# Leibniz's Ontological Arguments

## How Existence Prevails over Non-Existence in Leibniz's Metaphysics

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[…]

Dir entsprossen Myriaden Leben,
Als die Strahlen deines Angesichts,
Wendest du dein Angesicht, so beben
Und vergehn sie, und die Welt ist Nichts.

F. Hölderlin

(inspired by Leibniz's *Monadology*)

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# Thesis Abstract


This thesis is a study of Leibniz's ontological arguments for the existence of God and a discussion of their bearing on his metaphysics. I argue that the Leibnizian metaphysical system is fundamentally inclined towards existence, and that the reason for this is to be found in his concept of *God*, or 'the being for whom being possible suffices for being actual'. In the first chapter, I present the development in Leibniz's strategy of argument. Initially, Leibniz argues that God's essence *contains* existence because he is *perfect*; later, after serious methodological doubts, he argues that existence *follows from* God's essence because he is *necessary*. The latter strategy is based on the intuition that essence is a *tendency to exist*. This intuition finds two related expressions, the *exigentia*-doctrine and the Doctrine of Striving Possibles, both of which I discuss in the second chapter. In the third chapter, I examine how Leibniz uses the conviction that all possible things exist unless they are hindered to explain why God's existence is necessary. I argue that the result is a metaphysical system in which existence is fundamentally favoured. In light of this conclusion, I disagree with Brandon C. Look's (2013) associating Leibniz with the belief that nothingness would be a more natural state of affairs.

# Contents

# Introduction

"The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God."
Psalms 14.1

**I. Why ontotheology?**

Whoever understands the *concept* of God, will realise that he must exist; and those who say that God does not exist simply do not understand the concept – so goes the central claim of the ontological arguments for the existence of God. The term 'ontological argument' was coined by Immanuel Kant to describe arguments that "abstract from all experience and infer the existence of a highest cause entirely *a priori* from mere concepts" (Kant 1998:563 = A590/B618). This form of *a priori* transcendental theology, Kant wrote, is called *ontotheology* (ibid., 584 = A632/B660). Although *a priori* arguments for eternal, necessary truths are as old as philosophy itself, ontological arguments for the existence of God can be traced back to the *Proslogion* of St. Anselm of Canterbury, written in 1078 (Oppy 2016). Anselm's argument proceeds by a *reductio ad absurdum*, and is as elegant as it is brief: God is a being than which nothing greater can be conceived. If such a being does *not* exist, then we can conceive of something greater still, namely a greatest conceivable being that *also exists* – but something greater than the greatest conceivable being is impossible. Therefore, the greatest conceivable being cannot *not* exist, i.e. God exists (ibid.). Almost six hundred years later, René Descartes picked up the thread of Anselm's argument in his *Meditations*, and was joined in his redemptive efforts by the rationalist philosophers following him, most notably Baruch de Spinoza and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. As Wolfgang Janke writes in his influential article on Leibniz from 1963, the "theology of reason" [Vernunfttheologie] is deeply Cartesian: it relies on the ability of clear and distinct thought alone to provide a foundation for knowledge (Janke 1963:259-60). In view of this methodology, it is not surprising that the ontological argument is a hallmark of rationalist philosophy.

Ever since its initial formulation, the ontological argument has been relentlessly criticised, most famously by Anselm's contemporary Gaunilo, St. Thomas Aquinas, Pierre Gassendi, David Hume and Immanuel Kant. Common to all criticisms of the argument is the refusal to allow a passage from concept to existence, or from *conceptual* possibility to *real* possibility (Henrich 1960:54). Conceiving of a thing never reveals whether or not

it exists. Kant's influential chapter on the impossibility of an ontological proof of God's existence in the *Critique of Pure Reason* sums up the majority of these objections, and many considered it the final nail in the coffin for ontotheology. As a result, defending the ontological arguments in the wake of Kant did not make one especially fashionable. The impact of Hegel's offered refutation of Kant's critique is hardly comparable, for instance.

It is easy to get wound up in metanarratives of this kind in the history of philosophy. *With Kant*, so the metanarrative goes, *ontological arguments were revealed to be a rationalist illusion. Why should we want to revert to dogmatism? We have entered the modern era now.* And if Kant did prove the futility of rationalist ontotheology, the only justification for studying it is historical. In subscribing to metanarratives of this kind, however, we confuse context of discovery with context of justification. Kant could well have dismantled the ontological argument, but he was neither the first nor the last to do so, which reveals the artificiality of the schism. As I show in chapter 1 of this thesis, Leibniz anticipated much of Kant's critique himself in 1677, as did Gassendi in the 1640s. What is more, the ontological argument stubbornly refused to disappear even after the *Critique of Pure Reason*. For as Graham Oppy writes, paraphrasing Russell: "it is much easier to be persuaded that ontological arguments are no good than it is to say exactly what is wrong with them" (Oppy 2016). As mentioned, the argument found favour in the eyes of Hegel, who even reframed it within his own speculative logic. Friedrich Schelling disagreed with any attribution of existence to God, but like Spinoza, he acknowledged that 'God' in the ontological arguments serves as a placeholder for existence itself (Luckner et al. 2018:57). In 1884, Gottlob Frege presented his own reasons why ontological arguments fail, and in the 20$^{th}$ century, philosophers like Gödel, Hartshorne, Malcolm, and Plantinga demonstrated new ways of redeeming the ontological argument using contemporary modal logic (Oppy 2016). Clearly, the argument is still of *some* interest – but of interest to whom?

One of the more curious things about the ontological argument is that none of its two obvious beneficiaries, religion and philosophy, seem to actually want it. It simply falls between two stools. The first of these stools is religion. A friend who studies to become a priest always scoffed at the ontological argument. *Rational argument is not needed for faith*, she said. *And even if it were, how can we profess to understand God's essence? Whatever you philosophers claim to be selling here*, she said, *we do not want it.* Indeed, the arguments that resonate the most with believers and nonbelievers alike are

the *cosmological* arguments, which build on facts about the world (fine-tuning, the seeming orderliness of the universe, the low probability of intelligent life, the awe-inspiring beauty of nature etc.) and trace them back to a first cause or an intelligent designer. In contrast, most ontological arguments are strikingly unpersuasive. When the analytic philosopher of religion William Lane Craig defends God's existence in packed theatres all over the world, he never once mentions the ontological argument. Why put the whole case at risk with technical and unintuitive word play when you have the edifying and public-friendly cosmological arguments? So if the aim of the ontological argument is to inspire faith, it is safe to say that it fails. One should think, therefore, that *philosophers* would welcome the ontological argument with open arms. Yet most philosophers do not seem to like it either. It has a distinct feel of sophism to it, my classmates tell me. And if Kant is right in dismissing the argument on methodical grounds, how can it be anything but a historical curiosity? Did we not agree sometime in the 18th century to manage without the concept of God? Surely it only muddies the waters of philosophy?

There is one way of making the ontological argument more palatable to philosophers, I believe, and that is to remind them of its existence component. In his *Principles of Nature and Grace* from 1714, Leibniz asks the question that Schelling and Heidegger later immortalised: "Why is there something rather than nothing?" (Leibniz 1969:639). Unless this has become a silly question, it seems that we cannot afford to dismiss a thousand years of attempting to answer it. What is it about existence that made it trump non-existence? What ignited the engine of being? The ontological argument suggests an ignition spark: because of God's *nature* there had to be something – namely God. If God had to exist, something had to exist. In other words, the ontological argument explains existence in terms of (God's) nature, or *essence*. According to Dieter Henrich, understanding existence in terms of essence is the only real alternative to the sceptical or critical doctrine that the concept of existence is an insoluble problem, impenetrable by reason (Henrich 1960:50). And surely, saying that we can never know the nature of existence is more dogmatic than leaving the possibility open?

## II. Why *Leibniz's* ontotheology?

God's essence holds the key not only to his own existence but also to existence in general. This claim sums up much of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's (1646-1716)

ontotheology (and the whole of this thesis). But it was also Spinoza's claim, and that of the Scholastics before him. In a tradition of almost a thousand years, what makes Leibniz's ontological arguments worthy of our attention?

One argument is from the rational reconstruction camp of the history of philosophy: Leibniz's arguments are the first in a modal category that has proven very promising lately. These arguments proceed from a definition of God as a necessary being and attempt to prove that this being is *possible*. In the most generally accepted system of contemporary modal logic (the so-called S5), one is allowed to make the inference that if God *possibly* necessarily exists he exists necessarily.[1] Herein lies the true originality of Leibniz's arguments: Leibniz understood that since possible necessity implies necessity, a proof of divine possibility is sufficient. From this point of view, the arguments' relevance is due to their objective quality.

Another argument for the relevance of Leibniz's ontological arguments is a historical one, which has been the principal motivation behind this thesis: Leibniz's ontotheology has great explanatory power on the rest of his metaphysics. According to Bertrand Russell, "it cannot be denied that certain gaps in [Leibniz's] system were patched up by a reference to the Divine […]" (Russell 1975:172). When the concept of God is seen as a patch-up job on a leaky system, it is no wonder that the ontotheology looks like "the weakest part in Leibniz's philosophy" (ibid.). Many of Leibniz's choices make more sense when we consider his views on God as a starting point instead. The question of what makes God's existence necessary, or exactly how existence belongs to God's essence, reveals that his later ideas of *substantial force* and *striving* are, at least in part, answers to fundamental questions of theological nature. The passage from possibility to actuality that is necessary in the sole case of God is the "*principe des existences*" – the principle of all existing things (GP VI, 402).

### III. The aim and structure of this thesis

I argue that Leibniz's metaphysics is fundamentally tilted towards existence, and that the reasons for this should be sought in his ontotheology. "[Once] it is assumed," Leibniz writes in 1697, "that *being prevails over non-being*, i.e. that *there is a reason why something should exist rather than nothing*, or that *there is to be a transition from possibility to actuality*, it follows that even if nothing further is determined, there exists

[1] I am indebted to Adrian K. Ommundsen for explaining this to me. See also Look 2013.

as much as is possible in accordance with the capacity […] of the order of possible existence" (Leibniz 2006:33, my italics). The existence of all things follows from the necessary existence of God, which is rephrased in three ways here as the prevailing of being over non-being, the answer to why there is something, and the transition from possibility to actuality. All three assumptions would be secured by a valid ontological argument.

Typical of Leibniz's contribution to the ontological argument is his insistence on the *possibility* of God. For if it is *possible* that a necessary being exists, then it is necessary that it exists. This conditional lies at the heart of Leibniz ontotheology, and although his understanding of possibility deepens (with a corresponding change in the ontological arguments), he never ceased to consider divine possibility as the most promising route to divine existence.

In the first chapter, I examine the earliest attempts to prove divine possibility. At first, they are strictly logical: since God possesses the perfection of existence, he necessarily exists. However, as he grows increasingly suspicious of both the concept of existence and perfection, Leibniz starts looking for another strategy of proof and finds that he needs a deeper understanding of the divine *essence*.

This deeper understanding begins with what I call the *exigentia*-doctrine, which is an anticipation of the later *Doctrine of Striving Possibles*. To account for these two doctrines is the aim of my second chapter. Both express the same basic intuition: all possible things – everything that has some essence – strive for existence, and need no help other than the removal of an impediment. I argue that with the help of the Doctrine of Striving Possibles, Leibniz discovers a final way of explaining why God's existence is necessary.

The third chapter has two parts, A and B. In part A, I discuss the ontological argument resulting from the Doctrine of Striving Possibles. I argue that a system in which the *absence of an impediment* entails existence is one that is fundamentally inclined towards existence. Building on this, part B is a discussion of an article by Brandon C. Look from 2013, in which he attributes the intuition that 'nothingness is more natural than something' to Leibniz. I argue that this attribution is at odds with the results of Leibniz's ontotheology, namely the necessary existence of God and the striving of finite essences.

Due to their impressive interconnectedness, it is hard to account for one of Leibniz's doctrines without involving all the others. But since my scope is limited, I have omitted the parts of his philosophy that are less obviously relevant to the ontological arguments and God's existence. Specifically, I try not to enter more deeply into his monadic theory of substance than what is required for my discussion of the Doctrine of Striving Possibles in chapter 2. Other important topics that can only be briefly mentioned or that fall outside of the scope of this thesis are Leibniz's epistemology of perception, his theory of truth, and (since my aim is chiefly to account for what *precedes* the act of creation) Leibniz's idealism or phenomenalism about bodies.

## IV. Three central concepts

### *The Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR)*

Leibniz writes: "The final reason of things is God, and knowledge of God is no less the principle of science than his essence and will are the principles of existing things" (GP III, 54).[2] That knowledge of God should be the 'principle of science' sounds strange to modern ears, but for the rationalists of the 17th and 18th century, belief in God was not only compatible with, but essential to, their scientific motivation. If the world is indeed a *created* world, willed by a rational mind, we are in the happy position of knowing that there are reasons for everything. As a result, the created world becomes an irresistible temptation for the rational, scientific mind.[3]

The conviction of a divine purpose is clearly a motivation behind the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR), which figures in its typical form in §32 of the *Monadology*: "[the principle] by virtue of which we consider that we can find no true or existent fact, no true assertion, without there being a sufficient reason why it is thus and not otherwise" (Leibniz 2009:278). Provided that God is not irrational, the structure of the world is an intelligible one. However, there is also a long tradition for taking the PSR to be derived from Leibniz's more logical doctrines,[4] especially his theory of truth, sometimes called the *predicate-in-notion principle* (PIN) (Look 2013). The PIN states that in a true proposition, the concept of the predicate is contained in the concept of the subject. Thus,

[2] "C'est Dieu qui est la derniere raison des choses, et la connoissance de Dieu n'est pas moins le principe des sciences, que son essence et sa volonté sont les principes des estres."
[3] I find this to be an overlooked argument against the alleged conflict between religious and scientific attitudes. In the case of Leibniz, there certainly did not seem to be a conflict between a truly brilliant intellect and religious conviction (or even zeal).
[4] Couturat and Russell (and to some extent Parkinson 1965) defend this view.

Leibniz writes late in his life, "it is evident […] that all truths – even the most contingent – have an *a priori* proof, or some reason why they are truths rather than not. And this is what is meant when it is commonly said that nothing happens without a cause or that there is nothing without a reason" (Parkinson 1965:65 = GP VII, 303). The PSR demands that there is a reason for everything or, which amounts to the same, that every true proposition is *demonstrable* (if not by us, then at least by an omniscient God). The theory of truth shows why this holds: every truth is demonstrable because of the conceptual containment relation. In other words, the PIN implies the PSR.

