniz's case, the disruptive influence of the passions is a crucial factor in explaining wrongdoing, but this influence also diminishes the agent's freedom and with it the agent's culpability for her wrongdoing.

More generally, then, it seems that the kinds of explanations of wrongdoing available to the intellectualist tend to undermine the responsibility of the wrongdoer. The challenge, for the intellectualist, is to provide an account that manages to render actions that are wrong *intelligible* without thereby undermining their status as *responsible* – that is, as actions for which it is appropriate to praise, blame, reward or punish the agent. I shall refer to this as the problem of accounting for *intelligible and responsible wrongdoing*.

In this paper, I argue that Leibniz has the theoretical tools to provide at least part of an answer to this problem. The main move in my proposal is to make a distinction between direct and indirect responsibility. In sum, an agent is *directly responsible* for her wrongful action if the cognitive error or the disruptive influence of the passions that bring about this wrongful action do not completely undermine her acting freely. By contrast, an agent is *indirectly responsible* for her wrongful action if she is directly responsible for previous actions which partly resulted in her current wrongful action, even if the presence of cognitive error or disruptive influence of the passions completely undermines her acting freely.

Here is the plan. In Section 2, I present in some detail the way in which the intelligible and responsible wrongdoing challenge arises for Leibniz. In Section 3, I present my proposal. In Section 4, I illustrate some of the ways in which Leibniz's commitment to a strong version of the principle of sufficient reason and causal determinism have important consequences for the account sketched in Section 3.

⁷See also DPG 42b; 42e; G 6:453/CD 98; G 6:139/T 67; G 6:143/T 75; G 6:162/T 107; G 6:288/T 288; Graa 368/AG 117. It is worth noting that some passages seem to paint a different story. In Section 2.3, I consider a few passages and some philosophical considerations for thinking that Leibniz ultimately abandons this intimate connection between freedom and moral responsibility – an interpretation advanced by Jorati (*Causation and Agency*, Ch: 6–7).

2. The problem of intelligible and responsible wrongdoing, for Leibniz

2.1. Brief observations on methodology

Intellectualists have several theoretical tools to address the problem of intelligible and responsible wrongdoing. Here are some of the main ones: (i) locating contingency in the acts of the intellect by insisting that the intellect is free to consider or reconsider, attend to or ignore different possible alternatives at any time (thus rendering cognitive error more within the control of the agent and thus less exculpatory than would otherwise seem);⁸ (ii) locating cognitive error partly under the control of the will by insisting that how good different possible options appear to the intellect partly depends on the will's commanding the intellect to entertain or ignore these options (thus rendering cognitive error at least partly voluntary and thus less exculpatory),⁹ and (iii) postulating an indirect power over future emotions, volitions or actions that grounds the agent's responsibility for these future emotions, volitions or actions.¹⁰ It is this latter theoretical tool that I wish to investigate further in this paper.

Furthermore, throughout this paper I cite work from Leibniz that covers over thirty years of his life. I do not presume that Leibniz did not change his mind during this period. Rather, my positive proposal rests almost exclusively on texts from Leibniz's mature period, roughly late 1690s onward. The few texts I cite from earlier periods pertain to topics for which I do not see Leibniz changing his mind, such as the idea that true freedom rests on acting on the basis of the judgement of the best. Sometimes I cite texts from Leibniz's mature period and make references to texts prior in his career to note the continuity of his thinking. However, it is not clear to me that all the elements of my positive proposal are present prior to Leibniz's mature period, so I make no claims to this effect.

2.2. Leibniz on freedom as expression of true rational self

Leibniz describes his basic account of freedom in the following way: "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). For Leibniz, then, an agent counts as a free agent if she has the ability to deliberate and to determine herself to action on the basis of her deliberate judgement of the best. Having these general capacities make an

⁸Aquinas seems to advocate this view: ST I.83.1, I-II.13.6. McCluskey ("Intellective Appetite" and *Aquinas on Wrongdoing*) argues that this is at the heart of Aquinas' view of the contingency of free choice.

⁹This is at the heart of Aquinas' conception of agency: ST I-II.76.1; 77.2; II-II.24.11; *De Malo* 3.7 ad 5; ad 8; 3.8; 4.1 ad 15. As we will see in Section 3.3.2, Leibniz himself endorses a version of this claim.

¹⁰*De Malo* 3.8; 3.11.

agent a *free agent*, and exercising these capacities make the resulting particular action a *free action*. An action is free only if it is the result of actual deliberation by the agent: “when there is no judgement in he who acts there is no freedom” (G 6:122/T 34) or more generally: “The *nature* of the will requires *freedom*, which consists in this: that the voluntary action be spontaneous and deliberate, and therefore exclude that necessity which suppresses deliberation” (G 6:441/CD 20; see also G 3:36/LGR 297; G 6:569/WF 198; G 5:160/NE 2.21.8). An action is not free if it is not based on judgement, and judgement requires deliberation.

