Gottfried Leibniz [on Free Will][1]

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Leibniz was obsessed with freedom. He turns to this topic again and again throughout his long career. And what he has to say about freedom is much more resourceful and inventive than typically acknowledged. While building on medieval theories—for instance by describing freedom in terms of the relation between the agent's will and intellect—he also adds radically new elements and even anticipates some views that are popular today.

The combination of theses about free will that Leibniz endorses in his mature writings is unusual and may at first appear inconsistent: (a) he claims that some of our actions are free, (b) he links free agency closely to agent causation and in fact appears to deny that there is event causation; (c) he accepts a form of determinism. In other words, Leibniz endorses what we can describe as an agent-causal compatibilist theory of freedom. The three theses may seem to be in tension not only because proponents of agent causation views are typically incompatibilists, but also because determinism is often defined in a way that presupposes event causation. As we will see soon, however, the tension is merely apparent. Leibniz's version of agent-causal compatibilism is perfectly coherent and has some unique advantages over rival accounts.

Three Conditions for Freedom

In order to be free, Leibniz sometimes tells us, an agent must meet three necessary and jointly sufficient conditions:

> freedom … consists in *intelligence*, which includes a distinct knowledge of the object of deliberation, in *spontaneity*, by which we determine ourselves, and in *contingency*, that is, in the exclusion of logical or metaphysical necessity. … The free substance determines itself by itself, following the motive of the good recognized by the understanding, which inclines it without necessitating it; and all the conditions of freedom are contained in these few words. (T §288; cf. CD §20; SLT 94)[i]

[1] Published in *The Routledge Companion to Free Will*, eds. Kevin Timpe, Meghan Griffith and Neil Levy. New York: Routledge, 2017.

Intelligence, spontaneity, and contingency, according to this passage, are the three components of Leibniz's account of freedom. The passage even explains what, roughly, these three terms are supposed to mean: in order to act freely, an agent must deliberate and know the object of this deliberation—which, apparently, must have something to do with goodness. Further, she must determine herself by herself, and she must not be necessitated logically or metaphysically. From this short passage, in fact, we learn quite a lot about Leibniz's views on freedom. We learn that only deliberate—in the sense of deliberation-based—actions are free, that freedom requires some kind of self-determination, that free actions aim at something that the agent takes to be good, and that freedom is compatible with inclination but not with logical or metaphysical necessitation. The passage also raises a number of questions, though. What, for instance, is the difference between inclining and necessitating? And what kind of self-determination does Leibniz have in mind?

Spontaneity and Agent Causation

Let us first take a closer look at Leibniz's account of spontaneity or self-determination. What does it mean for an action to be spontaneous, or for an agent to determine herself by herself? It does not mean—even though the term may suggest it—that the action is capricious, uncaused, or undetermined. Leibniz reminds us repeatedly that he views the inner workings of minds as perfectly deterministic. A sufficiently intelligent being who knows everything about your mind's current states can deduce all of its future states, including the free ones (see WF 25; AG 211). That is because for Leibniz, each mind has a nature that prescribes all of its states, or, as Leibniz sometimes puts it, each mind is governed by a deterministic law that dictates all of the states it will ever have (WF 49; WF 206). This is in fact connected to Leibniz's acceptance of the principle of sufficient reason: for anything that happens, there must be a reason explaining why it, rather than anything else, happens. I will return to Leibniz's determinism below when I discuss the contingency condition.

What it means to say that an action is spontaneous or that an agent determines herself by herself, Leibniz sometimes tells us, is that the action is not caused by anything or anybody external to the agent, or conversely, that the principle of action is internal to the agent. (I am bracketing divine concurrence here; for a detailed discussion, see von Bodelschwingh 2011). In the *Theodicy*, for instance, Leibniz explains that spontaneity "belongs to us in so far as we

have the source of our actions within us" (T §290; cf. SLT 97). This does not mean, however, that we cannot be influenced by our perceptions of external things, as Leibniz sometimes stresses: "when we speak of … spontaneity, of the inward principle of our actions, we do not exclude the representation of external things; for these representations are in our souls" (H 421). Leibniz seems to be saying that when you decide to take a sip of the coffee in front of you, for instance, your perception of the coffee plays a role in your choice without undermining your spontaneity.