Leibniz himself considered his transformation of the general PSR into the more detailed PIN to be "one of his principal contributions to philosophy" (Rutherford 1995:76). But although the PIN clearly strengthened his belief in the PSR, it did not inspire it (Adams 1994:67-68). Leibniz attempted to prove the PSR *a priori* as early as in 1670, before his theory of truth was articulated. And throughout his life, early as well as late, Leibniz insisted that the PSR is required to prove the existence of God (Griffin 2013:34). Although the PSR is characteristic of the rationalist tradition as a whole, it never features more prominently than in the philosophy of Leibniz. Indeed, Leibniz even defines *metaphysics* as "the science which discusses the causes of things using the principle that nothing happens without a reason" (Rutherford 1995:71). Other definitions are along the same lines: metaphysics is the "science of intelligibles"; the "science which has being, and consequently God, the source of being, for its object"; and "general truths based on reason and confirmed by experience, which holds for substances in general" (ibid.). All four express the same conviction: being is intelligible, or conversely, the 'intelligibles' are what truly is, and God is the source of what truly is.

A silent premise behind these four definitions is a vital one: for Leibniz, God is the source of the 'intelligibles' because they are *ideas* in God's understanding (ibid.). In a letter from 1707, Leibniz writes: "there is an intelligible world in the divine mind, which I also usually call the region of ideas" (Leibniz 1969:592). God knows everything, and consequently the reasons for everything are found in the form of 'intelligibles' in his understanding. 'Everything' does not only refer to the actually existing things, however. In order for anything to be intelligible it must be free of contradiction, and absence of contradiction in turn ensures logical possibility. So when God has an idea of a thing, it can possibly exist. This brings us to the concept of essence.

***Essence***

Leibniz uses the term essence in a variety of ways throughout his writings, and not always with the same rigour. Sometimes he equates it with *reality*, sometimes with *possibility*, sometimes with "that component of a possible individual substance which individuates its share of reality" (Griffin 2013:50). In this thesis, I make the case that there is a development in Leibniz's philosophy from a logical to a more ontological conception of essence. Despite this development, some convictions are kept throughout.

Like St. Thomas Aquinas and the Scholastics, Leibniz always separates essence from existence, or *possible being* from *actual existence*. Essence is the 'what' of a thing, its intelligible 'content'; existence is the simple fact of its existence, or its 'that'. For Aquinas, these two principles of a thing had to be kept apart: the essence of a horse, for instance, cannot reveal whether or not it actually exists (Magee 2013). Only in the case of God does essence indicate actual existence.

To a large extent, this could be said of Leibniz's philosophy of essence as well. For him, however, essence has a modal character that is typical for his philosophy and crucial to his ontological arguments. In fact, on Leibniz's view, the essence of a horse reveals its *possible existence*. In an argument for God's existence from 1678, Leibniz defines essence as "the specific reason [ratio] of a things possibility" (Adams 1994:138 = A II, i, N. 164). Robert Merrihew Adams explains this claim in the following manner: "Leibniz thinks of essence as a quasi-logical structure that grounds truths that need not be […] conditional on the existence of something exemplifying the essence. […] [For a finite thing, the] essence is a quasi-logical structure that grounds the (unconditional) truth that the existence of a thing is possible" (ibid.). Because a thing has essence, it is always true that its existence is possible. Thus, only essence is needed for true predication, which makes Leibniz's theory of truth differ from most modern ones.[5]

Yet essence was always more than a logical structure. Later in his life, Leibniz defines essence as "nothing but that which makes [a thing's] possibility in particular" (Adams 1994:138n = GP IV, 406). Therefore, "it is quite evident that [for a thing] to exist by its essence is to exist by its possibility" (ibid.). There are also countless examples of Leibniz using *essence*, *being*, and *possibility* interchangeably in phrases like "essentia seu [or] possibilitas" or "ens seu possibile" (Palkoska 2010:23-30). Equating being with possibility has the striking consequence that "possibles are beings or entities" and that

[5] I discuss this briefly in chapter 1, section 1.3.

"something need not exist to have the status of an entity" (Griffin 2013:49-50). These entities called 'possibles' should be understood as "fully determinate individuals" – possible *things* – "rather than general or indeterminate things" (ibid.).

***Existence***

Can the simple *fact* of a thing's existence be conceptually articulated? Thomas Aquinas' answer was a decisive *no*: with the exception of God, essence and existence are always separate, and God's essence is beyond our conceptual reach. Leibniz answers the same question somewhat less straightforwardly.

As I show in chapter 1, Leibniz's views on existence change. Initially, he accepts the Cartesian treatment of existence as a perfection (i.e. a quality that in God's case is possessed without limits). In the course of his correspondence with Arnold Eckhard in 1677, however, Leibniz comes to doubt this categorisation. Perfections could well be qualities, he writes, but existence is not. What is more, it is absurd to treat existence as something that is added to a thing – for then one could say that this added thing has an existence of its own, which opens for an infinite regress. For a while, Leibniz tests a quantitative definition of existence, but when he finds that this too has considerable shortcomings, he comes to suspect that existence is something 'undefinable': something that we can only vaguely explain, not analyse (Palkoska 2010:30n). This is typical of Leibniz's later views, and in this respect, he comes close to the views of Aquinas.

There is on one point on which they differ, however, and that is on the question of whether essence has anything in common with existence. Around 1700, Leibniz writes: "Existence is conceived by us as a thing having nothing in common with Essence, which cannot be, however, since there must be more in the concept of the Existent than [in that] of the non-existent […]" (Adams 1994:166n). According to Adams, this passage should *not* be taken to imply that existence is some 'part' or 'content' in the thing's essence, but rather "that existent things as such must differ from nonexistent things in some way that is *rooted in their essence*" (ibid., my italics). So although he draws dangerously close, Leibniz never falls into full-blown scepticism about existence. Existence is best understood as the concept of a *status* that some things have, and one that they have in virtue of their essence (ibid., 160). Granted, the concept of 'horse' cannot reveal whether or not that horse actually exists – only that it possibly exists. But the concept of 'God' *can* reveal actual existence. So while Aquinas on Leibniz's view is

right that finite essence is of no help in understanding actual existence, he would not be right in that existence cannot be understood. Existence can and should be understood, but this can only happen in terms of the divine essence.

**V. State of the art**

When Leibniz died in 1716, the only published account of his philosophy was the *Theodicy* from 1710, which he never considered a sufficient overview: "It is true that my *Theodicy* does not suffice to present my system as a whole. But if it is joined with what I have published in various journals, […] it will not fall short of doing so" (Leibniz 1969:656-7 = Letter to Remond [1714]). His shorter and far more cryptic *Monadology* was edited, named, and published posthumously, and is full of references to paragraphs in the *Theodicy*. It was probably intended as a more stringent metaphysical supplement. Throughout the 18th and 19th century, these were the primary sources of the Leibnizian philosophy, as well as the attempts of Wolff and Baumgarten to streamline the system and fill in its gaps (Wilson 1994:444f).

To call these two texts the tip of the iceberg would be a gross understatement. Roughly estimated, Leibniz wrote 50 000 pages of correspondence during his life, in addition to more than 60 000 pages of manuscripts and jottings he never showed anyone (Lenzen 2004:5). As of today, the Berlin Academy edition of Leibniz's collected works amounts to 8 series and more than 60 large volumes, yet almost a hundred years after the initiative was launched, there is still no end in sight. In other words, the gaps in Leibniz's system are filled as I write this, which is both a challenge and an inspiration for anyone studying him. When the French and German editors could join forces again after the war, the Academy began the publication of the hugely important series VI, set to contain the whole of Leibniz's philosophical writings. Between 1981 and 1999, manuscripts from 1672 to 1690 were published, shedding some long-awaited light on the early stages of Leibniz's metaphysics. Among these manuscripts are Leibniz's most important contributions to the ontological argument for the existence of God.

Needless to say, these publications sparked a renewed interest in Leibniz's ontotheology. Robert Merrihew Adams dedicates a third of his book on Leibniz from 1994 to the latter's ontological arguments, which, Adams writes in the introduction, "I regard as exceptionally interesting" (Adams 1994:4). A year later, Donald Rutherford opens his *Leibniz and the Rational Order of Nature* with the remark that "we have tended

proportionally to neglect [less logical] aspects of [Leibniz's] thought – most notably, his central theological commitments. We have all but forgotten that the only philosophical book Leibniz published during his life was the *Essays on Theodicy*" (Rutherford 1995:1). This is a "significant weakness of many modern studies", he concludes (ibid.). Luckily, with the aid of the new publications, many scholars have attempted to remedy this weakness. The 1990s and 2000s saw a spike in *Studia Leibnitiana*'s special editions on Leibniz's *natural theology* and concept of God, of which the works of Jan Palkoska and Erhard Holze proved especially helpful. I have also had great use of Michael V. Griffin's *Leibniz, God, and Necessity* from 2013, which considers Leibniz's most central ontotheological claim ('*A necessary being exists if it is possible*') in light of contemporary modal semantics.

Why is the neglect of Leibniz's rational theism a weakness? The first answer is that (unlike Russell, perhaps) Leibniz always took care to distinguish between *natural* and *supernatural* theology, or a theology built on reason and evidence and one built on revelation. It would be unfair to taint the former with the irrationality of personal belief, especially in view of the above-mentioned definition of metaphysics as "the science which has being, and consequently God, the source of being, as its object" (ibid., 71 = GP VI, 227). If 'understanding God and being' was how Leibniz himself conceived of and motivated his metaphysical enterprise, I do not see how steering clear of all theology in the rendering of it serves us in any way. Which brings me to the topic of method.

**VI. Method**

Despite the lack of a signed and approved *magnum opus*, Leibniz was a system builder, and no very parsimonious one at that. In a system of such magnitude and complexity, contradiction at some point or other seems unavoidable. The questions we must ask ourselves, then, are the following: *Are we interested in coherence?* And if we are, *whose coherence* are we interested in? We could do as Jonathan Bennett does in his *Learning from Six Philosophers*, namely to confront earlier thinkers in rational discussion as though they were contemporaries: "I want to learn from these men, which I do by arguing with them" (Bennett 2001:v). On this view, the aim is still a coherent set of beliefs, but it does not matter whether the coherence is Leibniz's own. This is of greater importance on the more historical approach, of which Robert Merrihew Adams' method is an example. In his introduction, Adams writes: "I have tried throughout to maintain a

rigorously historical approach, attempting to establish as accurately as possible, and with the best evidence possible, what Leibniz actually said and meant" (Adams 1994:5). The reason for doing this, he continues, "is that [Leibniz] was indeed a great philosopher, great enough that an arbitrary interpretation of his work, more relevant to our historical context than he is, is unlikely to be as interesting philosophically in the long run as what he actually thought" (ibid.). This does not exclude 'arguing' with Leibniz – after all, Adams says, "Leibniz's reasons are more interesting than his motives" (ibid., 6). Still, it means that Leibniz's reasons are more interesting than our own. I have come to agree with Adams in the course of my work on this thesis. If our aim is *coherence*, one could argue that we put it at risk by borrowing ideas from hundreds of years of scholarship. Leibniz's system has the advantage of having been continuously developed within a single mind. If we cannot trust Leibniz, true genius as he was, to ensure coherence, whatever hope do we have?

Furthermore, the textual circumstances speak decisively in favour of Adams' historical method. An unknown amount of Leibniz's work still awaits publication. Until we have a general view, any accusation of actual gaps in his philosophy must remain unsubstantiated. For all we know, Leibniz has his own solutions to the problems we have found.

For these reasons, I wanted a chronological framework in the laying out of Leibniz's ontotheology. I have no doubt that Leibniz's theories are worthy of our best efforts at rational reconstruction, but my case is first and foremost historical. I present historical evidence (i.e. Leibniz's own writings) that Leibniz saw existence as the most natural state of affairs, and that this comes about as a result of his ontotheology.

Finally, regarding my use of original texts and translations: most of Leibniz's manuscripts have not been translated, which is hardly surprising in view of their number. I use Leroy E. Loemker's translation from 1969 whenever I can, but where it lacks some of the more recently surfaced texts, I use either Lloyd Strickland's translation from 2006, Ariew and Garber's from 1989, or translated excerpts in the secondary literature (Adams, Parkinson, Griffin). Where there are no other references aside from the Academy (A) or the Gerhardt edition (GP), the translation is my own, and the reader will find the original in a footnote.

# Chapter 1

## Proving Divine Possibility

*Chapter abstract: In this chapter I outline the development of Leibniz's thought from the earliest, more logical ontological arguments based on the concept of existence as a perfection, through serious methodological doubts and reconsiderations until arrival at a more metaphysically founded argument. This new strategy of argument arises from a deepening of Leibniz's understanding of* essence*, and anticipates the later conviction that all essence strives for existence.*

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Two years before his death, in the often-cited §45 of the *Monadology*, Leibniz concisely summarises his lifelong work on the ontological argument for the existence of God:

> […] God alone (or the necessary being) has this privilege, that he must exist if he is possible. And since nothing can prevent the possibility of what is without limits [n'enferme aucunes bornes], without negation, and consequently without contradiction, this by itself is sufficient for us to know the existence of God *a priori* (Leibniz 2009:279).

This passage contains the characteristically Leibnizian emphasis on the *possibility* of divine existence, but it is not his only version of the argument. His most fully developed and systematic versions date from between 1676 and 1678 (Adams 1994:142).[6] These are considered to be among the soundest of the ontological arguments, but a combination of factors – particularly methodological concerns and the gradual refinement of his own metaphysical system – made Leibniz abandon the logically stringent demonstrations in favour of a model which is often read metaphorically: *the Doctrine of Striving Possibles*.[7] I shall argue, among other things, that this doctrine is no mere metaphor, but in fact a seriously held metaphysical view that allows Leibniz to explain – if not to prove – why God's existence is necessary. This final discussion will be the topic of chapters 2 and 3. In chapter 1, I present how Leibniz arrived at the vital conclusion that the answer to the mystery of existence must be sought in the concept of *essence*.

I follow the young Leibniz through his earliest attempts for the following reasons. Firstly, the later doctrines make more sense when regarded as attempted solutions to

[6] These are almost exclusively letters and fragments in Latin, many of which were not systematized and accessible until the Academy edition of 1980 (A VI, iii). As I mentioned in the introduction, this explains why the ontological arguments have seen a spike in publicity and interest the last thirty-forty years.
[7] I believe this term was coined by David Blumenfeld in his article in *Studia Leibnitiana* from 1973. It is also sometimes known as the Striving doctrine, the doctrine of *Daseinstreben*, of *exigentia*, of *propensity*.

the problems he encountered in his early years. This is especially true for his conviction that all essence is fundamentally inclined towards existence, which I discuss in chapter 2. Secondly, the early attempts provide a unique insight into Leibniz's *philosophical theology*, which according to Robert Merrihew Adams is "the context of his fullest reflections about the nature of existence and of essence […]" and whose metaphysical core "has attracted less attention than its intrinsic interest deserves" (ibid., 4). In some ways, Adams continues, this theological core "is also the core of his metaphysics" (ibid.). It is a point at which an astounding number of Leibniz's central metaphysical concepts intersect.