Importantly for our purposes, deliberation itself can be more or less sound. This gradeability in deliberation makes Leibniz’s account of freedom gradable as well.¹¹ Leibniz writes:

The more we act according to reason, the freer we are, and there is so much more servitude the more we act in accordance with the passions. 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 emphasis in original)

For Leibniz, then, freedom is to be understood in contrast with bondage: an agent is free to the extent that the rational part of his nature is free from the more animalistic, or passion driven, part. The more an agent’s passions settle her action, the less free she is in that action.

Furthermore, cognitive error also undermines or debilitates freedom, and is in important ways intertwined with the disruptive influence of the passions. Leibniz writes:

Our knowledge is of two kinds, distinct or confused. Distinct knowledge, or intelligence, occurs in the actual use of reason; but the senses supply us with confused thoughts. And we may say that we are immune from bondage in so far as we act with a distinct knowledge, but that we are the slaves of passions in so far as our perceptions are confused.

(G 6:288/T 289)

Here part of the emphasis is again on the way in which the passions undermine freedom, but Leibniz also insists that cognitive error is itself an obstacle to “the actual use of reason” and thus an obstacle to the expression of the agent’s true rational self in action. According to Leibniz, then, the paradigmatic example of freedom is an agent doing what she deems best, and this action is itself explained by the rational capacities of the agent working properly: the intellect adequately assesses and judges the relative goodness of the considered courses of action, and the will is inclined

¹¹Jolley (*Leibniz*, 129–30) also highlights this.

proportionately to the apprehended goodness of the different possible objects of choice, and thus chooses the course of action judged best.

Leibniz's gradable notion of freedom has important implications for our project. The agent is most free when she does the right thing. Cases of wrongdoing necessarily involve some diminution of freedom, for they necessarily involve diminution in the soundness of the agent's deliberation. Does this mean that Leibniz is committed to a proportionate diminution of culpability correlating to the diminution of freedom? There are some passages in which Leibniz seems to indicate that the level of culpability of an agent is indeed proportionate to, or at least correlated with, the level of freedom in that action. In his mature work *New Essays*, he writes:

The laws threaten punishment and promise reward in order to discourage evil actions and encourage good ones. But a madman may be in a condition where threats and promises barely influence him, since his reason is no longer in command; and so the severity of the penalty should be relaxed in proportion to his incapacity.

(G 5:224–5/NE 2.27.20)

This passage is explicitly about a madman whose reason "is no longer in command". According to my interpretation, if the madman's reason has zero influence on his actions, then, this madman is not acting freely at all. This does not seem to be what Leibniz has in mind here, however, for he allows that there is some minor influence on the madmen by threats of punishment and promises of reward, which Leibniz thinks directly appeals to an agent's intellect and will (G 6:143/T 75). The most important point, for our purposes, is expressed in the last sentence of the quote. Here Leibniz seems to articulate a principle for agents in general, and not just for madmen. The principle states that "the penalty should be relaxed in proportion to" the incapacity of the agent's true rational self to settle the action for the agent. And this principle about just punishment is arguably based on a different principle: just penalties are proportionate to the culpability of the agent. If so, Leibniz is endorsing a gradable notion of culpability tied to his gradable notion of freedom.

If this is Leibniz's considered view, then he is content to insist that as long as an agent is acting freely to some extent the agent is culpable to a proportionate extent. This provides part of the answer to the intelligible and responsible wrongdoing challenge: responsibility does not require full freedom; as long as the agent is free to some extent, she is also culpable at least to a proportionate extent. Thus, wrongdoing must be explained by citing cognitive error or disruptive influences of the passions on deliberation and action, and to the extent that these suppress the true rational self they undermine the agent's freedom and culpability for that action. However, provided that the agent is free to some extent, she will be

culpable to a proportionate extent. I say that an agent is ‘directly responsible’ in these sorts of cases.

At this juncture, a possible objection can be raised.¹² This objection is that the proportionality of culpability just sketched seems implausible. If freedom is diminished in cases of wrongdoing, and responsibility requires freedom, then it seems that the right conclusion is that the agent is not culpable at all. Rather, an agent is right to the extent to which she is acting freely and exculpated to the extent that her action is settled by the passions. Whence culpability, then? It seems that there is thus no proportionality of culpability in cases of wrongdoing.

Part of the answer to this challenge, as I see it, is that for Leibniz culpability requires that there is a sense in which the agent has the power to avoid doing the wrong for which she is culpable. Leibniz writes, for example: “Moreover, the certain determination to sin which exists in man does not deprive him of the power to avoid sinning (speaking generally) or, since he does sin, prevent him from being guilty and deserving punishment” (G 6:334/T 369). This topic will play a main role in Section 3, and, as we shall see there, these powers to do otherwise are importantly interconnected with the freedom of the wrongdoer. For now, as Leibniz sees it, the pernicious influence of the passions explains how an otherwise rational agent comes to act wrongly, but part of the ground for the agent’s responsibility is that she could have avoided acting wrongly.

