

**Research Note**

# Leibniz's Concept of Freedom

Shohei Edamura

**Introduction**

In this research note, I will show the components of freedom in Leibniz, and problems concerning his definition of freedom. Leibniz's view is very interesting in that he commits determinism and still holds that we can be free and freedom is a requirement of moral responsibility.

**1. Determinism and Responsibility**

First, we see Leibniz holds a version of determinism, and still claims that one is morally responsible for her actions. The following passages are important in relation to his determinism:

But let us pass to the difficulties. Philosophers agree today that the truth of contingent futurities is determinate, that is to say that contingent futurities are future, or that they will be, that they will happen: for it is as sure that the future will be, as it is sure that the past has been. It was true already a hundred years ago that I should write today, as it will be true after a hundred years that I have written. Thus the contingent is not, because it is future, any the less contingent; and determination, which would be called certainty if it were known, is not incompatible with contingency. (H 147 = T 36)

There I pointed out that by nature every simple substance has perception, and that its individuality consists in the perpetual law which brings about the sequence of perceptions that are assigned to it, springing naturally from one another, to represent the body that is allotted to it... (H 307 = T 291)

In Section 36, against Aristotle, Leibniz argues that even the truth values of statements about future are settled. Thus it was true that Leibniz was going to write something even in 1600 or 1500. In Section 291, Leibniz suggests that all simple substances have their own "perpetual laws," and so all of our actions are produced in accordance with the laws of our substances. Here some may be tempted to suppose that these laws may not fully determine our actions, given that Leibniz says we are inclined to do something, but not necessitated. But it should be noted that in other texts, like in a letter to De Volder, Leibniz explicitly suggests that all actions are fully determined by the law of a substance. Thus it is natural to interpret Leibniz as a determinist. We briefly take note of a notable commentator who claims that Leibniz is not a determinist. Michel Murray states that "[w]hat makes the free action

genuinely the creature's own, is the fact that it has an active will, which is not psychologically determined, and which is not necessitated by divine action on creatures" (Murray 2005, p. 213). His interpretation mainly depends upon the following passage:

Because it is an impossible condition that a creature operates without divine concurrence, it is impossible that God foresee what the creature, per se, would do by the power of free will alone. So God can only foresee that to which the creature is inclined. And so the matter is reduced to the doctrine of inclination but not necessitation. (Grua 387-8)

However, it is possible that Leibniz was only talking about the distinction between hypothetical and metaphysical necessities, given that in the *Theodicy* Leibniz contrasts inclination and necessitation on the one hand, and hypothetical and metaphysical necessities, the other. Even if God cannot tell what a creature is going to do by her power of freewill alone, when God considers her inclinations in the level of small perceptions, He might tell her future behaviors. For this reason, I do not agree to Murray's interpretation. In terms of responsibility, the following is suggestive:

The Socinians, Hobbes and some others do not admit this punitive justice, which properly speaking is avenging justice. God reserves it for himself in many cases; but he does not fail to grant it to those who are entitled to govern others, and he exercises it through their agency, provided that they act under the influence of reason and not of passion. The Socinians believe it to be without foundation, but it always has some foundation in that fitness of things which gives satisfaction not only to the injured but also to the wise who see it... (H 165 = T 73)

Leibniz clearly admits that the punitive justice is necessary, and seems to presuppose that criminals are morally responsible for their actions, and obligated to compensate for them. Just like Kant, Leibniz does not suppose that punishments are merely means to improve criminals' minds, or preserve the security of the whole society. In a sense, they have intrinsic values as realization of justice.

In brief, Leibniz commits a version of determinism, and still, unlike Hobbes and Spinoza, emphasizes the significance of punitive justice and moral responsibility in accordance with laws. Maybe Hobbes and Spinoza are forerunners of Leibniz in a sense, since both of them hold that we are necessitated to do something and still can be free. But Leibniz somehow goes further, when he argues that freedom is a basis of moral and legal responsibility.