### 1.1 The first attempts (1676)

In an article in *Kant-Studien* from 1963, German philosopher Wolfgang Janke presents what he sees as the three main phases of Leibniz's ontological argument (Janke 1963:259). The earliest phase of the argument is set to 1676-78, when Leibniz presents a critique of the Cartesian method and lays the foundations of his own. Despite this revision, however, the argument remains fundamentally Cartesian throughout the first phase. Janke sets the middle phase to around 1700, within the context of a new conception of *essence* and *existence*. At this point, important changes to the argument have definitely taken place. The final phase is represented by the version cited above, from the *Monadology* (Janke 1963:259). I keep Janke's well-argued framework in the laying out of Leibniz's first phase, but supply it with additional original sources and some more recent observations by other commentators, published after the Academy edition of 1980.[8]

The best-known versions of Leibniz's ontological argument are found in the first phase, but the methodological insights allowing for it were reached several years earlier. In 1671, in a critical rendering of the Cartesian version of the argument, Leibniz questions the ability of the Cartesian method to preserve *truth*, which naturally threatens the validity of any argument, ontological or not (ibid., 260). The argument in question is found in Descartes' *5th Meditation*, and seeing as it is the object of Leibniz's initial critique, I quote it at some length:

[8] As I hope to show in chapter 2, I believe the second and third phases to be more closely linked and occur slightly earlier than Janke claims.

> But if, from the mere fact that I can bring forth from my thought the idea of something, it follows that all I clearly and distinctly perceive to belong to that thing really does belong to it, then cannot this too be a basis for an argument proving the existence of God? […] [From] the fact that I cannot think of God except as existing, it follows that existence is inseparable from God, and that for this reason he really exists. Not that my thought [imposes] any necessity on anything; but rather the necessity of the thing itself, namely of the existence of God, forces me to think this. […] I must of necessity ascribe all perfections to [God, and] existence is a perfection […] (Descartes 2009:59-60).

Beneath the quoted passage's informal expressions ("cannot think of […] except as"; "forces me to think this"), lies the following methodology: the clear and distinct understanding of something *immediately* guarantees the truth of it. This is Descartes' *general rule*, at which he arrived in the beginning of the *3rd Meditation*: "everything I very clearly and distinctly perceive [cogito] is true" (ibid., 47). Thus, when the concept in question contains existence among its components, the thing can truly be said to exist. In the case of God, *that he exists* is known immediately to be true, without any intermediate deliberation [Zwischenüberlegung] (Janke 1963:260). The ontological argument arrived at by this method can be formalised in the following manner:

**The Cartesian Ontological Argument**
**1.** We 'must of necessity ascribe all perfections to God'; we 'cannot think of God except as existing'
**2.** 'Existence is a perfection'
**3.** Therefore, 'God really exists'

Leibniz accepts this argument in 1671, although he has one objection to Descartes' method: the clear and distinct *cogito* is said to *directly* secure truth, which on Leibniz's view it cannot. It can only rule out the impossibility of the thing, by making sure that its idea or concept does not contain a contradiction. Leibniz expresses this in a reformulation of the *general rule* from 1671: "Quicquid (clare distincteque) cogito *possibile* est" (Janke 1963:260, my italics). Descartes' "verum" has been replaced by "possibile"; truth is suspended and in need of further argumentative steps. Aside from this, Leibniz's method remains Cartesian in the early 1670s.

The doubts regarding the Cartesian method return and intensify, however, during Leibniz's years in Paris, and in 1676, in the *scholium* of Leibniz's "best known and most finished" version of the ontological argument, the *general rule* is definitely rejected (Adams 1994:142). This methodological critique goes as follows:

> [It does not] suffice for Descartes to appeal to experience and allege that he experiences this very concept in himself, clearly and distinctly. This is not to complete the demonstration but to break it off, unless he shows a way in which others can also arrive at an experience of this kind. For whenever we inject experience into our demonstrations, we ought to show how others can produce the same experience […] (Leibniz 1969:168).[9]

It is not sufficient to appeal to the subjectively experienced clearness and distinctness of some concept, Leibniz writes, for subjective evidence can never constitute a rule. It cannot give the ontological argument the formally ensured linkage [Verbindlichkeit] that is needed to make it conclusive (Janke 1963:261). Neither *truth* nor *possibility* can be secured in this subjective manner. That something can be clearly and distinctly conceived makes it wahr*scheinlich*, literally 'true-seeming', but that is all (ibid.). And that something seems true from a single perspective does not suffice to prove it; critics of the Cartesian argument would still have the right to accuse the demonstrandum of being a "chimera" (Leibniz 1969:168).

This is a serious accusation. In Cartesian terminology, a chimera is *a being in name only*: something that through its nature cannot exist, whose essence implies a contradiction (Janke 1963:262).[10] The paradigmatic example is the contradictory concept of the quadrangular circle: such concepts are so utterly empty that they cannot even be imagined, Janke writes – let alone thought. Their *essential contradiction* stops them not only from existing but also from having any sort of essence or being in the first place. Chimeras are "Unwesen" (ibid.). So in the same way that God is said to *necessarily exist* through his essence, a chimera is a being that through its 'essence' (i.e., lack thereof) *necessarily does not*. The threat this poses to the ontological argument is clear: unless it can be demonstrated that the concept of a most perfect being is not of this empty category – that is, that it does not essentially contradict itself – that God is a chimera and *necessarily does not exist* is still an option.

A second accusation the Cartesian argument faces is one of *circularity*. The following proposition is necessarily true: "Angles in a triangle sum to 180 degrees". However, this being true does not entail that there is such a thing as a triangle (ibid., 263). All that is expressed by the proposition, in effect, is that *if there were a triangle,* its angles would sum to 180 degrees. In the same way, Leibniz explains in the *scholium*, we

[9] "Quod Ens perfectissimum existit" (A II, i, N. 131). I use Loemker's English translation.
[10] "[…] das durch seine Natur nicht zu existieren vermag […], deren Wasbestand [essence] einen Widerspruch impliziert".

must acknowledge the conditional character of a proposition attributing necessary existence to God, as Leibniz explains in the *scholium*:

> Descartes's reasoning about the existence of a most perfect being assumed that such a being can be conceived or is possible. If it is granted that there is such a concept, it follows at once that such a being exists, because we set up this very concept in such a way that it at once contains existence. But it is asked [...] whether such a concept has reality (Leibniz 1969:168).

When the necessity of God's existence depends *on* his being possible, the argument can give us only *conditional* necessity (Janke 1963:263). Accepting the challenge, Leibniz enlarges the scope of the argument to include the unnoticed antecedent as well (ibid.). Now the ontological argument has two steps, but this is no setback. Indeed, the peculiar conditional inherent in the concept of God – *if God is possible, he necessarily exists* – is the fundamental stepping stone of metaphysics; it is what allows us to pass from potentiality to actuality, from essence to existence, as soon as the antecedent can be established. Only the concept of God has this privilege (ibid.). The whole drama of the ontological argument unfolds within the concept of God: the being for whom possibility suffices for actual existence.

A third accusation levelled at the ontological argument ever since Anselm is that of *arbitrariness* (ibid., 261). Could we not simply conjure up some other concept containing necessary existence, like 'a necessary *man*'? Leibniz is aware of this threat, but again, he invokes the requirement of possibility through non-contradiction. In 1678, he notes the following on the backside of a letter from Henning Huthmann: "Take for instance some concept, a necessary man, which we call A. I say that this A exists [...], for its essence involves existence according to the hypothesis. But it will be objected that it is uncertain whether such an essence can be given or whether it may be correctly formed and distinctly conceived or whether A is possible" (A II, i, N. 164).[11] There remains the possibility that 'a necessary man' is an *Unwesen*: essentially contradictory and consequently impossible. The same goes for similar usurpers to the position of *Ens perfectissimum*, like Anselm's contemporary Gaunilo's infamous *perfect island*. Each would be proven by analysis to contain some contradiction (Janke 1963:263). Arbitrariness only threatens arguments that allow unexamined concepts, concepts whose "Possibilität dunkel bleibt", to figure in their premises. With the methodological

[11] "Ponamus enim conceptum aliquem, homo necessarius quem significamus per *A*. Dico ipsum *A* existere [...], nam ejus essentia involvit existentiam ex hypothesi. Sed respondebitur incertum esse an talis essentia detur seu recte fingi ac distincte concipi possit sive an A sit possibile."

imperative of asking for a thing's possibility, arbitrariness becomes less of a threat (ibid.).[12]

Thus, in order to save the Cartesian argument and make it conclusive, it is to a proof of divine possibility that Leibniz must devote his efforts.[13] His best-known argument to this effect is presented to Baruch de Spinoza during a visit to The Hague in 1676.[14] Like Descartes, Leibniz sets out from a definition of God as 'the most perfect being' (*Ens perfectissimum*). He then proceeds to analyse this concept to see whether any of its components are mutually exclusive. After the visit, Leibniz proudly notes that Spinoza found the argument "sound" (Leibniz 1969:168).

The analysis of 'a being possessing all perfections' demands a definition of perfection, which Leibniz gives in the opening line of the argument: "By a *perfection* I mean every simple quality which is positive and absolute or which expresses whatever it expresses without any limits" (ibid., 167). "From this," he continues, "it is not difficult to show that *all perfections are compatible with each other* or can be in the same subject" (ibid.). He proceeds to give the following *reductio ad absurdum* argument:

> Let us assume that there is a proposition of this kind: *A and B are incompatible*, understanding by *A* and *B* two simple forms or perfections of this kind. […] It is clear that this proposition cannot be demonstrated without an analysis of the terms […]. And by hypothesis they are unanalyzable. Therefore this proposition cannot be demonstrated about them. But it could certainly be demonstrated about them if it were true, [for] all propositions which are necessarily true are either demonstrable or known per se […] Therefore [A and B] can be in the same subject (ibid.).

In other words, the proposition 'Two perfections are compatible' is possible if its contradiction, 'Perfections A and B are incompatible', is not a necessary truth. A necessary truth, Leibniz writes, is either an explicit statement of identity ('known per se') or it can be reduced to one by demonstration, i.e. *analysis*. Since perfections are

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[12] "Solche Beliebigkeit des Beweisanfanges wird eingeschränkt durch die methodologisch unerläßiche Frage: Ist die unterstellte Idee möglich?"

[13] Leibniz remained convinced that the Cartesian argument was 'a good starting-point', like this diplomatic statement from around 1699 shows: "L'auteur de l'écrit croit que l'argument est un sophisme, l'auteur de la reponse le tient pour une demonstration, et moy je crois que c'est un argument imparfait qui suppose tacitement une proposition de la quelle si l'on adjoutoit la prevue, la demonstration seroit achevée. Ainsi l'argument n'est pas à mépriser, c'est un bon commencement au moins" (GP IV, 404).

[14] There is mention of this visit in a letter to Jean Gallois from 1677, followed by a commendation of Spinoza typical of the period before 1678, when Leibniz first read the *Ethics* in its entirety and developed a more critical attitude (Leibniz 1969:196): "Spinosa est mort cet hyver. Je l'ai veu en passant par la Hollande, et je luy ay parlé plusieurs fois et fort long temps. Il a une étrange Metaphysique, pleine de paradoxes. […] Il n'est pas si aisé qu'on pense, de donner des veritables demonstrations en metaphysique. Cependant il y en a et de tres belles" (A II, i, N. 158).

defined as 'unanalyzable', no statement of incompatibility between them can be true necessarily. The implicit reasoning behind this is twofold: 1) because perfections are purely *positive*, no perfection can contain a negation of another, so 'A and B are incompatible' is not a statement of identity. 2) But neither can it be reduced to one by analysis. Because perfections are *simple*, there is nothing more fundamental into which they can be reduced. Consequently, when it is *never* necessarily true that the perfections are *in*compatible, it follows that they are compatible. Thus God, or *Ens perfectissimum*, is possible – because it cannot be demonstrated that he is impossible. The antecedent of the conditional that was the ontological argument seems to have been established, and Leibniz is allowed – with Descartes – to conclude that an absolutely perfect being really exists.

At this point, a brief conceptual remark is in order. The concept of possibility with which Leibniz operates around 1676 is strictly logical, as the *ad absurdum* argument for divine possibility illustrates: the (demonstrated) absence of contradiction implies possibility. It is the eminent *Principle of Contradiction,* the "Hauptprinzip des Denkens" to which Leibniz adhered throughout his entire writing, which ensures this implication (Janke 1963:261-2). According to this principle, nothing can both *be* and *not be* at the same time: "a proposition cannot be true and false at the same time, [therefore] A is A and cannot be not A" (Leibniz 1989:321). There can be no being if there is essential contradiction. Contradictory concepts always and already negate themselves. Thus, demonstrated conceivability (opposed to the subjective *Wahrscheinlichkeit*) implies possibility – in the logical sense of the word. However, this logical approach offers problems of its own.

### 1.2 Letters to Eckhard (1677) – serious methodological doubts

In April 1677, Leibniz concludes one of his many letters to the Cartesian Arnold Eckhard by saying that the argument for God's existence will remain imperfect until it is proven that a being containing existence due to its essence does not imply a contradiction – and although he should think [putem] this can be done, he writes, *no one has done it thus far* (A II, i, 502).[15] Whether this applies to Leibniz's own attempts from the previous year is hard to say, although the use of the subjunctive *putem* might be taken as an indication

[15] "[…] imperfectum esse argumentum nostrum, antequam demonstretur, Ens continens existentiam vi suae essentiae, non implicare contradictionem. Quod etsi fieri posse putem, fecit tamen hactenus nemo."

that it does. Which parts of the initial attempts made him doubtful? This is what we shall now investigate.

According to Janke, Leibniz's correspondence with Eckhard constitutes the most significant critique of the ontological argument to be formulated before Kant (Janke 1963:271). Janke sorts these doubts into three categories, all related to the increasingly suspicious concept of *perfection*, namely mathematical, theological, and ontological doubts (ibid.). United, they cut the ontological argument of 1676 down to the bone.

Initially, Leibniz questions whether perfections are susceptible to a *maximum degree* in the first place, or whether this would prove contradictory at a deeper level of analysis. Maximum is defined as the degree of infinity [Unendlichkeitsgrad] ascribed to a thing within its kind [Genus] (ibid.). As Leibniz points out, there are several examples in the field of mathematics of such ascriptions leading to contradiction: although superficially we tend to accept absolute superlatives like 'the highest number' or 'the highest speed', mathematical analysis proves both to be impossible (Leibniz 1969:178-9). For instance, every number can be doubled, which includes the highest number – provided it is still a number, which it is, according to the hypothesis – but then it would no longer be the highest number, and we have a contradiction (Janke 1963:271). How do we know that the concept of perfection is not susceptible to the same error? More specifically, how do we know that the divine perfections, e.g. 'the most perfect knowledge', will not lead to paradoxes of the same sort? If perfections are qualities in the Aristotelian sense, they should be susceptible to degrees. Mathematically, however, *maximum degrees* are dubious.

Secondly, and related to the former, Leibniz asks how the *omnitas*-character of perfection ('all-being') can be preserved without serious threats to the theist worldview. Here, not only the highest degree of a perfection *within its own kind* is questioned, but the highest degree of all forms of being *put together*, "in einem Seienden" (ibid., 272). The highest degree of being reminds us of Anselm of Canterbury's famous definition of God: "ens quo majus cogitari non potest" – a being than which nothing greater can be thought (ibid.). But what if there must always be something greater than this being, something greater than God? If the perfections taken separately should prove resilient to any maximum or endpoint, will this not also be the case for the sum of them? How can there even be a *sum*? The theological implications of these considerations are momentous, of course.