Returning to the main narrative of the paper, the sketched conception of direct responsibility leaves many unanswered questions. Are agents only responsible for actions for which they are directly responsible? Are the influences of the passions or cognitive error ever so strong that they completely overpower the rational self and thus completely undermine freedom? If so, is the agent responsible in any sense for these actions? Do freedom and responsibility ever come apart? In the next subsection, we will take a closer look at Leibniz’s answers to these questions.

2.3. Leibniz on freedom and responsibility

According to the interpretation presented so far, an agent is directly responsible for an action if she performed that action freely, at least to some extent; and, importantly, diminution in freedom implies diminution in culpability: provided that an agent acts freely to some extent, she is culpable to a proportionate extent. This interpretation can be extended into a complete answer to the intelligible and responsible wrongdoing challenge by insisting that, for Leibniz, every action performed by a free agent is free to some extent. If so, agents would be *directly responsible* for each of their actions, and even

¹²I wish to thank an anonymous referee for raising this objection.

though the presence of cognitive error or the influence of the passions diminished their culpability, such factors could never completely exculpate the agent. I refer to this interpretation as the 'always-free' view.

One reason for thinking that Leibniz endorses the always-free view is that he is willing to ascribe freedom and a power to do otherwise even to people suffering eternal damnation:

But after this life ... there is always in the man who sins, even when he is damned, a freedom which renders him culpable, and a power, albeit remote, of recovering himself, even though it should never pass into action. And there is no reason why one may not say that this degree of freedom, exempt from necessity, but not exempt from certainty, remains in the damned as well as in the blessed.

(G 6:277/T 269)

Here Leibniz insists that eternal punishment is just partly because agents are still free and have the power to reform themselves even in hell. Arguably, then, if even the actions of those irrevocably condemned to eternal damnation retain a sufficient amount of freedom, then every action performed by a free agent is free to some extent.

However, as is often the case in Leibnizian exegesis, assessing Leibniz's considered view is a complicated matter. There are other passages which do seem to suggest that it is the influence of the passions alone that settle the action for the agent, and thus fully remove the freedom of the agent. In the *New Essays*, Leibniz insists:

Involuntary thoughts come to us partly from without, through objects' affecting our senses ... We are passive in this respect ... they are not within our power ... But our mind on becoming aware of some image which occurs in it can say Stop! And bring it to a halt, so to speak ... This is a matter in which people differ very much, according to their temperaments and according to the use they have made of their powers of self-control; so that one may be able to rise above impressions whereas another would give in to them.¹³

(G 5:163/NE 2.21.12)

This is an important passage for our purposes. Here Leibniz emphasizes the involuntary nature of the influence of the passions, or the impressions, and affirms a kind of control an agent has over them. This control, he tells us, involves a kind of ability to rise above the impressions. We will come to this ability later. For now, what is most relevant is the last point he makes in this passage. There are cases, he insists, in which the influence of the passions is so strong that the agent simply gives in to them. He does not explicitly say that the rational faculties of the agent do not contribute to the agent's action at all, but it is not implausible to read this passage in this

¹³Translation altered. I wish to thank an anonymous referee for bringing this translation issue to my attention.

way. On other occasions Leibniz describes some agents as “abandoning” themselves “to the passions” (G 6:197/T 147), which can also be reasonably read as cases in which the rational self fails to contribute to settling the agent’s actions. Sometimes Leibniz warns that “passion will prevail over reason” unless an agent “prepare[s] himself in good time to resist the passions” (G 6:309/T 326). The clear implication, I take it, is that without such preparations the passions will prevail over reason and the resulting action would not be free at all.

Furthermore, for Leibniz some actions are un-free not because overpowering emotions drown the true rational self, but for the more mundane reason that they are done without deliberation or judgement. Such actions are not free because judgement is a condition for freedom: “when there is no judgement in he who acts there is no freedom” (G 6:122/T 34).

These considerations suggest that Leibniz’s considered view is not the always-free view. Rather, it seems that Leibniz is happy to admit that sometimes the actions of agents are not free, and thus the agent is not *directly responsible* for these actions. Where does this leave us? Does Leibniz think that agents acting un-freely are completely exculpated? Alternatively, does Leibniz hold agents responsible for wrongful actions for which they are not directly responsible? It seems to me that the answer to this last question is ‘yes’.

In *Causa Dei*, for example, Leibniz insists that some actual sins can be “engendered by the infirmity of our nature” or “by the malice of our souls” (G 6:453/CD 92). It seems reasonable to think that neither the infirmity of our nature nor the malice of our souls is the direct result of practical deliberation; Leibniz’s account of freedom is not met. Yet, Leibniz explicitly ascribes “guiltiness” and “perversity” to the sins engendered in these fashions (G 6:453/CD 92). Put differently, Leibniz is holding agents responsible for actions for which they have no direct responsibility, as previously described.