Why does that type of influence not take away our spontaneity? You might suspect that it is because this influence goes "through us" in the right way. The coffee, one might be tempted to think, does not directly cause your action, but merely causes a mental state in you which in turn causes your action. Yet, this proposal is mistaken in two ways. First, I do not think that mental states can efficiently cause anything for Leibniz; only agents or substances can be efficient causes. I return to this below. Second, Leibniz holds—strangely enough—that strictly speaking no mental state or perception is caused by external things such as mugs of coffee. Indeed, he denies that created things interact causally. Your perceptions of the coffee, then, are not caused by the coffee. Rather, you perceive the coffee solely because of your nature and your prior states. Even if your soul were the only substance that God created, you would have a coffee perception. The same applies if you subsequently burn your tongue when drinking the coffee: your pain is not caused by the coffee, but by you. In fact, this is true for any changes in your mental states.

Luckily, God has arranged things in such a way in the actual world that there is a perfect correspondence between your perceptions and external things. This correspondence, however, is pre-established by God; your perceptions correspond to external things without being caused by them (see L 593). That means that human minds are spontaneous in a very strong sense for Leibniz: external things are not even partial or indirect causes of any of our mental states. The principles of our actions are entirely within us. This in fact is one major advantage of Leibniz's version of compatibilism. While almost all other versions are committed to saying that free actions are ultimately determined by external things, or by events that occurred before the agent was born, Leibniz can deny this. Your actions are determined only by you (at least if we bracket God's role; more on this below).

As if denying the interaction between our minds and external objects weren't already radical enough, Leibniz applies the same reasoning to the relation between our minds and

our bodies. Your hand's motion toward the coffee mug is not caused by your decision or by your mind, strictly speaking. Your mind is unable to interact causally with your hand, and the correspondence between what you decide to do and what your body does is again merely due to divine pre-established harmony (see AG 319; L 587; WF 199). Consequently, the only things that we can cause, or the only actions we can perform, are our own mental states. The result of your decision to reach for the coffee is, in a way, merely your perception of your hand's movement toward the mug. This change in your perceptions is what your action consists in. (If this strikes you as insane, you're not alone. But bear with Leibniz a bit longer: the theory of freedom he builds from these elements really is quite ingenious.)

Leibniz claims that he can preserve the traditional way of talking about things interacting with each other, which somewhat cushions the punch of his metaphysics. Here's how: he introduces a less strict and, as he sometimes puts it, "ideal" sense in which what happens in one creature can explain what happens in another. Imagine you sustain a nasty mosquito bite. Leibniz would say that the pesky insect explains your discomfort in the following sense: God created your soul—a substance that as he foresaw would at a particular time perceive pain—in part because he wanted to create the mosquito (see AG 279). After all, God does not desire imperfections or evils such as your pain for their own sake, but permits them only insofar as they are required for the overall perfection or harmony of the world. Imperfections, in this sense, are in need of a special explanation. For this reason, Leibniz sometimes says that an imperfection in one substance is explained by a corresponding perfection in another substance, and that the latter substance ideally influences the former in this respect (M §51; T §66). Since a perfection in the mosquito corresponds to the imperfection in you, we can say that this annoying insect is influencing you ideally, even though it is not causing your pain strictly speaking. This Leibnizian move allows us to view ourselves, in accordance with common sense, as sometimes acting on other things and sometimes being acted upon: the mosquito acts on you when it bites you, and you act on it when you subsequently kill it.

Because Leibniz denies that created substances interact causally, he takes there to be spontaneity all over the place: the pain you feel when sipping the piping hot coffee is as spontaneous as your deliberate act of picking up the mug. None of your mental states are caused by anything external to you; the principles of all of these states are within you. How exactly does that work? On my view, the best way of understanding this ubiquitous

spontaneity is as ubiquitous agent causation. This means that all genuine efficient causes, for Leibniz, are agents or substances; events, facts, or states of substances cannot cause anything. Even though some interpreters disagree with me here, Leibniz says so explicitly in a few texts, most clearly perhaps in 'On Nature Itself': "everything that acts is an individual substance" (§9, AG 160; cf. Bobro and Clatterbaugh 1996). Strictly speaking, then, your perceptions or inclinations do not efficiently cause your actions; rather, you agent-cause these actions because you are inclined or motivated in a certain way. This motivating or inclining, in turn, is not an instance of efficient causation (see LC5 §15 and H 428); the influence of reasons and motivations is probably best understood in terms of final causation (we need not worry about the details of that here). All efficient causation, on this picture, is therefore agent or substance causation. This means that the causal chains that an agent originates are not really chains at all—they consist of only one link, since the states that a substance causes do not in turn cause anything else.