## 2. When Are We Free?

Then what are the components of freedom for Leibniz? It is important to see the necessary and sufficient conditions for being free:

I have shown that freedom, according to the definition required in the schools of theology, 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. (H 306 = T 288)

Now we have seen three components of freedom: intelligence, spontaneity and contingency. First, it is clear that human beings are conscious of their actions (purposes, circumstances, etc.). This consciousness presupposes the intelligence of agent. For Leibniz, only intellectual or rational creatures can reflect themselves, and have consciousness. Second, for Leibniz, any substance produces its actions through itself, and any action must be spontaneous. According to the system of pre-established harmony, created substances do not interact. So, not only wills and thoughts, but sense perceptions come from our minds, since metaphysically speaking, unextended simple substances cannot receive any actions from physical bodies. Third, for Leibniz, God could have created another world or universe. The number of this kind of possible worlds is infinite. So, the existence of this world and the realization of a crime are contingent in a sense that it could be otherwise. In another possible world, we may not find the crime of Jack the Ripper. Now, one may be tempted to think that a human being always satisfies these conditions, and give the following formulation (A).

(A) One is free when her action is produced by her substance, and the statement that she commits that action is a statement of merely contingent truth, and she has intelligence.

A problem remains. Freedom is supposed to be a basis of responsibility. We are morally responsible only if we are free to choose an action. Not only that, it should be noted that in the context of criminal law, for example, sometimes we are not free. If someone puts a gun on my back and says "Why don't you bring a book from that book store for me?", and I steal one book there, judges will state that I do not freely take it. I was just forced to do so, and did not freely decide to take something from the store. Concerning this problem, Donald Rutherford introduces two different concepts of spontaneity. The first is monadic spontaneity, which can be found in any monad or simple substance. Human minds, animal souls, and even other monads or simple substances which only have unconscious perceptions, are all spontaneous in this sense. The second is agent spontaneity, which has more contents, and whose extension is narrower than the first. Rutherford points out that some of our perceptions are passive. For example, if a dog is suddenly beaten by a stick when he is eating his favorite meat, then he will feel an unexpected pain. He does not will that pain, and he is considered to be passive here. Not only that, Rutherford suggests that we may not active in a proper sense even if we are conscious of our actions. The previous gun case is a typical example. In that case, my action had a strong physical constraint.

Leibniz's considered view, therefore, is that the notion of spontaneity must be understood in two distinct

senses, corresponding to what I have called “monadic spontaneity” and “agent spontaneity.” The doctrine of monadic spontaneity articulates a basic metaphysical truth: any substance is self-determining in the production of all its own states. At the same time, Leibniz allows that, among these states, we can distinguish those in which a substance operates as an agent promoting change in the world, relative to its own perspective and that of other substances (including God), and those in which it operates as the passive recipient of the effects of external causes, relative to its own perspective and that of other substances (including God). (Rutherford 2005, p. 161)

I think his reading has some textual basis, too. Sometimes Leibniz seems to use the term “spontaneity” in a narrower sense.

34. The physical co-operation of God and of creatures with the will contributes also to the difficulties existing in regard to freedom. I am of opinion that our will is exempt not only from constraint but also from necessity. Aristotle has already observed that there are two things in freedom, to wit, spontaneity and choice, and therein lies our mastery over our actions. When we act freely we are not being forced, as would happen if we were pushed on to a precipice and thrown from top to bottom; and we are not prevented from having the mind free when we deliberate, as would happen if we were given a draught to deprive us of discernment. (H 146 = T 34)

Here Leibniz seems to suggest that if we are physically forced to do something, we are not spontaneous. This concept of spontaneity is clearly narrower than the monadic spontaneity. So if I have a strong physical constraint, like in a gun case, then I do not have spontaneity in the second sense. Rutherford states that the agent spontaneity is necessary for freedom. Even for Hobbes and Spinoza, physical constraints are serious problems to undermine one’s freedom. Likewise, in Section 34 Leibniz seems to admit that not to have physical constraints is a necessary condition to be free. Thus we may be able to have the formulation (B).

(B) One is free when her action is contingent, produced by her substance, and she is conscious of her action and does not have any physical constraint to do so.