There are also some philosophical considerations for thinking that Leibniz is committed to ascribing responsibility to agents even for actions that they do not perform freely at all.¹⁴ One of these considerations is that Leibniz thinks that when both virtue and vice attain their fullest manifestation in an agent’s character, the agent acts in accordance with these character traits in a way that is “second nature” to her (Grua 581/SLT 169; G 5:173/NE 2.21.35; A 4.4.615/Riley 106). Arguably, actions which can be appropriately characterized as ‘second nature’ are ones that do not require deliberation, and thus does not require freedom as Leibniz understands it. However, it seems implausible that agents are responsible for the formation of their character, to the extent that this formation is voluntary or free, but not responsible for the actions that follow from their fully formed character. Thus, it

¹⁴Jorati (*Causation and Agency*, 195ff) provides some of these philosophical considerations.

seems that Leibniz is committed to ascribing responsibility to agents for some actions that follow from their fully formed characters despite these actions failing to meet his account of freedom.

A second philosophical consideration for thinking that Leibniz sometimes holds agents responsible for actions for which they have no direct responsibility is that he insists we have an obligation to better ourselves. In the *New Essays*, he writes: “in so far as one is capable of knowledge, it would be a sin to neglect it” for such knowledge helps us approach “the advantage of being infallible and faultless” (G 5:80/NE 1.1.27). As he sees it, complying with this duty requires developing our mastery over our passions and thereby increasing our freedom and virtue. Arguably, at least on some occasions, we are culpable for neglecting to better ourselves; but, one way of neglecting this duty is by not even trying to comply with it. This lack of attempt need not be the conclusion of a (faulty) deliberation, but simply a lack of deliberation altogether. If there is no deliberation, there is no judgement, no freedom, and no direct responsibility either.

What are we to make of these seemingly contradictory passages and philosophical commitments? What is Leibniz’s considered view regarding the relationship between freedom and responsibility? As we have seen, many passages seem to indicate that for Leibniz freedom is a condition for moral responsibility, yet others seem to indicate that Leibniz is happy holding agents responsible for actions that they did not perform freely at all. In the following section, I present my proposal for answering these kinds of questions.

3. Direct and indirect responsibility

Here is my proposal. For Leibniz, freedom is indeed a condition for moral responsibility. But Leibniz can admit two kinds of responsibility: direct and indirect. Direct responsibility for an action requires that the agent perform that action freely. Indirect responsibility, by contrast, only requires that the action be in part the result of previous actions which the agent performed freely. Freedom is thus required for both kinds of responsibility, but in different ways. For ease of reference, I refer to the way in which freedom is required for direct responsibility as ‘direct freedom’, and I refer to the way in which freedom is required for indirect responsibility as ‘indirect freedom’.

I elaborate this account below. For now, it is worth noting that this distinction can help make sense of some of the texts in which Leibniz seems to divorce freedom from moral responsibility. For example, as we have seen, Leibniz holds agents responsible for sins which result from the infirmity of their nature (G 6:453/CD 92). Arguably, such infirmity is not the direct result of deliberation, and thus not something for which the agent can be held *directly* responsible. However, arguably, such infirmity can either be

the result of a series of actions that the agent performed freely (i.e. with direct freedom) or, perhaps more likely, failing to improve upon such infirmity can be the result of a series of actions freely performed (again, with direct freedom) by the agent. Thus, arguably, the agent can be held *indirectly* responsible for the sins which result from the infirmity of her nature partly because such infirmity, or failure to improve upon it, is the result of some of her directly free actions. And this notion of indirect responsibility can similarly elucidate the sense in which an agent can be held responsible for failing to improve herself or for the actions that follow from her fully formed character.

3.1. Direct and indirect powers

At the heart of the Leibnizian account of indirect responsibility I advance here is Leibniz's conception of indirect powers. Leibniz writes:

One must admit that there is always within us enough power over our will, but we do not always bethink ourselves of employing it ... the power of the soul over its inclinations is a control which can only be exercised in an indirect manner.

(G 6:309–10/T 327; see also G 6:172/T 120; G 6:296/T 301; G 6:310/T 328; G 6:357/T 404; G 5:168/NE 2.21.24; G 5:183/NE 2.21.48)

And these indirect powers extend to our habits and passions: “For although [the soul] cannot change its passions forthwith, it can work from afar towards that end with enough success and endue itself with new passions and even new habits” (G 6:137/T 64; see also G 6:309/T 326; G 3:403/AG 195; G 5:168/NE 2.21.24).