The fact that spontaneity and agent causation are ubiquitous may suggest that these two notions cannot help us understand what makes free agency special. Yet, that would be too rash. As already seen, Leibniz is happy to say that in some sense, external things can influence us, even though strictly speaking, they never act on us. This talk of ideal influence captures something real and significant, namely the correspondence between perfections and imperfections. To the extent that external things ideally influence you, you are imperfect, and to the extent that you ideally influence them, you are perfect. If we take this kind of influence seriously, we can distinguish different degrees of spontaneity: the less you are ideally influenced by external things, the more spontaneous you are. Hence, in addition to the ubiquitous type of spontaneity that is present in all actions to the same extent, Leibniz can acknowledge another type that comes in degrees. These degrees correspond to the degree to which we are free from ideal external influence. Let us call the latter type 'agent spontaneity' (see Rutherford 2005; Jorati, Forthcoming).

Plausibly, agent spontaneity is more relevant to freedom than the ubiquitous kind of spontaneity. After all, unless Leibniz wants to change the notion of freedom very radically, cases like the burning sensation on your tongue are not at all promising candidates for free actions because they are not things that you *do*, in any relevant sense. At a minimum, it seems, free actions must be cases in which we can describe the agent as acting, rather than as

being acted upon. Leibniz's claim that free actions must be spontaneous can therefore be informative after all, if we understand him as referring to agent spontaneity.

We can get even more specific about the spontaneity of free actions. Suppose you attend a lecture and the speaker says something that you know to be false. You deliberate about what you should do, conclude that it's best to point out the mistake, and immediately do so. This, according to Leibniz's definition, is a clear example of a free action. In what way is this action spontaneous? Well, like all actions, it is of course spontaneous in the sense that strictly speaking, nothing outside of you causes it. Moreover, it is agent-spontaneous to a very high degree: you are not ideally influenced by external things (except in negligible ways, perhaps).

There is, however, yet another way to think about the degree of spontaneity that your action possesses. As mentioned, all of an agent's states are dictated by her nature. What is important for free actions, according to Leibniz, is that they are dictated by the rational part of the agent's nature, that is, that the agent's rational faculties—will and intellect—play a central role. If an action is exclusively the outcome of non-rational inclinations such as passions and instincts, it is not free. Likewise, to the extent that such non-rational factors play a role in free actions, the action is less free. Interestingly, Leibniz treats non-rational inclinations as external to the free agent in important ways: some represent the ideal influence of the agent's body and are thus external to her soul, and others he describes as external to the rational faculties of the agent, and hence as external to the rational self (SLT 94; 98; T §228). Suppose, for instance, that in our example part of your motivation for pointing out the speaker's mistake is that you subconsciously desire to get back at her for being rude to you earlier. Since you are unaware of this desire, and since it was not something you consciously considered during your deliberation, Leibniz would view it as a non-rational inclination and as external in the above sense. To the extent that this desire motivates you to criticize the speaker, then, your action is less free.

I find it helpful to describe this as a third and even more demanding type of spontaneity that I call 'rational spontaneity': the most spontaneous actions in this sense are the actions that are coming entirely from the rational faculties of the agent; non-rational factors are not playing any role whatsoever. For Leibniz, only God's actions are perfectly spontaneous in this sense because creatures are always influenced by non-rational factors (see T §288).

Created agents can only possess rational spontaneity to lower degrees, and the more rationally spontaneous their actions are, the freer they are.

Based on the distinction between rational actions and actions that are dictated by non-rational factors such as passions, Leibniz even provides a compatibilist account of what it means to have control over one's actions. This account in some ways anticipates Fischer and Ravizza's (1998). To the extent that we determine our actions based on a conscious weighing of reasons, Leibniz proposes, we are in control. To the extent that passions dictate our actions, on the other hand, we are at the mercy of quasi-external forces of which we are not fully aware and whose influence we do not consciously endorse. Leibniz sometimes calls the latter "bondage" and the former the "mastery" or "dominion" of reason (T §§64; 228; 326; NE 196).