Thirdly, and most interestingly for our purposes, Leibniz begins to resist the idea that *existence* itself is a perfection. In the Hague-version of the ontological argument from 1676, we saw him accept this without question. In the letters to Eckhard, however, in the course of a discussion around the ontology of existence, Leibniz comes to what Janke calls "ein bestürzend negatives Resultat" (ibid., 273). Perfections are characterised in three ways: they are qualities of the divine being, and as qualities they have being, and as qualities they are susceptible to degrees – none of these things, however, can as easily be said of *existence* (ibid.). Leibniz writes:

> I said that in this demonstration of divine existence, two things are to be considered[:] one, whether there is not some contradiction implied in the most perfect being, the other, given that the most perfect being does not imply a contradiction, whether existence is among the perfections. For perfections seem to be qualities, as existence is not (A II, i, N. 140).[16]

If we accept a qualitative definition of perfection, this should not apply to existence. Leibniz does not explicitly say why, however, and Janke is somewhat vague on this point as well. He simply refers to Pierre Gassendi, who famously objected to Descartes' treating existence as a perfection in the *5th Meditiation*:

> [You] count existence as one of God's perfections, but don't treat it as one of the perfections of a triangle or a highland, though it could be said that in its own way it is just as much a perfection of each of these things. In fact, however, existence is not a perfection either in God or in anything else; it is that without which there are no perfections. What doesn't exist has no perfections or imperfections; what does exist may have various perfections, but existence won't be one of them. . . . We don't say that existence 'exists in a thing' as perfections do. And if a thing lacks existence, we don't say that it is imperfect or lacks a perfection; rather, we say instead that it is nothing at all (Gassendi 2017:132).

There are two objections and one suggestion in this passage. Gassendi first accuses Descartes of inconsistency: if existence is a perfection, and more things than God have it, it should be called a perfection in each case. That existence is a perfection in the case of God only seems arbitrary. Whether this is a fair criticism of Descartes is a question for another setting; maybe Descartes did consider created things to be perfect in so far as they exist. In any case this way of thinking is mistaken, Gassendi writes, and proceeds to his harshest objection: existence is no perfection in either case – indeed, existence is no

[16] "Dixi ego in hac divinae existentiae demonstratione duo esse consideranda, unum an Ens perfectissimum non implicet contradictionem, alterum posito quod Ens perfectissimum non implicet contradictionem, utrum existentia sit ex numero perfectionum. Videri enim perfectiones esse quasdam qualitates, qualis non est existentia." The last sentence is translated by Adams (Adams 1994:157).

quality at all. A non-existent thing cannot have qualities. Qualification presupposes a *substance*. This is why we don't say that existence 'exists in a thing' as perfections do, Gassendi writes.

Leibniz seems to think along the same lines. Existence is no *perfectio singularis* that you can find in a thing alongside other qualities, like the colours and shapes that make up a particular table. For if existence could be found in a thing, Leibniz writes in the margin of a document from around this time (between 1677-80), that is, if "[…] [existence itself] has some essence or superadds something new to things, […] it could be asked again whether this essence exists, and why this one rather than another" (Adams 1994:158 = GP VII, 195). Adams interprets 'essence' in this context as "*content* of the sort that is required to constitute, in whole or in part, some essence" (ibid., 160). There is no content in existence, for if there were, one could say that this content exists as well. To take an example: one component of the essence of God is *omnipotence*, so it should be possible to say: "There is omnipotence in God". But can one say: "There is existence in God"? If so, Leibniz objects, "we could ask whether [this] existence exists" (an infinite regress), "or whether existent things exist", which is trivial (ibid., 159). So existence does not behave like a *quality*, and it has no *being* of its own either. This sets it apart from perfection in two ways at least. There remains the question of whether existence can be understood quantitatively.[17]

Arnold Eckhard still wants to link existence and perfection. After all, that the former is a species of the latter used to be the solid ground of the ontological argument and is difficult to part with. His new strategy is to define existence as a *special kind* of perfection: "Moreover," Eckhard writes, echoing Gassendi, "existence is not only *a* perfection, but the basis and foundation of all perfection" (A II, i, N. 142, my italics).[18] It is misleading to see existence solely as one perfection among many, for it clearly grounds them in some way: having perfections implies existence. When the concept of perfection is modified like this, Leibniz is more inclined to accept it, as he explains in a letter from the summer of 1677. We should understand perfection in relation to being:

> Several of my objections have ended since you have explained that in your usage, perfection is being insofar as it is understood to differ from nonbeing, or, as I should prefer to define it, *perfection* is degree or quantity of reality or essence, as *intensity* is degree of quality, and *force*

[17] The quantitative account of existence (although far from flawless, as we shall see directly) comes closest to his later views, as will be clear from chapters 2 and 3.
[18] "Existentia autem non solum est perfectio, sed basis et fundamentum omnis perfectionis."

> is degree of action. It is clear, also, that existence is a perfection or increases reality, that is: when *A* is thought of as *existing*, more reality is thought of than when *A* is conceived as *possible* (Leibniz 1969:177).

Perfection measures being, Leibniz seems to say, so that more or less being equals more or less perfection. And 'it is clear' that what exists is more real than what does not exist, which makes existence a higher degree of being. Leibniz appears to contradict himself, however. If perfection is a degree or measure of being, it cannot itself increase being. Yet he says that 'existence is a perfection *or increases reality*'. How can a degree increase the quantity of anything? What increases a quantity must be an addition of whatever is measured by the degree. If perfection is a degree, then it is a symptom of increased reality rather than the *increaser* of reality itself. A second objection could be that if existence is a perfection and therefore a measure of being, more or less being equals more or less existence. Is existence something of which you can possess more or less? And what, then, is the difference between being and existence?

Leibniz must have been aware of these problems. In an undated[19] fragment entitled "Existentia, an sit perfectio" (Whether existence is a perfection), Leibniz answers in the negative, and this time the doubts are more radical: what if we cannot even conceive of existence?

> It can be doubted very much whether existence is a perfection or degree of reality; for it can be doubted whether existence is one of those things that can be conceived – that is, one of the parts of essence; or whether it is only a certain imaginary concept, such as that of *heat* and *cold*, which is denomination only of our perception, not of the nature of things (Adams 1994:165 = A VI, iv, N. 253).

Existence says nothing of *what* the thing is, only *that* it is. Things are conceived in their "Sachgehalt", Janke says, in their qualities, in what makes up their essence, therefore conceivability lies on the side of essence (Janke 1963:274).[20] This suspicion sets Leibniz on a new course entirely:

> Yet if we consider more accurately, [we shall see] that we conceive something more when we think that a thing A exists, than when we think that it is possible. Therefore it seems to be true that existence is a certain degree of reality; or certainly that it is some relation to degrees of reality. Existence is not a degree of reality, however; for of every degree of reality it is possible to understand the existence as well as the possibility. Existence will therefore be the superiority of the degrees of reality of one thing over the degrees of reality of an opposed

[19] The fragment was published only once before in 1895 in the form of "*Handschriften*" before it resurfaced in the Academy edition of 1999. The Academy editors set the date to around 1677.
[20] "Die Begreiflichket liegt demnach auf der Seite des Wasseins (essentia)".

> thing. That is, that which is more perfect than all things mutually incompatible *exists*, and conversely what exists is more perfect than the rest. Therefore it is true indeed that what exists is more perfect than the non-existent, but it is not true that existence itself is a perfection, since it is only a certain comparative relation [comparatio] of perfections among themselves (Adams 1994:165 = A VI, iv, N. 253).

Significant insights are reached here. Existence itself is no perfection, and no degree of reality either, but rather 'a certain comparative relation' between things with different degrees of reality. Somehow, the degrees of reality in God bring about his necessary existence. What is the exact nature of this relation? "[Existence] is identified", Adams explains, "with the property of having more reality or perfection than any incompatible alternative" (ibid.). What exists is more perfect than the non-existent. This anticipates the *Doctrine of Striving Possibles*: "Degrees of reality or perfection […] are equivalent, in this scheme of things, not to existence itself, but to degrees of *tendency* to exist" (ibid.). It is clear, in other words, that it is not *existence* per se that holds the key to the transition from possible to necessary existence. The answer must be sought in what allows for the existence of a thing, namely its *essence.*

### 1.3 Proof from the divine essence (1678)

Hopeless as the ontological project seemed throughout 1677, Leibniz emerges with a more promising foundation for the argument than ever. This foundation is no longer the *Ens perfectissimum* and the logical compatibility of its perfections, but the metaphysical constitution of essence itself. God's essence involves existence; Leibniz only needs to show *how*.

The best-known argument following the new strategy is found in a letter dated January 1678 of unknown addressee. It is entitled "Proof of the existence of God from his essence" and takes the following form:

> (1) The possible existence or Possibility of any thing and the essence of that same thing are inseparable (that is, if one of them is given in the region of ideas or truths or realities, the other is also given there. That is, if the truth of one of them exists so does the truth of the other; for the truths exist even if the things do not exist and are not thought of by anyone…..)
>
> *Therefore by subsumption*
>
> (2) The possible existence or possibility of God and the essence of God are inseparable (for the essence of a thing is the specific reason of its possibility),
>
> *but*
>
> (3) The essence of God and his actual existence are inseparable.
>
> *Therefore in conclusion*
>
> (4) The possible existence or Possibility of God and his actual existence are inseparable,
>
> *or, what is the same,*

(5) On the assumption that God is possible it follows that God actually exists (Adams 1994:136 = A II, i, N. 164).

Steps (2), (3), and (4) express the following transitivity relation: divine possibility and essence are inseparable; divine essence and actual existence are inseparable; therefore divine possibility and actual existence are inseparable. Leibniz is aware that premise (3) is the one most in need of argument – especially if we are no longer allowed to use the 1676-proof from the compatibility of God's perfections to prove why his essence contains existence – for he continues:

(6) The essence of God involves necessity of existence (for by the name of God we understand a necessary Being).
(7) If the essence of anything involves necessity of existence, its essence is inseparable from existence (for otherwise it is a merely possible or contingent thing) […] (ibid.).

So instead of establishing that necessary existence is among God's perfections, if he is possible, this argument establishes that God's *essence* guarantees necessary existence, if God is possible.

The parentheses of the argument are worth looking at as well. The first mentions a certain 'region of ideas or truths or realities' [regione idearum seu veritatum seu realitatum]. In the region of ideas, the essence of a thing and its *possible existence* are inseparable. An essence free of contradiction does not negate itself, as we remember, and consequently allows for that particular thing to exist. But how should we understand this region of ideas? What is the exact nature of these inseparable things? Are they ideas in some mind? Surely, God's mind presupposes God's existence. The danger of circularity looms.

Wolfgang Janke explains how Leibniz avoids just that. The essences or possibilites, he writes, are examined wholly *a priori* – without any reference to the experience of a "vorstellenden Ich" or any such being's actual existence (Janke 1963:275). For, as Leibniz writes in the first parenthesis, the ideas in question 'exist even if the things do not exist and are not thought of by anyone'. This is a strange view of truth to a modern reader, indeed, but Leibniz never strayed from it: truth comes about due to relations of inclusion between concepts. For Leibniz, a predication is not true because there is some state of affairs 'out there in the world' to which it applies, but rather because the predicate *inheres* in the subject from the beginning, conceptually. Most modern theories of truth are extensional. "Plato is a man" is true because the

concept of 'man' applies to the object Plato, who is then included in its extension. For the intensionalist, on the other hand, "Plato is a man" is true because the concept of 'Plato' includes the concept of 'man' among its infinity of other predicates.[21]

Truth still has its basis "in the nature of things", as Leibniz famously says in his *Discourse on Metaphysics* from 1686, but this 'nature of things' amounts to *essence*: that which a thing cannot lack and still be itself (Leibniz 2009:228). This means that what is needed for true predication on Leibniz's view is not existence, but essence: not actuality, but *possibility* (Adams 1994:160). This too flies in the face of modern intuitions: when we say, in contemporary predicate logic, that "*Fa*" (*a* is *F*) is true, this *implies* that *a* actually exists. To understand Leibniz, we must try to set these intuitions aside. There need be no existing thing for truth to obtain.

The claim that the truths or ideas 'exist even though the things do not' means, more precisely, that the concept that allows for the existence of the thing, i.e. its essence, has some being in its own right – or as Janke says, that it belongs on the side of being instead of non-being [Nichts] (Janke 1963:276). Thus, we can know truths about this thing *a priori*, just by considering its ontological constitution. The argument, Janke writes, "bleibt von der Frage unberührt, ob die Possibilitäten sind ohne ein Vorstellendes überhaupt oder sie nur sind durch einen göttlichen Verstand" (ibid.). The ideas *are* grounded in the divine understanding, but this does not prevent Leibniz from treating them as what they are in themselves: "possibilitates als seiend", possibilities as forms of being (ibid.).

We can know about ideas that if they are free of contradiction, they allow for being. This yields the following schema of equivalencies in the *regione idearum*:

***Essence***
*"Widerspruchsloser Wasbestand"*
*'the special reason [ratio] of [the thing's] possibility'*
*The reason why a thing is what it is*
*instead of something else*

*=*

***Possibility***
*'Possible existence'*
*Existieren-Können*
*"Ermöglichendes Dasein"*

[21] I am indebted to professor Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra's lecture on Leibniz's theory of truth (Oxford University, 02.02.17) for this explanation.

This law of equivalence applies to the idea of God as it does to any other idea, only that in the special case of God, his essence is inseparable not only from his *possible* but from his *actual* existence (ibid., 277). God contains actual existence because he is necessary. But what explains God's necessity?

Around the same time as the argument from God's essence in 1678, Leibniz was given a copy of Spinoza's *Opera posthuma*, which he read with great care and interest. A remark in the margin of Book I of the *Ethics* is particularly noteworthy with regard to a conception of essence as *ratio*:

> For the rest [of Proposition 6, that a substance cannot create another substance], I grant the demonstration if substance is taken as something which is conceived through itself. The case is different if substance is taken to be something which is in itself, as this is commonly understood, unless he shows that to be in itself and to be conceived through itself are the same thing (Leibniz 1969:199).

Leibniz is willing to grant that existence belongs to the essence of a substance but wants to stress that this follows from the clause of the '*per se concipi*' – being conceived through oneself.[22] Being conceived through oneself means being self-explanatory: that there is no need of recourse to other things. What sort of being would fit this self-explanatory category? Leibniz's answer is the *Ens necessarium*. A necessary being contains the reason for its existence in itself. As was specified in the argument from God's essence, 'the essence of a thing is the specific reason of its possibility'. But since God is the only self-explanatory being, his essence is the specific reason of his actual, not possible, existence.