In this subsection I develop my interpretation of Leibniz's conception of these powers and the way in which they ground indirect responsibility for agents.¹⁵

3.2. Leibniz on moral responsibility and the powers to do otherwise

I have described Leibnizian indirect responsibility as the kind of responsibility an agent has for an action that partly results from directly free actions for which the agent is directly responsible. This is only part of the story, however. For Leibniz, culpability also requires that the agent have the power to prevent or avoid her doing the wrong action (G 6:155/T 95; G 6:334/T 369; G 6:453/CD 98). This commitment seems to also follow from Leibniz's insistence that “There is no obligation to do the impossible” (G 6:358/T 407; see also G 6:196/T 145; G 6:33; A 6.4.2153–4/OTB), or that

¹⁵Jorati (*Causation and Agency*, Ch. 7) and Davidson (“Deteriora Sequor”, 250f) also point out this part of Leibniz's views.

'ought implies can', as philosophers say nowadays. I wish to explicitly incorporate this demand for a power to do otherwise as a condition for culpability into the Leibnizian account of indirect responsibility advocated here. An agent is indirectly responsible for her wrongdoing only if this wrongful act results from previous directly free actions *and* she could have avoided or prevented her wrongdoing.

Leibniz seems committed to thinking that *direct responsibility* requires that agents possess a power to do otherwise during the moment of choice: "it must be possible for us to abstain even from the sin which we are actually committing" (G 6:453/CD 98) if we are to count as moral agents or in order "to render our actions virtuous or vicious" (G 6:453/CD 98). Because these kinds of powers are required for direct responsibility, I label them 'direct powers' to do otherwise.

Importantly, it seems to me that Leibniz is also committed to *indirect* powers to do otherwise that ground indirect responsibility even for cases in which agents lack *direct* powers to do otherwise and thus also lack direct freedom and direct responsibility. I have not encountered a text in which Leibniz says exactly this. But he does seem to be committed to this view in the following text:

There is a great deal of difference between the actions of a drunk man and of a true and acknowledged sleepwalker. We punish drunkards because they could stay sober and may even retain some memory of the punishment while they are drunk. But a sleepwalker is less able to abstain from his nocturnal walk and from what he does during it.

(G 5:225/NE 2.27.22)

Here Leibniz contrasts a sleepwalker to a drunkard and insists that only the latter can be punished. Sleepwalkers lack a certain ability to abstain from their acts that drunkards still possess, he insists. The complete inability to abstain from her actions exculpates the sleepwalker, but this is not true of the drunkard. The ability that Leibniz is appealing to here is not one that the drunkard possesses *while drunk*, but rather it is the ability to "stay sober" and thus not find themselves in the position of drunkenness in which their direct freedom is compromised. Leibniz continues:

The real question is not so much that as what to do when it has been well established – as it can be – that the drunkard or the sleepwalker really was beside himself. In that case the sleepwalker can only be regarded as a victim of mania; but since drunkenness is voluntary and sickness is not, we punish the one rather than the other.

(G 5:225/NE 2.27.22)

Here Leibniz acknowledges that both the sleepwalker and the drunkard lack direct powers to do otherwise, but he insists drunkenness is nonetheless in some sense *voluntary* and thus culpable. In this context, what Leibniz

seems to mean by “voluntary” is both the fact that drunkenness results from directly free actions (to drink), and the agent had the direct powers to do otherwise or the direct freedom to “stay sober”. As I read this passage, it has all the ingredients of the account I am developing. An agent can be held *indirectly* responsible for her actions while drunk – even though such actions are not directly free – precisely because those actions are the result of previous directly free choices (to drink) and for her past unexercised direct powers to stay sober (do otherwise).

3.3. Leibniz on direct powers

In this subsection I briefly elaborate Leibniz’s notion of direct powers, which ground indirect powers and indirect responsibility. I argue that ultimately all direct powers are Leibnizian powers of agency, which are just rational strivings or wills.

According to Leibniz all substances are agents (G 6:598/PNG 1); and agency requires that the principle of action be within the agent (G 6:608/M 11; G 6:598/PNG 2; G 6:308/T 323). This inner principle of action within substances grounds or is manifested in powers of agency which Leibniz sometimes calls “appetitions” (G 6:609/M 15; G 6:598/PNG 2). For Leibniz, free agency is a subcategory of agency, so not all powers of agency are relevant for freedom. It is rational strivings, or wills, which are the powers of agency that matter for freedom. Describing the dynamic process that leads to free action, Leibniz writes:

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.

(G 6:309/T 325)

As Leibniz sees it, then, the free action of an agent is settled by a dynamic struggle between antecedent wills, as powers of agency, striving to bring about the different options under consideration in deliberation. The result or culmination of this appetitive struggle is the consequent will, which settles the action for the agent.