Intelligence

To the extent that an action is free, then, it exhibits rational spontaneity. This is closely connected to one of the other two necessary conditions for freedom that Leibniz mentions: intelligence. In order to act freely, an agent must deliberate, distinctly perceive the object of her deliberation, and recognize "the motive of the good," as Leibniz says in the passage with which I started (i.e., T §288). The relevant kind of deliberation, this passage suggests, is deliberation about what is best to do. Before acting freely, the agent needs to consider at least two options and compare them, trying to figure out which one is best. If the agent has only one option, Leibniz claims, she is not free (see A 1.17.611). A free action, then, is an action that an agent performs because she has judged it, after comparing it to at least one other option, to be best.

One thing that is important to note about this understanding of freedom is that it is a clear departure from certain medieval views on the relationship between intellect and will, such as Molinist ones. For Molinists, free agents do not always choose the option that their intellects judge to be best. As long as an option is viewed as good in some respect, on such views, the agent can choose it freely. For instance, you can freely choose to buy a certain type of coffee without judging it to be better than the other options you considered; in fact, you can choose it freely even though you judge a different type to be better overall. Leibniz, on the other hand, thinks that the only way for us to perform an action that we do not judge

to be best is unfreely, for instance when a strong contrary passion overbalances our rational desires. And if you can't decide which option is best, you cannot freely choose any of them. Accordingly, the will, for Leibniz, is merely the inclination to act in accordance with the intellect's judgments; it is not a radically independent faculty (see Greenberg 2005).

Contingency and Determinism

Having examined Leibniz's views on spontaneity and intelligence, let us turn to the third necessary condition for freedom that Leibniz lists in *Theodicy* §288: contingency. In what sense are free actions contingent, for Leibniz? In the continuation of the passage from *Theodicy* §288, Leibniz says, "infallible determination … destroys neither freedom nor contingency." Whatever it means to say that free actions are contingent, then, it is clear that freedom and the relevant kind of contingency are compatible with infallible determination. There are many other passages in Leibniz's writings that show that he takes determinism to be compatible with freedom. For instance he says, "Predetermination or the predisposition by causes … is very far from introducing the kind of necessity which, as we have said, is contrary to contingency, freedom, or morality" (CD §106). Being predetermined to perform a certain action, accordingly, is compatible with performing this action freely and contingently, and it is compatible with being morally responsible for the action (cf. H 420).

An infallibly determined action, then, can be free and contingent. We have already seen, however, that freedom is incompatible with logical or metaphysical necessitation. What is the difference between infallible determination and these freedom-undermining kinds of necessitation? Without going into the gritty details, I think it is the same difference as the one between inclining and necessitating that Leibniz mentions earlier in *Theodicy* §288. That becomes particularly clear in a different text, in which Leibniz tells us more about the ways in which our free actions are predetermined:

> every cause in the world has been determined to produce such-and-such an effect under such-and-such circumstances, and even we are determined to take the side toward which the balance of the deliberation in which enter true or false reasons, as well as the passions, makes us lean the most. … Thus although these determinations do not strictly speaking *necessitate,* they do not fail to *incline,* and we always follow the

> side where there is the greatest inclination or disposition. (SLT 96; translation altered)

This passage states not only that all causation in the world is deterministic, but also that our minds are determined by inclinations, analogously to the way in which a balance is determined by weights. When we are thinking about what to do, our passions and the reasons we consider are our inclinations to perform one of the available courses of action. What we end up doing, according to this passage, is determined by the "weight" of these inclinations: we always do what, given all the passions and reasons, we are most inclined to do. Saying that we are only inclined but not necessitated to act in certain ways, then, most plausibly means that we are determined by reasons and passions, rather than in some other way (cf. WF 180f; NE 178; 182; 196; H 406f.). Note a crucial disanalogy between weights in a balance and inclinations in a mind, however: weights are efficient causes while inclinations or reasons most plausibly are not. Leibniz views reasons and inclinations, I think, simply as the agent's tendencies to act in certain ways; they are not entities that act on the agent or efficiently cause an action.