With the new definition of a necessary being as that which is self-explanatory, a second central Leibnizian principle is brought into play: the *Principle of Sufficient Reason* (PSR). In its usual form, the PSR states that *nothing is without reason* (nihil est sine ratione), and that *for everything that is, there is a reason why it is thus and not*

[22] Leibniz distinguishes between *being in itself* and *being conceived through itself* in order to have more than one substance: there is only one substance that is conceived through itself, namely God. But there are other substances, too, that *are in themselves*. In chapters 2 and 3, we shall se how Leibniz elaborates on this distinction.

*otherwise*.[23] That a thing *possibly* exists is a truth grounded in its essence. That God *actually* exists is a truth grounded in God's essence.

To Leibniz's credit, he seems to have had the intuition that necessity is more promising than perfection as early as 1676. In a less known fragment entitled "Quod Ens perfectissimum sit possibile [That a most perfect being is possible]", Leibniz keeps the compatibility-argument for God's possibility but – interestingly – does not arrive at the final stage of necessary existence in the same way. For some reason he avoids counting 'necessary existence' among God's perfections, but defines a necessary being precisely as 'a being which has the reason for existing from itself':

> Hence now it seems to be proved, further, that a Being of this sort, which is most perfect, is necessary. For it cannot be unless it has a reason for existing from itself or from something else. It cannot have it from something else, because everything that can be understood in something else can already be understood in it – that is, because we conceive it through itself [per se], or because it has no requirements [requisita] outside itself. Therefore either it cannot have any reason for existing, and so is impossible, contrary to what we have shown, or else it will have it from itself, and so will be necessary (Adams 1994:151 = A VI, iii, N. 79).

The point is to argue that the *Ens perfectissimum* must also be necessary, and thereby to shift the weight of the argument away from *perfection*. If we grant that God is *not impossible* (since Leibniz proved the compatibility of any two perfections in one being), we know that he is possible and consequently that he has *some reason for being*. This reason can be found either in the thing itself (if the thing is *a se*) or in something else (if the thing is *ab alio*) – the third alternative, that there is no reason, is excluded by the PSR: if a thing is, there is a reason why.

Leibniz's argument for why this reason cannot be 'from something else' is a little puzzling: 'because everything that can be understood in something else can already be understood in it' or 'because it has no requirements outside itself'. This has to do with Leibniz's definition of the divine perfections as "omnia attributa positiva", all positive attributes; the fundamental component parts out of which every other concept is made. God possesses each one of the positive qualities that are "combined with limits in other beings" (Adams 1994:114 = A VI, iii, N. $36_1$ [1676]).[24] God is the fundamental level of

[23] See for instance A VI, iv, N. 256 [1678-79]. This could well be the rationalist principle *par excellence*: by ruling out the possibility of brute facts, the PSR guarantees the inherent intelligibility of the world. It was also one of Leibniz's first metaphysical commitments (Adams 1994:68).

[24] Janke argues that the Leibniz of 1676 has a clear Spinozistic streak, and this particular ontological argument seems to support his claim: What *aliud*, what 'something else' could there be for a being possessing *all positive qualities* (Janke 1963:267)? If God does possess all positive qualities, there is

analysis; there is no going beyond to a prior principle of explanation. Consequently, because he has the reason for his existence in himself, God is a necessary being.[25]

To summarise briefly, Leibniz states his new strategy of arguing for the existence of God from his essence explicitly in 1678, but it is also hinted at two years earlier. The aim was to show in what way "*the essence of God and his actual existence are inseparable*" (A II, i, N. 164). Leibniz's answer lay in the clause of *per se concipi*: God is a being conceived through himself, which makes him ground himself, which again is the definition of a necessary being. "Der Name Gott bedeutet ein ens necessarium", Janke writes, and this is how God's essence includes necessary existence, for a necessary being simply *cannot not* exist – a *non-existing necessary being* forms a contradiction [bildet einen Widerspruch] (Janke 1963:277). Both arguments, then, end up preferring the concept of an *Ens necessarium* to that of *Ens perfectissimum*.

A further outcome of 1678 is an enriched concept of essence or possibility as metaphysical grounding of existence. A thing being *possible* means not only that it is free of contradiction, logically, but also that it essentially contains a reason for why it should come into existence instead of something else. This reason constitutes the possibility of the thing, or – as I shall argue in the following chapter – the 'case' it makes to exist: that which has the better reason to exist, will exist, in accordance with the PSR. So where the ontological argument used to be dominated by the principle of contradiction (PC), it seems that preferring necessity over perfection as a foundation for the argument has made the PSR increasingly relevant.

The reader will have noticed, however, that the 1678 argument depends on a *nominal* definition of God. Nominal definitions allow us to distinguish a concept from other concepts, to recognise it from description, but it does not demonstrate if the concept is at all possible. The *Ens necessarium* is simply termed the *Ens a se*, or *being from itself*. In a letter from January 1678, Leibniz writes: "We define God as a Being from itself, or a Being from whose essence existence follows, or a necessary Being, from which this memorable proposition follows: if God is possible, he actually exists. Which is what we set out to demonstrate. This proposition is the summit of the modal doctrine" (A II, i,

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nothing that he is not, which seems to imply monism. I am inclined to believe there is a way out through the "combined with limits"-idea. We shall return to these questions at a later stage.

[25] I give a more detailed account of this conceptual dependence in the final section of chapter 2.

N. 164).[26] It is the summit, we may assume, because it allows for the passage from possibility to actuality – undeniably a true victory for metaphysics. But did we not leave the compatibility argument for the possibility of God behind, seeing as the concept of perfection could be suspected of inherent contradiction? How can we know for certain that this new being, the promising *Ens necessarium*, is possible?

The difference between real and nominal definitions plays an important role in Leibniz's methodology. The most famous formulation of his theory of definition is found in §24 of the *Discourse on Metaphysics* from 1686:

> I call a definition nominal when one can still doubt whether the notion defined is possible […]. As long as we have only a nominal definition, we cannot be certain of the consequences we derive, for if it concealed some contradiction or impossibility, the opposite conclusions could be derived from it. That is why truths do not depend upon names and are not arbitrary […]. Furthermore, there are […] differences between the kinds of real definitions. For when possibility is proved by experience, […] the definition is merely real and nothing more; but when the proof of the possibility is *a priori*, the definition is both real and *causal*, as when it contains the possible generation of the thing (Leibniz 2009:239).[27]

Experience of a thing implies its possibility and can provide real definitions, but a *causal demonstration* has not been given until it is shown how this thing can be generated. For example, many things can be truly said of a circle (that it will always have a greater surface area than a square with sides the same length as the radius; that a tangent is at a right angle to the radius, etc.) that allow us to recognise it, but we cannot say if the thing described is truly possible until we know how to construct it. If we take a given chord, however, pin it down on one end and let the other end move around freely, we will eventually have drawn a circle. This is the ideal method of demonstration, for it reveals that there are no internal contradictions in the demonstrandum. Real definitions, Donald Rutherford writes, are crucial for metaphysics, "because only they demonstrate a genuine possibility or, what is equivalent, the essence of a type of being" (Rutherford 1995:74). The essence of an *Ens necessarium* is what needs further demonstration. It not yet clear exactly how the divine essence involves necessary existence, for it is no longer contained within it as "a part, or essential or defining property" (Adams 1994:164). Rather, "this involvement relation between existence and the divine essence […] can be

[26] "Cum Deum definiamus Ens a se, vel Ens ex cujus essentia sequitur existentia, vel Ens necessarium ideo sequitur haec propositio memorabilis: Si Deus est possibilis actu existet. Q.E.D. Haec propositio est fastigium doctrinae Modalium."
[27] See also *Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas* from 1684: "[nominal definitions] contain only marks of discerning one thing from others" (Leibniz 1969:293).

understood in terms of the essence necessarily having, for some other reason, the *status* of being actually exemplified" (ibid., my italics). What exactly brings about the divine essence's existing status will be the subject of the next chapter.

# Chapter 2

## Arguments from Essence:
## The Doctrine of Striving Possibles

*Chapter abstract: When Leibniz returns to work on the ontological argument in the middle years, it is with a concept of* essence *that is no longer strictly logical, but more active in character: having essence or being possible means presenting reasons for one's own existence. Somehow, essence is inclined to exist. In this chapter, I discuss how this intuition finds two similar formulations. First, the inclination takes the form of a demand, which I interpret as a juridical case to exist. Later, within the framework of a new conception of* substance*, it comes to mean a* striving for existence*. I present and discuss the main traits of this new doctrine, which closes Leibniz's work on the ontological argument.*

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Counting existence among the divine perfections did not produce the desired conclusion of necessary divine existence, for as it turns out, existence does not behave like a perfection. It is hard to say that it *behaves* in any way at all – how can one grasp the 'what' of a pure 'that'? Whatever its nature, existence is too elusive to be a point of departure for the ontological argument. What is more, as Leibniz writes to Foucher in 1675, there is always a 'what' preceding a 'that': "[Of] all the things which actually are, the possibility or impossibility of being [d'estre] is itself the first. But this possibility and this necessity form or compose what are called the essences or natures and the truths which are usually called eternal" (Leibniz 1969:154 = A II, i, N. 120). *Prior to existence, there is essence*. This is no less than a variation on a formulation of the Principle of Sufficient Reason: there is a reason for all existence, divine and creaturely alike, and *essence* is where this reason can be found. In this chapter, I outline the final shifts in Leibniz's conception of essence or possibility. In light of his new theory of substance, Leibniz comes to the conclusion that essence cannot be separated from a force striving for its actualisation. The result is a metaphysical system in which all essences exist unless they are hindered.

### 2.1 Essence's case to exist – a scene in court

According to Wolfgang Janke, it is not until the second phase of his work on the ontological argument, set to the years around 1700, that Leibniz's ontology is sufficiently well developed to answer whether 'a necessary being' is among the "*wesenhafte* Möglichkeit[en]" – or in other words, to give a real definition of the concept

of God (Janke 1963:282, my italics). If such a definition can be provided, the 'pinnacle of the modal doctrine' – *If God is possible he necessarily exists* – is conclusive (A VI, iii, N. 84).[28] This theorem, we remember, is what allows for that "memorable" passage from potentiality to actuality (ibid.).[29]

Leibniz seems to have left the question of God's possibility at least partially unanswered until the late 1680s, when he identifies 'substance' with *active force* and 'possibility' with a corresponding *effort to exist*. In the meantime, however, Leibniz worked on a passage into actuality which is less impressive than a proof of divine possibility would be, perhaps, but which is historically interesting in that it nuances Janke's claim: the intuition that there is, in all essence, a *tendency* or *inclination* of some sort is present in Leibniz's thought as early as 1680, shortly after the now familiar first attempts at an ontological argument.[30]

What we see, often in marginal notes and fragments not intended for public use, is Leibniz gradually articulating his conviction that every essence *demands to exist,* and that this is how, fundamentally, there is a passage from possible to actual existence. In order to avoid confusion with later formulations of a similar idea, I shall call this tentative formulation the *exigentia*-doctrine. The best-known version of it is found in a short fragment from 1680, which opens with two *absolutely first truths*:

> Absolutely first truths are, among truths of reason, those which are identical, and among truths of fact this, from which all experiences can be demonstrated *a priori*, namely: everything possible demands existence [omne possibile exigit existere], and hence will exist unless something else prevents it, which also demands existence and is incompatible with the former (Leibniz 2006:29 = A VI, iv, N. 270).

There is a second reason why this is a remarkable fragment, besides the early date, namely that it shows Leibniz connecting the *exigentia*-doctrine with the Principle of Sufficient Reason. Here, that 'everything possible demands existence' is called the 'absolutely first […] among truths of fact' – a position usually occupied by the PSR

[28] "fastigium doctrinae Modalium" (A II, i, N. 164). As I mentioned in the introduction, this is "one of the notorious axioms of [modern] modal logic": if it is possible that it is necessary that *p*, then it is necessary that *p* (Look 2013).
[29] "[…] quo transitur mirabili ratione, a potentia ad actum". Michael V. Griffin calls this *Leibniz's Splendid Theorem* (Griffin 2013:47-49).
[30] There are fragments suggesting an even earlier date. In a note to a letter received from Simon Foucher in 1676, Leibniz writes: "The essence of substances consists in the primitive force of action, or in the law of the sequence of changes […]" (Leibniz 1969:155). If this was not in fact added at a much later date, it is a testament to the remarkable consistency of Leibniz's intuitions. I shall return to this comment later in this chapter.

(Adams 1994:173). The placement is especially interesting given the relative clause of 'from which all experiences can be demonstrated *a priori*'. According to Donald Rutherford, this is exactly the role of the PSR: in its informal expression, the PSR states that "[…] no proposition can be true unless there is a sufficient reason why it should be thus and not otherwise, even though in most cases these reasons cannot be known to us" (Rutherford 1995:76). Leibniz later transforms this "general demand for reason into the [predicate in subject principle], a condition that guarantees a reason for the truth of any proposition in the connection between its subject and predicate terms […]" (ibid.). In other words, Leibniz's theory of truth is the PSR in more concrete, crystallized form, and this position has now suddenly been taken by the *exigentia*-doctrine. That all experiences can be demonstrated *a priori* follows quite clearly from the conceptual containment theory; that the same follows from the *exigentia*-doctrine is less obvious. Robert Merrihew Adams interprets this apparent interchangeability as the *exigentia*-doctrine being "a corollary of a version of the [PSR]" (Adams 1994:173). But how can the undeniably metaphorical-sounding *exigentia*-doctrine follow from the simple statement that there is a reason for everything?

In a footnote to the same fragment, Leibniz writes that unless it were in the nature of possibility or essence to demand existence, no reason could be given for the existence of things (A VI, iv, N. 270).[31] If essences did not demand it, *existence* would be an exception to the PSR – which Leibniz takes to be absurd. So the antecedent must be false too, by *modus tollens*: essence *must* demand existence. But the conditional itself still sounds hollow: *why* must there be a demand for there to be a reason? Could not the reason depend on something else entirely? It seems that the only way to make the argument conclusive is to accept that demand and reason are somehow the same, or at least inseparable: unless an essence has some demand for existence, it can have no reason for it either.

One possible motivation for the conditional could be that Leibniz saw essence as the *sufficient reason* for any given thing. One of the earliest mentions Leibniz makes of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (which is also an attempt to prove it), dating back to 1670, could help explain this connection:

[31] "Adeo ut natura sit possibilitatis sive essentiae exigere existentiam. Nisi id esset, ratio existentiae rerum reddi non posset."

*Proposition:*
*Nothing is without a reason*,
Or whatever is has a sufficient reason.

*Definition 1*: *A sufficient reason* is that which is such that if it is posited the thing is.
*Definition 2*: *A requirement* [requisitum] is that which is such that if it is not posited the thing is not.

Demonstration:

Whatever is, has all [its] requirements.
For if one [of them] is not posited, the thing is not *by def. 2.*
If all [its] requirements are posited, the thing is.
For if it is not, it will be kept from being by the lack of something, that is, a requirement.
Therefore all the Requirements are a sufficient reason *by def. 1.*
Therefore whatever is has a sufficient reason.