I have argued elsewhere (“Leibniz on Agential Contingency”) that this appetitive struggle in deliberation gives rise to powers of free agency that help make sense of Leibniz’s conception of the kind of contingency that matters for freedom. In sum, 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 label this account ‘agential contingency’ and the kinds of powers of free agency ‘agential powers’. It is these agential powers that I think are the direct powers that ground Leibnizian indirect powers and ultimately ground Leibnizian indirect responsibility.¹⁶ The way in which these direct powers can ground indirect powers over future volitions, actions, or passions is a complex one. It is worth our while to look at this complexity in more detail. That is the topic of the next couple of subsections.

3.3.1. *Morally benign decisions that form characters*

An important observation is that the choices for which the agent is directly responsible – and which eventually culminate in wrongful behaviour for which she is indirectly responsible – need not themselves be wrongful. In fact, when Leibniz discusses ways in which our indirect powers give us mastery over our future actions, passions, and habits, he often only mentions morally benign actions:

Hence what is required is that the mind be prepared in advance . . . we should become accustomed to proceeding methodically and sticking to sequences of thoughts for which reason, rather than chance (i.e. insensible and fortuitous impressions), provides the thread. It helps with this if one becomes accustomed to withdrawing into oneself occasionally, rising about the hubbub of present impressions – as it were getting away from one’s own situation and asking oneself ‘Why am I here?’, ‘Where am I going?’, ‘How far have I come?’, or saying I must come to the point, I must set to work! . . . It is through these methods and stratagems that we become masters of ourselves, and can bring it about that we have certain thoughts and that when the time comes we shall will according to our present preference and according to reason’s decrees.

(G 5:181–2/NE 2.21.47)

By acting in these individually morally benign ways, we gradually form our characters or habits and thus “become masters of ourselves”, Leibniz insists. Now failure to perform a morally benign act is itself morally benign: if it were wrongful not to perform an action, this action would not be morally benign. However, failure to perform the morally benign actions recommended by Leibniz would gradually form characters in morally problematic ways. Agents become indirectly responsible for the actions that follow from their characters partly because they are directly responsible for the morally benign actions that helped formed their characters.

In many texts, Leibniz identifies a multiplicity of strategies for character formation which begin with morally benign actions. Seidler (“Moral Therapy”, III) does an excellent job of identifying many of these texts and of presenting

¹⁶As I see it, these projects are mutually reinforcing, for they gather a multiplicity of texts and philosophical considerations into a unified picture of contingency, agency, freedom and moral responsibility in Leibniz’s thought.

many of these strategies proposed by Leibniz. Seidler calls “moral art” (“Moral Therapy”, 34) the ability to understand and implement on oneself these different strategies for personal growth. One of the interpretative conclusions by Seidler worth highlighting here is that, for Leibniz, part of this moral art includes the transformation of some of “our instinctual tendencies into positive allies in virtue” (“Moral Therapy”, 29). In a text from around 1690 titled “Discourse on noble sentiments” Leibniz defines good sentiments in the following way: “Good sentiments are those which tend to the good, or to virtue” (B 365/DNS). In this text, Leibniz insists: “We have naturally undisciplined minds, and from our childhood we are diverted by a thousand trifles which divide our attention” (B 366/DNS). As Leibniz sees it, it takes “art”, or Seidler’s “moral art”, to reunite and redirect our thoughts to develop these good sentiments and grow in virtue, and ultimately to become masters of ourselves.

3.3.2. Leibniz on the direct power to rise above the impressions

Sometimes bad characters form by making bad choices or by acts of wrongdoing. The account developed so far states that an agent is indirectly responsible for her current wrongdoing partly because it resulted from previous actions for which she was directly responsible. But if some of these actions for which the agent is *directly responsible* are *themselves* wrongful, then this account does not help explain *them*. Thus, the plausibility of this account of indirect responsibility stands in need for an account of direct responsibility for wrongful actions. As we have seen, an agent is directly responsible for her wrongdoing only if it is a free action, at least to some extent. What is missing is an account of *direct powers* to do otherwise in cases of wrongdoing for which the agent is *directly* responsible. We turn to this account here.

Here is an important passage in which Leibniz describes these direct powers to do otherwise in cases of wrongdoing:

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.

(G 6:453/CD 98)

The most straightforward reading of this passage is that Leibniz thinks that an agent is *directly responsible* for her wrongdoing only if at *the moment of choice*, she had the power to have done the right thing by applying a stronger rational effort and thereby overcoming the oppressive influence of the passions.¹⁷ Leibniz sometimes describes these powers as abilities to rise above the influence of the passions (cited earlier):

Involuntary thoughts come to us partly from without, through objects’ affecting our senses We are passive in this respect . . . they are not within our power

... But our mind on becoming aware of some image which occurs in it can say Stop! And bring it to a halt, so to speak ... This is a matter in which people differ very much, according to their temperaments and according to the use they have made of their powers of self-control; so that one may be able to rise above impressions whereas another would give in to them.¹⁸

(G 5:163/NE 2.21.12)

This passage is not as clear as one would like, but it is nonetheless clear that Leibniz asserts that our powers of self-control extend in some way to the involuntary impressions that come from the senses. In some sense, the exercise of these powers enables one to 'rise above impressions' and either halt or redirect the way in which these impressions affect deliberation and ultimately help settle the action for the agent.