But, you may ask, how can Leibniz possibly be a determinist and a compatibilist, given his commitment to agent causation? Agent-causal theories of freedom, after all, are typically incompatibilist, that is, they are usually theories according to which freedom requires indeterminism. It is easy to see why: if some actions are agent-caused and do not have event causes, determinism as it is often understood must be false. After all, a common way to define determinism is in terms of event causation: every event is caused and physically necessitated by prior events (e.g. Markosian 1999: 258; 262). According to this kind of definition, determinism is not compatible with the view that some actions have only agent causes. It is for this very reason, it seems, that some scholars argue that Thomas Aquinas could not have been a compatibilist (e.g. Stump 2003: 286; 304f.). Agent-caused actions are not parts of deterministic causal chains that start outside the agent or in the distant past, and determinism is often understood in terms of such causal chains. In fact, those who find agent-causal theories of freedom attractive usually do so precisely because these theories allow us to break free from the chains of causal determinism. Ned Markosian, one of the very few contemporary proponents of agent-causal compatibilism, reconciles compatibilism with agent causation only by arguing that free actions have both agent causes and event

causes (1999: 269f.). How, then, can it be true that Leibniz is a determinist but denies that there is any event causation?

The answer, I think, is that characterizations of determinism in terms of event causation or causal chains are overly narrow. Definitions of determinism should be neutral with respect to kinds of causation because agent-causal theories can be just as deterministic as event-causal theories. Leibniz's views are a case in point: God, according to Leibniz, created substances that will infallibly, in accordance with their natures, produce a particular series of states, and these states are all that ever happens naturally. The way God set up the world in the beginning, then, fixes everything natural that is going to happen in the world thereafter. It takes a miracle—literally!—to prevent any of these events from occurring. If that is not determinism, I don't know what is. Definitions of determinism, then, should not settle the question whether there is event causation. And some characterizations, in fact, are neutral in precisely this way. Carl Hoefer, for instance, suggests the following definition: "The world is governed by … determinism if and only if, given a specified way things are at a time t, the way things go thereafter is fixed as a matter of natural law" (2010; italics omitted. See also van Inwagen 2008: 330). Even Markosian, after considering several event-causal characterizations, formulates what he calls "the strongest definition of Determinism" as follows: "There is at any instant just one physically possible future" (1999: 264). On such definitions, Leibniz is a determinist about the natural world and, since he thinks that some actions are free, a compatibilist.

Accepting determinism, then, does not commit us to accepting event-causal determinism. Nor, in fact, does it commit us to accepting what one might call external determinism. As seen, Leibniz holds that our actions are determined only by us, that is, by our natural tendencies. Nothing outside of us ever determines our actions, not even indirectly. My actions are not parts of causal chains going back in time to the beginning of the world, nor do my actions have any external agent causes (again, bracketing God's concurrence). Likewise, my natural inclinations, which determine my actions, are not in turn determined or caused by any outside thing or person.

Saying that the natures or natural inclinations of created substances are not caused by anything external may sound crazy. If the way God set things up when he created the world determines everything that is going to happen in the natural course of events, but you weren't around at the beginning of the world, wouldn't your nature have to be the product

of some other substances that existed before you? Perhaps your parents? And if that is the case, are your actions not indirectly determined by something external to you after all? The way Leibniz gets around this problem again involves a radical move: he insists that in a way, you *were* around at the very beginning of the world, and so was every other substance that ever existed or will ever exist. God produced all of his creatures simultaneously, in the very beginning. (God could of course add new substances to the world whenever he pleases, but Leibniz thinks that would be too much direct divine intervention). God initially created you, however, not as a rational mind with a human body, but rather as a very imperfect substance without consciousness or memory and with a microscopically small body. It is only when your parents conceived you that you started developing into a full human being. This is in fact connected to Leibniz's denial of causal interaction: your parents couldn't have literally produced you because created substances cannot interact. God is the only agent capable of causing changes in other things, and of creating new substances. Your parents, then, did not produce you, strictly speaking; God did. Your parents in fact had no genuine influence on you at all!