Q.E.D. (Adams 1994:68 = A VI, ii, 483).[32]

Both requirements and sufficient reasons are needed for a thing to be, but they are different sorts of conditions. A requirement is a *sine qua non*, a necessary condition. That a thing's requirement is posited does not imply that the thing is. Only when all of the requirements are posited together, which amounts to a sufficient reason, the thing is. So whenever something is, we can be sure that there is a sufficient reason for it. It is clear, then, that a thing's being depends on the subsistence of something prior to it: the requirements constituting its sufficient reason. And this, Leibniz explains in 1676, is in fact what amounts to the thing's essence: "The ultimate reason [of all things] is the aggregate of sufficient requirements. The aggregate of sufficient requirements is Essence" (A VI, iii, N. 79).[33] This allows us to explain at least one aspect of the argument: the claim that there would be no reason for existence if the essence of the thing did not demand it was evident to Leibniz because essence is the only place in which reasons can be found. This does not, however, do away with the seeming arbitrariness of the claim that this reason must take the form of a *demand*.

The word *demand* [exigentia] has a psychological, personified ring to it, which makes it easily dismissed as a metaphor, but I do not think Leibniz was trying to make his theory of creation more vivid. In fact, aside from the psychological ones, 'demand' also has *juridical* connotations, which I take to be intended – Leibniz was, after all, a man

[32] I think Adams is right in pointing out that this argument is trivial. If one does not already subscribe to the PSR, one could still deny the second claim of the demonstration ('If all [its] requirements is posited, the thing is') (Adams 1994:68). More than its validity, however, it is the argument's definition of *sufficient reason* as something prior to being that is of interest here. (Moreover, it shows that Leibniz *believed* that the PSR could be proven *a priori*.)

[33] "Ultima ratio [omnium rerum] est aggregatum requisitorum sufficientum. Aggregatum requisitorum sufficientum est Essentia."

of law. If we see the existence of things as the outcome of a *process* in the juridical sense, the choice of the term demand can be made sense of.

Some central aspects of Leibniz's *theodicy* – his account of divine justice – should be introduced to lay the groundwork for this interpretation. At the admitted cost of anthropomorphism, God's attributes of *power*, *knowledge* and *will* were always real for Leibniz, but they were arranged in a hierarchical order, with knowledge towering at the top and *will* decidedly inferior – sometimes even falling outside of the scope of the divine attributes. Leibniz was shocked that Descartes could let truth and goodness depend on the divine will. This, he argues in the *Discourse on Metaphysics* from 1686, has Trasymachean consequences:

> [It] seems to me that we unknowingly destroy all of God's love and all his glory. For why praise him for what he has done if he would be equally praiseworthy in doing the exact contrary? Where will his justice and wisdom reside if there remains only a certain despotic power, if will holds the place of reason, and if, according to the definition of tyrants, justice consists in whatever pleases the most powerful? Besides, it seems that all acts of willing presuppose a reason for willing and that this reason is naturally prior to the act of will (Leibniz 2009:225).

The eternal truths of metaphysics and geometry, he continues, "and consequently also the rules of goodness, justice, and perfection […] are only the consequences of [God's] understanding, which assuredly, does not depend on his will, any more than does his essence" (ibid.). There can be no will without a reason, which is why God cannot will *unreasonable* things. Divine justice does not consist in 'whatever pleases the most powerful' but in a will conform to *reasons*. And the reasons for God's 'act of willing' are prior to it, as is his essence – reasons and essence are, as we now know, inseparable. Consequently, if God's essence is prior to the will, then the will is not essential to him, but rather accidental: that God *is* does not depend on him willing anything.[34] As I hope to show, there is no *pure will* for Leibniz, no will that is not an *act* of willing, brought into action by reasons.

In his *Principles of Nature and Grace* from 1714 (whose §7 will play an important role in the next chapter), Leibniz explains that just as the perfect knowledge is

[34] That God was morally obliged to his act of willing, i.e. that the choice was morally necessary, is still the case, although this act is not essential to him. If it were essential, the choice would be metaphysically necessary, which Leibniz does not allow. In Gaston Grua's words: "Après reflexion, la volonté *consequente*, en un décret unique pour l'univers, produit l'ensemble optimum ou maximum, de nécessité *morale*" (Grua 1953:240, my italics). I shall return to this question briefly in the middle of chapter 3. The solution to the problem of God's freedom in Leibniz's philosophy goes far beyond the scope of this thesis, however.

omniscience and the perfect power is omnipotence, the perfect *will* is what we call sovereign goodness [bonté souveraine] (Leibniz 1996:229). And since God has omniscience and sovereign goodness he must also have a "justice souveraine": for justice is nothing but goodness in conformity with wisdom [bonté conforme à la sagesse] (ibid.). And it is before this sovereign justice – this divine court of law – that the essences come to make their case, trusting that justice will be served.

On one level, this is clearly a metaphor, for as essences are ideas in God's understanding they cannot strictly speaking stand before or across from him. And the divine understanding is not literally a courtroom, of course. On another level, however, the idea of a supreme judge can benefit from a literal interpretation: God's will is decided by reasons – this is what makes him a mind and a rational agent. Among the infinity of possible things in God's understanding there is a candidate that strikes him as the more reasonable. In this sense, the possibles really do lodge a juridical claim, and one of the claimants will end up convincing the judge. (The actual world evidently made the best case, and the sentence was passed: God willed us.)

All of the expressions above (demand existence, convincing the supreme justice, being more reasonable, making the best case, have the better reasons, etc.) amount to the same, cryptic feat of being *more possible* than other possibles. In the same fragment from 1680, Leibniz explains that a possible thing will demand existence "in proportion to its possibility or according to its degree of essence" (Leibniz 2006:29). In the end, what is most convincing is the highest degree of essence:

> [That] combination of things always exists by which the greatest possible number of things exists, so that if we assume *A, B, C, D* to be equal with regard to essence, i.e. equally perfect, or equally demanding existence, and if we assume that *D* is incompatible with *A* and with *B*, while *A* is compatible with any except *D*, and similarly with regard to *B* and *C*, it follows that this combination, *A, B, C*, excluding *D,* will exist [...] [The] combination *C, D* [...] is certainly more imperfect than the combination *A, B, C* (ibid.).

Underneath this lies Leibniz's strictly logical notion of compatibility, which we remember from the 1676 proof of divine possibility: that *D* is incompatible with *A* means that it can be shown, through analysis of their components, that they negate each other. For instance, *A* could be composed of (*a, b, c…*) and *D* composed of (*a, b, -c…*). God cannot choose them together, so what eventually decides their respective eligibility is which of the two can combine with and enter into the longest series of possibles. God, being omniscient, knows the answer to this. So even though *A* and *D* have equally good

reasons (i.e. the same degree of essence) taken *in isolation*, their eligibility is decided by the second factor of collective accumulation. Consequently, to be willed by God appears to be a function of both individual essence and mutual compatibility.

"*C, D* […] is certainly more imperfect than the combination *A, B, C,*" Leibniz confidently states, indicating that the question is purely quantitative: the more essence, 'the greatest possible number of things', the better reason. But do not reasons convince because they are *good*? Do we not usually let a few, really good reasons trump a majority of silly ones? Or are we to believe that there is no such thing as a bad reason? A thing is *good*, Leibniz writes in another fragment from the same year, if it contributes to perfection, and *more perfect* if it involves more essence (A VI, iv, N. 99).[35] In view of this, Leibniz might object that both 'good', 'silly', or even 'bad' reasons are reasons insofar as they have some degree of essence – but in this particular context, the 'silly' or 'bad' reasons, however large the number, would never collectively amount to the *most* essence and convince God.

As is repeated seven times in Genesis 1, God looked upon his creation and *saw that it was good*. According to Leibniz, this is a perfectly useful definition of "existent". Being existent, he writes in 1686, is "[to please] something intelligent and powerful" (Parkinson 1965:119 = A VI, iv, N. 165). 'Intelligent *and* powerful', we may assume, because the intellect finds, through reasons, something for the powerful God to do. For Leibniz, there is no action without something accounting for it, that is, without reasons. This is why intellect and power must go hand in hand. Sheer power does not equal action; action is the prerogative of minds and minds are rational – they *like* reasons. In Leibniz's own words, "it is pleasing to a mind that there should be made that which has a reason rather than that which does not have a reason" (ibid., 120). The more reasons (or essence) the merrier.

The obvious flaw of the *exigentia*-doctrine and the corresponding 'what pleases God'-account of existence is acknowledged by Leibniz himself: "in this way existence itself is presupposed" – divine existence, to be precise (ibid., 119). If essences exist in proportion to their demand before a divine justice, what divine justice settles the case of divine existence itself? As a definition of existence, then, the account is unsatisfactory as it is fails to be exhaustive. Indeed, if God's existence is not accounted for, a state of affairs is still possible "in which God does not exist" and nothing at all pleases him (Adams

[35] "*Bonum* est quod confert ad perfectionem. *Perfectius* autem est, quod plus essentiae involvit."

1994:170). The non-existence of God has to be ruled out. It must be demonstrated that God's existence is in fact necessary – and why.

### 2.2 The *being* of the possibles – force

Despite its failure to account for divine existence, the *exigentia*-doctrine still articulates a conviction Leibniz seems to have held for the greater part of his life: there is something in – or about – essence which makes it tend towards existence. The tending might not take the form of a juridical plea in all cases (in the case of God, it cannot), but whatever its nature, *essence* is where it takes place.

Towards the end of the same fragment on *exigentia* from 1680, Leibniz foresightedly changes 'exigentia' to 'inclinatio':

> Unless in the nature of essence itself there is some *inclination* [inclinatio] to exist, nothing would exist; for to say that some essences have this inclination and others do not, is to say something without a reason, since existence seems to be generally traced back to [referri ad] every essence in the same way (Leibniz 2006:29-30 = A VI, iv, N. 270, my italics).

The cosmological premise at work here is the fact that *something* clearly exists, which yields a second argument by *modus tollens*, which in its equivalent *modus ponens* form states: if something exists, there is an inclination in the nature of essence. Something exists, so there is an inclination. Admittedly, an inclination of the sort in one essence alone would explain why there is something, but this, Leibniz says, would conflict with the PSR, since the way from existence back to essence is similar for every case of existence. So the inclination must be in the *nature* of essence in general. Two parts of this argument call for discussion. 1. The first is the assumption that without an *inclination*, nothing would exist – like the first *modus tollens* argument about 'demand', this sounds unsubstantiated. 2. The second is the claim that all essences pass over into existence in the same way. I shall look at both these claims in turn.

1. The first *modus tollens* argument in the 1680 fragment stated that 'unless it were in the nature of possibility or of essence to *demand* existence, no *reason* could be given for the existence of things'. On the assumption that demand and reason are inseparable in the case of existence, this conditional is conclusive (if a little trivial). As we saw, the weight of the demand, juridically speaking, was decided by the pure amount of reasons provided by the thing. The argument has a distinct nominal feel to it, however: defining reason as demand and *vice versa* sheds no light on the ontological

constitution of either of them. Furthermore, as we saw, it provided a definition of existence that applied only to finite things – divine existence remained unaccounted for.

This second *modus tollens* argument is different for two reasons. Firstly, a semantic shift has taken place. Despite its psychological and juridical connotations, 'demand' is decidedly less active than this new term: *inclination*. When a legal demand is put forth, it still has to await the judge's verdict. (Or as most children grudgingly know to be true, demanding something does not mean getting it.) The term 'inclination', on the other hand, suggests independence, or more precisely: some sort of *spontaneity*, which anticipates Leibniz's conception of substance as an active force.

Secondly, and interestingly, the second *modus tollens* argument is *a posteriori*. A mere observation suffices to rebut the consequent: we see that "nothing would exist" is false. But is Leibniz entitled to such a leap into actuality? If the point is to secure divine existence, I do not see how he could be, for he would again be presupposing existence – creaturely existence this time. Still, if he *is* entitled to this observation, not only is the second argument valid but it is also no longer trivial.[36] On Robert Merrihew Adams' view, "[this] is not a silly argument. The fact that something exists, rather than nothing, does indeed seem to be a reason for suspecting that there is a bias for existence in the most basic metaphysical truths" (Adams 1994:176). A suspicion of something resembling an inclination might be supported by the observation that something exists, although this is far from a stringent argument. It tells us that since something exists, existence is *somehow* fundamentally favoured. The concept of 'inclination' is still in need of clarification, though, which luckily is what Leibniz provides when he returns to work on the ontological argument in the 1690s.

2. As regards the second unsubstantiated claim that existence is traced back to every essence in the same way, this fails for the same reason that the 'what pleases God'-account of existence failed: if existence is traced back to every essence in the same way (by amount of essence or reasons), it must be traced back to God's essence in the same

[36] In fact, the observation that 'there is something' has more force than one might immediately think. Given Leibniz's gradualism, which I shall treat at greater length in section 2.4 of this chapter, the fact that there is something *implies* that 'there was never nothing'. This, of course, is not the same as nothingness being metaphysically impossible, but it means that 'nothingness' is counterfactual not only *at this moment*, but at every moment in time. See the *New Essays*: "*il n'y jamais eu aucun temps, où rien n'existoit.* J'en demeure d'accord, et cela suit veritablement [...] par une consequence toute mathematique. Car si jamais il y avoit eu rien, il y avoit toujours eu rien, le rien ne pouvant point produire un Estre; donc nous mêmes ne serions pas, ce qui est contre la première verité d'experience" (GP V, 417).

way too, but this particular route is still uncharted territory. It is not yet clear how God's essence involves (necessary) existence – given that such a thing as a divine essence is even possible. And if we do not know how divine existence is traced back to essence, we do not know how existence is generally traced back to essence. So this second claim too must remain unsubstantiated until the 1690s, when Leibniz's new conception of substance rekindles hope for a passage from possibility to actuality. This passage, at last, is what I shall now turn to.

In 1694, the modal categories of necessity and actuality are developed within a new conception of substance as some sort of *force*:

> [I say] that the concept of *forces* or *powers*, which the Germans call *Kraft* and the French *la force*, and for whose explanation I have set up a distinct science of *dynamics*, brings the strongest light to bear upon our understanding of the true concept of *substance* (Leibniz 1969:433).

Leibniz goes on to explain that this "active force" is different from the Scholastic conception of "active power or faculty" in that it is "carried into action by itself and needs no help but *only the removal of an impediment*" (ibid., my italics). This feature of the Leibnizian concept of force will play a crucial role in establishing the final ontological argument, as I propose in chapter 3. One year later, in the first published account of his own metaphysical system,[37] Leibniz explains that he had arrived at this new conception of substance through the realisation that since matter is infinitely divisible, there can be no "*principles of a true unity* in matter alone",[38] and that consequently, "it was necessary, in addition [to the concept of extended mass] to use the concept of *force*, which is fully intelligible, although it falls within the sphere of metaphysics" (ibid., 454). More precisely,

> it was necessary to [...] rehabilitate the *substantial forms* which are in such disrepute today, but in a way which makes them intelligible and separates their proper use from their previous abuse. I found that their nature consists of force and that there follows from this something analogous to sense and appetite, so that we must think of them in terms similar to the concept which we have of *souls*. [...] I concluded that one ought not to use these forms to explain the particular problems of nature, though they are necessary to establish its true general principles. Aristotle calls them first entelechies. I call them, more intelligibly perhaps,

[37] The article, entitled "Systeme nouveau pour expliquer la nature des substances et leur communication entre elles, aussi bien que l'union de l'ame avec le corps", was published in the *Journal des savants* in 1695.
[38] Atoms are fundamental unities of matter. Denying their existence means denying unity in matter. Leibniz's reason for denying atoms is his subscription to the principle of the identity of indiscernibles (Leibniz 2009:299).