A few pages after the quoted passage Leibniz elaborates on this ability of agents to rise above impressions:

Even when the desire is strong enough in itself to arouse us if nothing hinders it, it can be blocked by contrary inclinations ... But as these contrary inclinations, propensities and desires must already exist in the soul, it does not have them within its power; and consequently it could not resist them in any free and voluntary way in which reason could play a part, if it did not have another method, namely to turn the mind in a different direction.

(G 5:181/NE 2.21.47)

Passages like this one are best read, I think, as Leibniz insisting that an agent's power to rise above the impressions is ultimately grounded in the agent's ability to turn the mind in different directions. That is, it is the mind's ability to reconsider or reassess different options during the process of deliberation that grounds the agent's power to rise above the impressions. Leibniz further tells us that such ability is itself grounded in the will. He writes: "in so far as a man wills *vigorously*, he determines his thoughts by his own choice instead of being determined and swept along by involuntary perceptions" (G 5:166/NE 2.21.19). Putting these claims together, we get the following account: an agent has direct powers over her involuntary perceptions, or passions, by having the ability to *will* to direct the mind to different options during deliberation. Put differently, sometimes an agent can *will* to direct the mind towards different options thereby bringing a stronger rational inclination to bear and thereby overcoming the influence of the passions on deliberation or action. In sum, an agent is *directly responsible* for her wrongdoing in circumstance C – despite the presence of either cognitive error or disruptive influence of the passions on deliberation or action – partly because *in C* she had the ability to will to redirect her thoughts such that

¹⁷Perhaps Leibniz is speaking about a similar phenomenon in his short work titled "Discourse on noble sentiments" (DNS). There Leibniz speaks of the internal strength of the soul, and the way in which skill or art enables one to properly channel this inner strength even if not increase it.

¹⁸Translation altered.

such redirection would have enabled her true rational self to prevail over her passions and thus not act wrongly on that occasion.

Leibniz's account of a power to rise above the impression is, thus, a particular account of his more general conception of direct powers as powers of agency or rational strivings. These direct powers ground indirect powers over future actions, volitions, habits and even passions for which the agent is indirectly responsible.

3.4. A recalcitrant text

Before concluding, there is a recalcitrant text that merits attention.¹⁹ In 1676, Leibniz annotates Spinoza's last letter to Oldenburg. In this correspondence, Oldenburg insists that men are excusable if their sins follow from a necessity of nature, and Spinoza disagrees. Leibniz comments on this disagreement. He notes:

He who does not deserve punishment is excusable. But even those who are weak of mind can deserve punishment; in general, so can those in whose power it is not to do evil, if only they willed it. But whether it was in their power to will is irrelevant to the matter. The discovery of a criminal will suffices for punishment.²⁰

(A 6.3.368)

A straightforward reading of this text is in tension with the main proposal in this paper. One problem is the appeal to a "criminal will". I have presented Leibniz as an intellectualist whose conception of the nature of the will makes it impossible for an agent to will evil as such or for its own sake, yet allusion to a "criminal will" seems to be precisely an allusion to an agent willing something evil as such or for its own sake. Another problem is that Leibniz here claims that culpability requires that the agent have the power to not do evil, if so she willed, but that culpability does not require the agent to have the power to will to do so. But, in this paper I have understood the former kind of power partly in terms of the latter.

What are we to make of this passage then? Here are a couple of thoughts. First, Leibniz sometimes uses the term 'will' to mean something like "strongest inclination" (G 6:131/T 51) and sometimes to mean something like "rational inclination" (G 6:128/T 45; G 6:301/T 311; G 6:309/T 325). It is only the latter that is 'the will' properly speaking. My suggestion is that in this passage, a 'criminal will' just means a person whose strongest inclinations are towards wrongful or sinful behaviour; thus, Leibniz's intellectualism is safeguarded. Second, perhaps it is not too much of a stretch to read the penultimate and antepenultimate sentences in a way that is compatible

¹⁹ I wish to thank an anonymous referee for bringing this text to my attention.

²⁰ This translation is partly based on a translation by an anonymous referee.

with the account advanced here. This may be done by introducing into the text the distinction between direct and indirect powers to do otherwise. Perhaps in the penultimate sentence, Leibniz is only denying direct powers to will otherwise, or to rise above the impressions, as conditions for culpability, and he is affirming, in the antepenultimate sentences, at least an indirect power to will otherwise as a condition for culpability. It does not strike me as a misreading of the text to read these two sentences in this fashion. But this reading may not be as convincing. Perhaps the best response to this text is that it comes from 1676, prior to Leibniz's mature period, and thus prior to the period in which I think my account is operative in Leibniz's thought.