Rutherford suggestion is nice, since with his framework somehow fits with an ordinary view of jurists. Also, no jurors would say that I am morally responsible for taking books in that kind of situation. But it should be noted that a notable commentator proposes a different view. Jack Davidson seems to take the scope of our freedom narrower. For Davidson, if we are mainly inclined to act by passions, then we are not free. But it is the imitation and not the expression of God makes rational minds free (cf. Davidson 1998, p. 403):

We, on the other hand, always act in accordance with our greatest inclination, which is sometimes dominated by our passions. It is when we rise above our passions and act with reason that we most nearly imitate God. (Davidson 1998, p. 411)

Davidson's interpretation is mainly based upon the following passage from the Couturat Edition:

But free or intelligent substances possess something greater and more marvelous, in a kind of imitation of God. (C 20; Davidson 1998, p. 371)

Though this alone may not be enough to establish his position, Davidson's interpretation is persuasive at least in two respects. First, this kind of idea is closer to Spinoza, and given Leibniz learned a lot from him, this interpretation may look plausible. Second, many people may feel that if someone has outrageously lost his temper and committed a crime, then he is not free at that time. With Davidson's suggestions, we can slightly modify the formulation (B):

(C) One is free when her action is contingent, produced by her substance, and she is conscious of her action, does not have any physical constraint to do so, and is not greatly inclined by her passions.

So far we have seen two notable views. But since it is better to show something original in this presentation, in addition to the point raised by Davidson, I would like to introduce another problem related to Leibniz's concept of freedom.

### **3. The Problem of Indirect Principle**

Suppose that a medical doctor had a patient. That doctor soon noticed that the patient is the boyfriend of his ex-girlfriend. She once told him that she wanted to break up with him since now she found someone else who is more attractive. He felt a lot of jealousy, but he did not know who that guy was. He now knew who he was, while the patient, her new boyfriend still did not know who was her ex-lover. The medical doctor came to hate the patient, and decided to kill him. He called a nurse and said that this injection is necessary for the medicare. But in fact, the injection contains some poison. She brought that injection to the room where the patient is lying in bed. Several hours later, it worked, and the patient died. This is a typical case of indirect principle. In this case, that nurse was used as an instrument to kill the patient. The action of the medical doctor's giving the injection is considered as an action of murder, just like pulling the trigger of a gun or something. The medical doctor committed a principle offense in this case. Since the nurse was not conscious of what was going to happen, it is difficult to blame that nurse. She did not know that the injection was in fact poisonous. It is not appropriate to say that she violated some morality. On the other hand, she was conscious of her injection. Also, she was not forced to do injection. It seems

that according to the formulation (B), she is considered to be free. Also, since she was not terribly mad or something at that time, she is considered as free according to the formulation (C), too. But our intuition tells that even if she may be free with respect to the action of injecting medicine, she is not free with respect to the action of injecting poison. Considering this, we may be able to have the third formulation:

(D) With respect to a certain action, one is free iff she is conscious of the meaning of that action in relation to morality, and spontaneous in that she does not have any physical constraint for doing it.

Since Leibniz is a jurist, he may well notice this problem. But so far I could not find a passage to support the formulation (D). Further research is needed.

Maybe Davidson already pointed out something related to this problem of indirect principle. Davidson states that we cannot be always perfectly free for two reasons. First, our knowledge is limited, so we cannot be conscious of all the aspects of our action. Second, we cannot always control our passions:

First, we lack perfect minds, and so are not perfectly rational. Our lack of perfect rationality is caused by two factors, one structural, the other (for want of a better term) empirical. The structural reason for our cognitive shortcomings is that, unlike God, we have finite minds.... The empirical reason why we lack perfect rationality is that we, unlike God, have passions that disrupt our cognitive processes... (Davidson 1998, p. 404)

Then, Davidson's first point may be able to explain the problem of indirect principle. The nurse was not free since her knowledge was limited, and she did not know the content of the injection.

### Abbreviations

C. = *Opuscules et fragments inédits de Leibniz*. Ed. by Louis Couturat. Paris: Félix Alcan, 1903. Reprint, Hildesheim : Georg Olms, 1966.

Grua. = *Textes inédits*. Ed. by Gaston Grua. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948.

H. = *Theodicy*. Trans. by E.M. Huggard. BiblioBazaar, 2007.

T. = *Theodicée*. Cited by Section.

### Bibliography

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[Kanazawa Seiryō University, Associate Professor]