> *primitive forces*, which contain not only the *actuality* or the *completion* of possibility but an original activity as well (ibid.).

Substances are best understood as *primitive forces of acting*. The laws of these forces are soul-like, not mechanical, so they cannot explain 'the particular problems of nature', but we need them in order to arrive at the 'true general principles' that are prior to nature. Ontologically, then, since they are the 'principles of true unity', *forces* are the only safe point of departure – for as Leibniz famously tells Arnauld in 1687, only that which has *unity* can truly be said to *be* (GP II, 97).[39]

Crucially, forces already contain 'the *actuality* or the *completion* of possibility'. According to Wolfgang Janke, these are epochally changed concepts of essence and existence, or possibility and actuality (Janke 1963:280). Admittedly, 'possibility in an actual form' does put a strain on the imagination. Was anything ever merely possible? What does it mean that a possibility is completed? And where does this leave the concept of essence? If forces contain the actualisation of possibility, they contain the actualisation of essence, as the two are the same. Metaphysically prior to essence, or at the least inseparable from it, is a force containing it. This force is the true nature of reality, or, which amounts to the same, the sole contender for the title of 'substance'. Force is also said to 'contain' two things, one of which is 'the actualisation of possibility' or essence in actual form. The other is an 'original activity' of soul-like character. These two correspond, I hope to show, to two aspects of the Leibnizian substance: their *orderliness* and *spontaneity*, respectively.

Action is essential to substance, Leibniz writes on several occasions.[40] But the action that is characteristic of *force* is of a peculiar kind. In a first draft of the same metaphysical article, of which I have found no English translation, Leibniz elaborates on what sort of action we are dealing with:

> [By] Force or Power [Puissance] I do not mean the power [pouvoir] or the simple faculty which is nothing but a close possibility of acting, and which, being as though dead itself, never produces an action without being provoked [excitée] from the outside, but I mean a middle

[39] "[Je] tiens pour axiome cette proposition identique qui n'est diversifiée que par l'accent, sçavoir *que ce qui n'est pas veritablement* un *estre, n'est pas non plus veritablement un* estre [...]. [Le] pluriel suppose le singulier."

[40] "[L]'activité est de l'essence de la substance en général" (A VI, vi, N. 2 = *Préface, Nouveaux Essais*); "Ce qui n'agit point, ne merite point le nom de substance [...]" (GP VI, 350 = T 393).

> between power [pouvoir] and action, which envelops an effort, an act, an entelechy, for force passes of itself into action, which is its character (GP IV, 472).[41]

How can we make sense of 'a middle between power and action'? It is safe to say, at least, that if force is a middle, it is none of the two extremes: it is no mere potentiality to act, motionless until moved from the outside; but neither is it action, which by definition is already happening. Action is essential to substances – but without a soul-like 'effort' which 'passes of itself into action', there would be no action. This effort comes from within and is what makes action *spontaneous*, unlike the mere triggering of a potentiality that is 'as though dead itself'.

One who also rejected mere or 'dead in itself'-potentiality was Baruch de Spinoza, who famously held that nothing happens that is not in fact necessary. His is a world of continual actualisation or "[immer schon] erfüllte Wirklichkeit", where nothing exists but the unperturbed exertion of the might or power of God (Bartuschat 1996:51). Curiously, Leibniz seems to agree at least partially with this picture: there can be no mere potentiality, for force, the most fundamental reality, always contains an 'original activity' or 'effort'. There remains one crucial difference, however. Unlike Spinoza, Leibniz holds that some possibles are *hindered* in their original activity, which is why not all possible things exist. For instance, the concept of a world in which Judas does not betray Jesus cannot be demonstrated by a finite analysis to contain a contradiction.[42] Therefore, that world is possible in itself although it is manifestly not actual. So insofar as it is possible or has some essence, the world of the loyal Judas is intrinsically disposed to exist: it is non-contradictory, it presents reasons (or an amount of essence) to the divine understanding, or – we may now assume – its essence is inseparable from a force striving for its actualisation.

Every possible thing is predisposed to exist before its actual existence, although this disposition is of an ever-active kind. To postulate that things have dispositional

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[41] "[Par] la Force ou Puissance je n'entends pas le pouvoir ou la simple faculté qui n'est qu'une possibilité prochaine pour agir et qui estant comme morte même ne produit jamais une action sans estre excitée par dehors, mais j'entends un milieu entre le pouvoir et l'action, qui enveloppe un effort, un acte, une entelechie, car la force passe d'elle même à l'action, qui en est le charactere."

[42] See for instance "On the Actual Infinite" in the *Specimen calculi universalis* from around 1679: "[As] in the case of surd ratios, the reduction involves an infinite process, and yet approaches a common measure, so that a definite but unending series is obtained, so also contingent truths require an infinite analysis, which only God can accomplish" (Leibniz 1951:98-99). I take this to mean that contingent truths are contingent precisely in virtue of their *proof-theoretical property* of requiring infinite analysis. God's intellect can know these truths, but even God cannot give a finite demonstration of them, because there is none. See Adams on the proof-theoretical notion of contingency (Adams 1994:25-30, in particular p. 28).

properties, Adams explains, is simply one way to be a realist about causation: "If there is more to the causal order of the world than just the observable regularities of nondispositional fact, and if the laws of nature are not freestanding features of the world, it remains that there must be a feature (or features) of one or more objects or substances by virtue of which the regularities of nature obtain" (Adams 1994:313). If Hume is wrong and causation is real, and if one wants to avoid reifying the laws of nature, the causing feature must be located within the things themselves. There must be some "dispositional property of the thing to which it belongs – a power or a tendency or perhaps a liability" (ibid.). Leibniz has just suggested such a feature: the key to the causal mystery *par excellence*, namely that of existence itself, lies in his concept of *force*.

### 2.3 Spontaneity and order – the activity of souls

#### 2.3.1 Spontaneity

For the best understanding of substance, it will be recalled, Leibniz referred to his science of forces, i.e. his *dynamics* (Leibniz 1969:433). In his *Specimen dynamicum* from 1695, Leibniz uses the example of *physical* forces or *motion* to explain why substances must be spontaneous and orderly: "[*W*]*hatever happens in substances must be understood to happen spontaneously and in an orderly way*. With this is connected the principle that *no change occurs through a leap*. If this is established, it follows also that there can be no atoms" – atoms being defined as "[inflexible] bodies of maximum hardness" (ibid., 446). True to fashion, Leibniz does not explicitly connect the to him so inseparable doctrines, but my guess is that the reasoning behind is something along the following lines: if force is the most fundamental of all realities, there can be talk of no true standstill (as was the case for Spinoza). Interestingly, the metaphysical impossibility of complete standstill seems to follow from the Principle of Sufficient Reason: if there are no brute facts (nothing without reason), then nature makes no 'causal jumps'. A complete standstill would be a 'causal jump' from motion to absolute rest. For however minuscule the motion, it could never completely disappear without conflicting with the PSR: at no point can something become nothing – in the same way that, conversely, no sum of 'nothings' can become something: "nothing but rest could arise from rest" (ibid., 449).

As regards atoms, they too are disproven by the absurdity of absolute rest: if there were atoms, things would come to a complete standstill, for when two 'maximally

hard' or 'inflexible' things collide, an absurd two-stage scenario of collision and (wholly inexplicable) deflection results. Inflexibility entails a causal jump, for a collision of atoms is nothing but "an instantaneous change from motion to rest without passing through intermediate degrees" (ibid.). What is lacking in this picture, of course, is *rebound*, and the only way to explain or give reasons for rebound is to allow for *elasticity*:

> [There] is no body, however small, which has no elasticity and is not thus permeated by a still subtler fluid [and] that analysis proceeds to the infinite […]. This is of such great importance in nature that I wonder that it has been so little noticed. […] [*A*]*ll rebound arises from elasticity*, and a reason is given for many brilliant experiments which show that *a body is bent before it is propelled* (ibid, 447.).

Even *rest* (the physical counterpart of motion) "can be considered as a special case of motion, namely, the case of a disappearing and minimal motion" (ibid.). This showcases the asymptotic nature of so many of Leibniz's ideas, happy as he was to invoke the concept of actual infinity. Constant motion and elasticity to infinity characterise Leibniz's *physics*. But motions are not primitive forces, just as bodies are not substances – so how does elasticity shed light on the spontaneity of substance?

In his SEP entry on Leibniz's dynamics, Jeffrey K. McDonough writes that when it comes to forces, "what we are inclined to think of as Leibniz's physics […] clearly bumps up against – indeed overlaps with – what we are inclined to think of as his metaphysics" (McDonough 2014). The reason, McDonough writes, lies in a relation of *grounding*: "It is widely accepted that Leibniz's primitive forces are supposed to serve as the intelligible metaphysical grounds for the forces that are of concern in physics" (ibid.). The derivative forces are proof of something more fundamental and primitive without which they would be inexplicable:

> I have often said – and I do not remember ever to have deviated from this position – that unless there were some primary active principle in us, there could be no derivative forces and actions in us, since everything accidental and changeable must be a modification of something essential or perpetual […] (Leibniz 1969:536 = GP II, 270, *Letter to de Volder* [1704]).

What is changeable and derivative has being only insofar as it is grounded in something of greater unity. "[L]ike time," Leibniz writes in the *Specimen*, "motion taken in an exact sense never exists, because a whole does not exist if it has no coexisting parts" – whatever it is that *endures* as a thing moves, it cannot be motion itself, for 'coexisting

parts of motion' amounts to an absurdity[43] – "[therefore] there is nothing real in motion itself except that momentaneous state which must consist of a force striving towards change. Whatever there is in corporeal nature […] must be reduced to this force" (ibid., 436). Motion owes its whole reality to that which is *momentaneously* – not sequentially – active. And being active without being sequential (without requiring time and place, like motion) means being the source of one's own action, or to be spontaneous. "[M]otion never truly exists[…], only force and the effort arising from it [the force] *at any moment*" (ibid., 449, my italics). In virtue of this dependence relation, the constancy of motion is analogous[44] to the constancy of force: in the same way that "*there is never any true rest in bodies*" (due to their elasticity to infinity) there is no such thing as a 'dead force' (ibid.).

A consequence of this lively metaphysical picture is that even the *passivity* of the material world is the result of a more primitive force: "*every passion of a body is spontaneous or arises from an internal source*" (ibid., 448). This source is to be found in substance as well: "there is in every substance a force of action and […] if it is created substance, there is also a force of suffering [passion]" (ibid., 445).[45] Upon creation, the phenomenal materiality of the actual world will result from substances' forces of passivity. The opportune question is, of course, what form these forces take when the substance is still a mere possible in the divine understanding. In an undated fragment which has occasioned much controversy, Leibniz calls the passivity in substances '*metaphysical matter*': "Substances have metaphysical matter or passive power insofar as they express something confusedly; active, insofar as they express it distinctly" (ibid., 365 = GP VII, 319f). In the following section, I shall attempt to make sense of this statement. My belief is that the passive forces in substances hold the key to why some possibles remain unactualised.

### 2.3.2 Orderliness

Spontaneity characterises the 'original activity' of substances; they are never 'dead', not even when they are being acted upon. This vitality is no random, unchecked exertion, however. It is orderly. Here is where the 'actualised possibility'-aspect of substance comes into play: if forces bring about action, they do so by actualising the essence from

[43] "Motion is the continuous change of place" (ibid., 437).
[44] See section 2.4 for a more detailed discussion of analogy.
[45] I prefer the slightly more paradoxical 'force of passivity', or 'force of being acted upon' to Loemker's 'suffering', which I believe has too dominant psychological connotations.

which they cannot be separated. Essence is what *determines* force.

In a short but illuminating section in his book on Leibniz from 1994, Adams connects Leibniz's rehabilitated version of the substantial forms (i.e. the primitive force of action) with the concept of *law* (Adams 1994:314-16). Among the textual evidence to support this is a note later added to a letter from 1676 (mentioned in footnote 30 of this chapter):

> The author [Foucher] is right in saying that thought is not the essence of soul, for a thought is an act, and since one thought succeeds another, that which remains during this change must necessarily rather be the essence of the soul, since it remains always the same. The essence of substances consists in the primitive force of action, or in the *law of the sequence of changes* [...] (Leibniz 1969:155, my italics).

Thoughts change, but every sequence of change follows a rule that is prior to it. The essence of soul is whatever this rule is. Leibniz then proceeds directly to substances (by analogy, presumably, since substances are soul-like): substances have the character of a *law* in addition to that of active force. The two are equally important aspects, 'force *or* law'. It is no coincidence that Leibniz often defines *freedom* as "rational spontaneity" (A VE, N. 262 [1677]).[46] On this definition, being free amounts to being a substance: acting *spontaneously* and *founded on reasons*. A 'dead' mechanism does not equal freedom, however *orderly* it may be – and irrational chaos does not equal freedom, however *spontaneous* it may be.

The substance's reasons could not be any given ones, however. Substances are candidates for freedom because the reasons determining them are *in* the substances themselves: in their essence. They are literally *autonomous*: they follow their own laws. And autonomous action means being determined to actuality by one's own reasons. Every created substance strives towards the actualisation of their essence, towards determining themselves to everything that they can possibly be, which is why action on Leibniz's view does not belong to God alone. This is probably the point on which he is in greatest disagreement with the occasionalist Nicolas Malebranche, who insisted that the only true principle of action is God – at the expense of the autonomy of God's creatures.

The concept of action as self-determination (force conforming to law) takes us to the final part of Leibniz's journey towards the *Monadology*-version of the ontological argument, for it is determination that explains how finite substances hinder each other.

[46] "[...] libertas est spontaneitas rationalis".

And if they are not hindered, we remember Leibniz saying, the substantial forces are carried into action by themselves (Leibniz 1969:433). In 1694, Leibniz writes: "[One] created substance receives from another created substance, not the force of acting itself, but only the limits and the determination of its own pre-existent striving or power of action" (ibid., 433). So the determination of a substance's striving is not the result of some other substance's 'impact', but of a determination that was already *in the substance's striving* from the beginning. What, then, makes Leibniz say that a force "has its full effect unless impeded by a contrary striving" (ibid., 435)? One answer is found in §50-52 of the *Monadology*:

> One created being is more perfect than another if one finds in it that which will supply a reason a priori for what happens in the other. […] It is in this way that actions and passions are mutual among creatures. For God, comparing two simple substances, finds the reasons in each which oblige him to adapt the other to it, with the result that whatever is active in certain respects is passive considered from another point – *active* insofar as what we distinctly know in it serves as a reason for what happens in another, but *passive* insofar as the reason for what happens in it is found in what we know distinctly in another (Leibniz 1969:648).