4. PSR, causal determinism, and direct powers

The Leibnizian account of indirect responsibility sketched so far is importantly coloured by Leibniz's commitment to a strong version of the principle of sufficient reason (PSR). I wish briefly to bring out some of this colouring. One of Leibniz's commitments, closely related to the PSR, is what I call 'a priori explanations'. As I use the term, a priori explanations are the kinds of explanations that causes provide, of the effects that they cause, which explain why those effects exist in the way that they do rather than otherwise. As Leibniz sees it, these a priori explanations form chains of explanations spanning the entire history of the universe (G 6:604/PNG 13/AG 211; G 6:610/M 22).

The details of this kind of causal determinism need not detain us here; what matters for our purposes is that these chains of a priori explanations ensure that prior to the moment of choice it is already *causally determined* which direct power will be utilized and which direct powers will remain unexercised during the moment of choice. Thus, the sense in which it is possible for an agent to do otherwise, and thus rise above the impressions, is *not* one that rises above causal determinism, for Leibniz.²¹ Arguably, Leibniz's commitment to a strong PSR and causal determinism diminishes the plausibility of the answer to the intelligible and responsible wrongdoing problem presented here.

Leibniz himself seems to think that his version of causal determinism does not undermine freedom because it is not efficient causes but final causes that determine free actions:

Souls act according to the laws of final causes by appetitions, ends and means.
Bodies act according to the laws of efficient causes or of motions. And the two

²¹It is observations like this one, I take it, that lead Seidler ("Moral Therapy") to insist that there is a fundamental tension in Leibniz's account of freedom. On the one hand, Leibniz's metaphysical doctrines imply a robust type of causal determinism; but, on the other hand, Leibniz's insistence on agents' indirectly control over their future passions, volitions, habits, and actions seems to require a more robust account of direct powers.

realms, that of efficient causes and that of final causes, are harmonious with each other.

(M 79)

What threatens freedom, claims Leibniz, is a causal necessity that is “blind” (T 168; 173). Blind necessity is “any value-free mechanism determining choice”, as Adams aptly puts it (“Moral Necessity”, 184). However, for Leibniz it is not a blind necessity but a “necessity which is moral, by which a wise being chooses the best” (LC 5.4).

Leibniz’s account of *moral necessity* is controversial,²² and I lack space to enter this debate in any detail. Instead, I would like to briefly sketch how my account of agential contingency helps illuminate one important way in which Leibniz’s account of moral necessity connects with his account of causal determinism and the kinds of powers to do otherwise required for freedom. As I see it, for Leibniz, an agent freely performed an action A only if in the deliberation in which she judged A to be best, she had the power to perform a different action B had she concluded that B was best, and it was metaphysically possible for her to conclude that B was best.²³ One implication of this account is that an action is agentially contingent for an agent S only if it is *metaphysically possible* for at least one of the considered-but-not-taken options to be *morally necessary* for S. These kinds of agential powers to do otherwise are required for Leibniz’s account of freedom and are not undermined by his account of causal determinism precisely because it is the rational faculties of the agent, and their teleological nature, that drive and explain the causal determination operating on free actions. How satisfactory this sketch should be to philosophers who more generally worry that causal determinism undermines freedom is not a question I will attempt to answer here.

5. Conclusion

As the intellectualist sees it, the will is best understood as a rational inclination towards the apprehended goodness of the object of choice, and hence not the kind of thing that can act contrary to the judgements of the intellect. This renders acts of will *intelligible*. From this it follows that it is impossible for an agent to *will* something evil *as such* or for its own sake. So, the intellectualist explains cases of wrongdoing by citing cognitive error or disruptive influence of the passions on the agent’s deliberation or action – both of

²²Sleigh (“Moral Necessity”) argues that for Leibniz moral necessity is the kind of teleological causal necessity that governs monadic activity. Adams (“Moral Necessity”) argues that for Leibniz moral necessity introduces value as itself explanatorily relevant (Adams makes similar remarks in *Leibniz*, 20f). Jorati (*Causation and Contingency*, 122f) echoes Adams’ observations. By contrast, Murray (“Leibniz and His Precursors” and “Moral Necessity”) argues that, for Leibniz, moral necessity is to be understood as a kind of modality that is itself weaker than causal necessity.

²³See my (“Leibniz on Agential Contingency” and “Agential Contingency and Explanation”) for more details.

these considerations, however, seem involuntary and at least partly exculpatory. The challenge for the intellectualist is to provide an account that renders acts of will intelligible without undermining their status as responsible.

In this paper, I have argued that Leibniz has the theoretical tools to provide at least part of an answer to this challenge. A central theoretical tool is the postulation of indirect powers over future actions that partly grounds the agent's responsibility of those future actions.

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