As a result, no other creature determines or influences your actions, not even indirectly. Nor do you owe your existence and your nature to any other created substances. This leads naturally to another question, though: don't you owe your existence and nature to God, according to Leibniz? And doesn't this entail that God determines your actions, similarly to the way in which an engineer determines the movements of a machine she invents? Here again, Leibniz has an answer: God didn't really invent you. He merely discovered your essence in his intellect, and he chose to actualize you because you are a member of the best of all possible worlds (see LC5 §6). The situation is therefore not analogous to an engineer who designs and then constructs a certain machine, but rather to an engineer who finds a blueprint and builds the machine that the blueprint describes. Like this second engineer, God didn't strictly speaking give you any characteristics. Instead, all of the characteristics that you have were already included in the essence that God discovered in his intellect. Could God have created a person similar to you who never burns her tongue? Maybe, but according to Leibniz, this person would not be you. This allows him to deny that God in some sense made you burn your tongue, or that he manipulated you into acting in the way that you acted (see WF 188). You can't reasonably complain that God made you drink scalding hot coffee, Leibniz would say; that's all on you. At most, you could complain about

God's creating you at all—a person who, as God fully well knew, would inevitably drink hot coffee and burn her tongue (see AG 61). The engineer who merely finds the blueprint, after all, can't be held responsible for particular features of the design; she can merely be held responsible for her decision to build that machine.

Conclusion

Leibniz, like many other philosophers, takes free will to be compatible with determinism, but his version of compatibilism is unique and intriguing. To be free, Leibniz claims, an action must first of all be spontaneous, that is, the principle of the action must be in the agent. This spontaneity, I have argued, is a deterministic form of agent causation: actions are caused by agents, rather than by events internal or external to the agent, and they are agent-caused in a way that is dictated by the agent's nature. While all actions are agent-caused and immune from external influence, free actions are special in that they result from the agent's rational assessment of the merits of at least two available courses of action. Freedom, then, requires both spontaneity and intelligence. It also requires contingency, which for Leibniz appears to mean that free actions are determined only by the agent's inclinations or motives. The payoffs of Leibniz's idiosyncratic metaphysics are immense: he can maintain, without introducing indeterminacy into his system, that nothing outside of the agent determines her free actions.[ii]

List of Related Topics

Agent-causal libertarianism, Determinism, Classical compatibilism, Thomas Aquinas, Thomas Reid

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Further Readings

J. Davidson, "Leibniz on Free Will," in B. Look (ed.), *The Continuum Companion to Leibniz*, (London: Continuum, 2011, pp. 208–222) provides an accessible overview of Leibniz's views on freedom and their relation to his contemporaries and predecessors. N. Jolley, *Leibniz* (New York: Routledge, 2005) is a general introduction to Leibniz's system with a helpful chapter on free will. M.J. Murray, "Spontaneity and Freedom in Leibniz," in D. Rutherford and J. Cover (eds.), *Leibniz: Nature and Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 194–216) contextualizes Leibniz's references to spontaneity as well as Leibniz's theory of free will more generally.

[i] All translations are mine unless an English edition is cited. I am using the following abbreviations to refer to Leibniz's works: **A** = *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, ed. by Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften, Akademie Verlag, 1923–, cited by series, volume, page; **AG** = *Philosophical Essays,* transl. by R. Ariew and D. Garber, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989; **CD** = *Causa Dei*, cited by section number as in G 6:439–462; **G** = *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, ed. by C. I. Gerhardt, Berlin: Weidmann, 1875–90, cited by volume and page; **H** = *Theodicy*, transl. by E. M. Huggard, La Salle: Open Court, 1985; **L** = *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, ed. and transl. by L. Loemker, Dordrecht: Reidel, 1969. **LC5** =

"Fifth Letter to Clarke," in *Correspondence* [*between Leibniz and Clarke*], ed. by R. Ariew, Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000, original text in G 7:352–440; **M** = *Monadology*, cited by section as in G 6:607–623; **NE** = *New Essays on Human Understanding,* transl. by P. Remnant and J. Bennett, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996, original text in A.6.6; **SLT** = *The Shorter Leibniz Texts*, transl. by L. Strickland, New York: Continuum, 2006. **T** = *Theodicy*, cited by section number as in G 6:102–365; **WF** = *Leibniz's 'New System' and Associated Texts*, transl. by R. S. Woolhouse and R. Francks, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

[ii] I thank Derk Pereboom, Kevin Timpe, Stephen Puryear, Qu Hsueh Ming, Joseph Anderson, Juan Garcia, and Issei Takehara for comments on earlier drafts.