A substance is active if it 'suppl[ies] a reason a priori' for other substances – reasons, or laws. Both action and passivity are determinations already present in each essence (each law of the sequence of events that ever befall it), but passivity in a substance comes about because God made one substance accommodate to the laws of *another* substance. The 'actions and passions are mutual among creatures', Leibniz writes, which means that the same reasons can enter into the essences of two different substances and determine them. The difference is whether the determination is mediate or immediate.

The *Monadology* uses the later developed vocabulary of *expression* (to which I shall return in the final section of this chapter), which underlines the soul-like character of substance as endowed with *appetite* and *perception*. I believe these two concepts could be read as psychological equivalents of substance's *spontaneity* and *orderliness*. A soul's appetite is its internal source of change, and its perception is its essential 'content': expressions of everything that will ever happen to it. The action or passivity of the soul depends on the degree of clarity of its expression. When a soul is passive, it will feel that it is being acted upon (Leibniz sometimes calls this *weakness*), for the 'reason for what happens in it' is not 'distinctly' known by it. God has determined it to this

particular event by consideration of another substance's reasons.[47] Speaking in more metaphysical terms, the result is a substance which taken in isolation is less active, less *self-determined* than the other substance.

This, then, is how substances act on each other primordially in the domain of possibility. The 'contrary striving' is nothing but God's weighing all the essences' reasons and adjusting them to one another; for the only thing acting on substances is God, as Leibniz writes in §32 of his *Discourse on Metaphysics* from 1686:

> For one sees clearly that all other substances depend on God, [...] that it is he alone who determines them from the outside by his influence, and, if to act is to determine immediately, it can be said in this sense, in the language of metaphysics, that God alone operates on me, and God alone can do good or evil to me; *the other substances contribute only by reason of these determinations*, because God, having regard for all, shares his blessings and requires them to accommodate themselves to one another (Leibniz 2009:244, my italics).

Only God can determine a substance 'from the outside', but he does this with a side-glance, so to speak, at other substances' essences. As a result, since the reasons in its essence have been *mediately* determined, the substance's force is one of passivity. It is still a force, but the laws determining its striving are those of another substance. Consequently, force of passivity is no *autonomous* action, but rather *heteronomous* passivity. Leibniz writes: 'to act is to determine immediately', that is, to obey one's own intrinsic laws, without mediation. In heteronomous passivity the reasons for why something happens seem alien to the soul; they confuse it.

God contemplates all this in his understanding. Which substances together combine to the greatest degree of perfection? It is all there already, in the essence of each substance, in the law that it contains. In the end, only God determines the finite substances to either immediate self-determination or mediate determination, with consideration of the reasons or laws between them. The most passive of substances is decidedly less perfect: it expresses its essence in an utterly confused manner. This, however, does not mean that it is banned from the set of best compossibles. One substance could in itself be of great perfection and could determine itself to many things, and the reasons it carried would be correspondingly convincing to God. A loyal Judas might be such a substance. In the greater scheme of things, however, the lesser degree of

[47] Perhaps an example could be that of a parent putting a child to bed in the middle of a fun game: the child will feel powerlessness because she cannot understand the reasons for this perceived injustice. Her perception of the reasons is *confused*. The soul that puts her to bed, on the other hand, perceives the same reasons far more distinctly.

perfection in the treacherous Judas secures a world of much greater perfection and harmony. Through comparison with other possible Judases, God determines one possible Judas to the confused perception of the events of that fateful Easter week. This is the case even though the sequence that is the act of betrayal itself, in all its greed and short-sightedness, amounts to a less perfect expression of the universe than a sequence taken out of the essence of the loyal Judas – him politely declining the offer of thirty pieces of silver, for instance. 'God requires [the substances] to accommodate themselves to one another', Leibniz writes, and it is this *infinite calculation of compossibles* that eliminated the loyal Judas. In itself, the concept of a loyal Judas does not contain any contradiction, but at a more detailed level its predicate of loyalty contradicts the predicate of treacherousness, with the result that the world in which the loyal Judas fits is a world without the crucifixion. So the striving of the loyal Judas must give way to the striving of the treacherous Judas.

The 'contrary striving', then, is what Janke calls "Widerstand" (Janke 1963:281): there is no internal contradiction in a thing's essence, it is perfectly possible in itself and thus inclined to exist, but its self-determination never reaches the outpost of existence; 'everything it is capable of' does not ultimately include 'to exist' – and the reason for this failure always lies in another substance. The unactualised possible had a claim to existence, but the claim was ill argued: it was vague, unarticulated, confused. In this manner, Leibniz keeps every possible from actually existing (and thereby his system from necessitarianism): the primordial *Widerstand* between possible substances is when one is determined to non-existence by another's reasons. This means that the only possible reason for a substance's non-existence is another's reason for existence, which is a point I shall discuss at greater length in chapter 3.

### 2.4 A remark on method: analogy – *everywhere is like here*

Before proceeding to the final chapter, where I investigate exactly how the Doctrine of Striving Possibles allows for a final version of the ontological argument, I want to make what is hopefully a helpful digression on the topic of *analogy.* The reader will surely have noticed the ease with which Leibniz moves from physical phenomena (motion and rest; bodies that are bent before being propelled; no jumps in nature; the science of dynamics or forces, etc.) to claims about metaphysical substances. This jumping back and forth needs justification.

In an often-cited letter to De Volder from 1704, where the monadic theory of substance finds its perhaps most concise formulation, Leibniz justifies his use of dynamics to explain substance, providing useful insight into his method:

> "[Force] is taken to be the principle of action and passion […]. [This] principle of action is most intelligible, *because there is something in it analogous to what is in us*, namely, perception and appetite. For the nature of things is uniform, and our nature cannot differ infinitely from the other simple substances of which the whole universe consists. Indeed, considering the matter carefully, it may be said that there is nothing in the world except simple substances and, in them, perception and appetite (Leibniz 1969:536, my italics).

Leibniz sees an analogy between the *primary principle of action* and 'what is in us, namely, perception and appetite'. It is in virtue of this analogy that force is 'most intelligible', he explains. Yet analogies have the dubious quality of simultaneously comparing and setting apart. 'Analogous', after all, usually means 'similar but by the same token *not* identical'. In a way, analogies are frustratingly ambivalent; they seem to actively hide the very truth that they are supposed to reveal. Leibniz clearly found them both appropriate and informative, however, and I believe there are at least three main reasons for this. The first reason is his gradualism; the second his conviction that every effect expresses its cause; and the third what can be called his conceptual atomism.[48] I shall discuss all three briefly.

According to Gaston Grua, who dedicates several chapters to analogy in his exceptional book on Leibniz from 1953, it is Leibniz's *gradualism* that motivates his frequent use of analogy (Grua 1953:63-4). This gradualism is again at least in part motivated by the PSR, with the resulting impossibility of causal jumps, of inflexibility, of atoms, of vacuum – of any state of affairs being without reason or inexplicable. Grua quotes a letter to queen Sophie Charlotte of Prussia from 1704, in which this gradualism even takes the name of a maxim: "la maxime que *c'est tout comme icy*" – *everywhere is like here* – "whence it follows that both naturally and speaking in metaphysical rigour, there can be neither generation nor death, but only development and envelopment" (GP III, 345).[49] Leibniz's philosophy is one of systematic *homeliness.* As he explained to De Volder in the letter above, "the nature of things is uniform, and our nature *cannot differ*

[48] Although these three reasons may all prove deducible from one another, as is so often the case with Leibniz's doctrines, I make no attempts at such deductions here. What is of interest is what they have in common, namely a legitimisation of analogy as a method.

[49] "[…] d'où il s'ensuit encor que naturellement et parlant suivant la rigeur metaphysique, il n'y a ny generation ny mort, mais seulement developpement et enveloppement […]". I take the envelopment-clause to refer primarily to the 'elasticity to infinity' of material being, see section 2.3.1 on spontaneity.

*infinitely* from the other simple substances of which the whole universe consists" (Leibniz 1969:536, my italics). Every difference is gradual. Things are never wholly unlike; there are no two things that could not reasonably be compared; there is always some common ground; everywhere is like home, etc. But, and this is of course crucial, no two things can ever be perfectly alike either, as this would conflict with Leibniz's principle of the identity of indiscernibles (PII). So for every likeness, there is always some unlikeness, and vice versa – and what does this better justice than the ever-ambiguous analogy? Analogies are perfectly useful expressions of equality in Leibniz's world of *déjà-vu*, precisely in virtue of their asymptotic nature (≈).

The second reason for the relevance of analogy is Leibniz's conviction that every effect expresses its cause: "Indeed, *all individual created substances are different expressions of the same universe* and different expressions of the same universal cause, namely God" (Leibniz 2009:267 = *Primary Truths* [1689]). Everything that ever happens to the created substances is contained in the laws of their own essence and can be explained by recourse to it. But God is the cause of all these essences:

> [In] rigorous metaphysical truth, there is no external cause acting on us except God alone, and [from] this it follows that there is no other external object that touches our soul and immediately excites our perception. Thus we have ideas of everything in our soul only by virtue of God's continual action on us, that is to say, because every effect expresses its cause, and thus the essence of our soul is a certain expression, imitation or image of the divine essence, thought, and will, and of all the ideas comprised in it (ibid., 241 = *Discourse on Metaphysics,* §28).

Everything that is in our souls is there because we *express* our divine origin. God alone excites our soul to perception; he puts the entire sequence of perceptions in us. Speaking metaphysically, the force that strives for the actualisation of a finite essence is an expression of the force and essence of God. "But", Leibniz writes in his *Primary Truths*, after having asserted that created substances are expressions of God, "the expressions vary in perfection, just as different representations or drawings of the same town from different perspectives do" (ibid., 267). Our expression differs in perfection from that of God, and since no thing can be both A and –A (given the PC), this difference in perfection ensures that God and the creatures are distinct substances. So again we see that even though no two things are wholly unlike, they cannot be wholly alike either. For if God had simply duplicated or multiplied himself so that each of his creatures were a perfectly limpid expression of him, there would be no telling the different Gods apart,

which again would conflict with the PII. So "rational souls at least serve to give us some knowledge of [other substances] by analogy", Leibniz writes to Arnauld, and the reason lies in the fact of their being caused by God and thereby expressing him (ibid., 256).

The third reason for the use of analogy is the more logical articulation of the previous one, namely Leibniz's lifelong project of a *characteristic*: a universal language. In a letter to the princess Elisabeth of Palatine from 1678, Leibniz writes:

> [This] characteristic would represent our thoughts truly and distinctly […]. I dare not say what would follow from this for the perfection of the sciences – it would appear incredible. And yet, there is a demonstration of this. […] But for now it is sufficient for me to note that the foundation of my characteristic is also the foundation of the demonstration of God's existence. For simple thoughts are the elements of the characteristic and simple forms are compatible among themselves. […] [If] this is granted, it follows that God's nature, which contains all simple forms taken absolutely, is possible [and] we have proven above that God exists, as long as he is possible. Therefore, he exists (Leibniz 1989:240 = A II, i, N. 187b).

The 'simple forms' to which he refers are the divine attributes, defined during the Paris period as "basic metaphysical categories. Or, rather, they are primal, unlimited purely positive versions of metaphysical categories that are combined with limits in other beings. Specifically, they include immensity, eternity, omniscience, and omnipotence, all conceived as the absolute degrees of the […] categories of reality" (Adams 1994:114 = A VI, iii, N. $36_1$, N. 74 [1676]).[50] Combined with limits, these categories of reality constitute beings of finite extension, finite temporality, finite understanding and finite powers. In the years that follow, however, Leibniz nuances this strictly logical picture, adding the force and striving of soul-like substances. We see an example of this in the *Specimen dynamicum* from 1695, where 'omniscience and omnipotence' are jointly replaced by the notion of activity or force: "[F]orce is something absolutely real even in created substances but […] space, time, and motion […] are not true and real per se but only insofar as they involve the divine attributes of immensity, eternity, and *activity or the force of created substances*" (Leibniz 1969:445, my italics). Even in 1676, Leibniz is not entirely comfortable with creation through negation and conjunction alone, for in an unaddressed fragment he writes:

> And in this way everything is contained in some way in everything. But clearly in another way in God than in Things […]. Things are made, not by the combination of forms alone, in God, but [by combination] *with a subject too*. The subject itself, or God, with its ubiquity yields the immense; this immense, *combined with other subjects*, causes all the possible […] Things in it,

[50] Note that God's will is not among the basic categories, only his understanding and power.

to follow. Various results from forms combined with a subject cause particulars to result" (Adams 1994:130, my italics = A VI, iii, 523).

Leibniz needed something like the notion of a subject to make 'Things' sufficiently distinct from God and avoid Spinozism. I believe it was this intuition that later developed into the notion of individual substance with spontaneous, autonomous action.[51] Aside from the addition of subject or substance, however, Leibniz kept his initial conviction of creatures' conceptual dependence on God. The attributes of God are ascribed to finite creatures by limitation, and consequently, all created things share the same fundamental realities. No creature can fully explain itself (be conceived through itself) – the final point of analysis will always be the divine attributes. This 'reuse of code' is the third reason why analogies carry greater weight in Leibniz's system: things are both like and unlike because although the components of all things are the same, they have different degrees of limitation.

These three reasons also explain why, on Leibniz's view, no denominations are truly extrinsic. Because every difference is gradual, every effect expresses the one same cause and everything shares in the same atomic concepts, it follows that the exact temperature of the Oslo fjord on this cold winter day is something that can be truly predicated of me, or of Judas, or of Leibniz himself.[52] In fact, this trivial proposition is true even of God.

The willingness to use analogy and the underlying conviction that *c'est tout comme icy* is of particular relevance in the context of the ontological argument. The whole enterprise of constructing such arguments is predicated on the conviction that whatever can be said of *being in general* also applies to the *being of God*. This conviction, Gaston Grua explains, is a crucial feature of Leibniz's ontology, which is one in which both God and his creatures are species of the category of *being* (Grua 1954:56).[53] Most scholastic philosophers took great care to deny this; on their view, creaturely and divine being could never be subsumed under one category (ibid., 55).[54] St. Thomas Aquinas used analogies expressly to mark this chasm, indicating that speaking *analogously* about God's being is the closest we can ever get to it (ibid.). Aquinas, of course, was also

[51] In 1678, upon reading Spinoza's *Ethics*, Leibniz objects that "there are some things that are in themselves though they are not conceived through themselves. And this is how men commonly conceive of substances" (Leibniz 1969:196 = GP I, 139).
[52] See *Primary Truths* from 1689 on the complete or perfect notion of an individual substance.
[53] "[Les] lois de l'être commun sont donc applicables à Dieu".
[54] "l'Etre infini est premier, non subordonné à l'être abstrait".

famously sceptical of ontological arguments, stating in the first part of his *Summa theologicae* that such arguments are self-evident and useful to no-one but God himself, seeing as only he can know the divine essence (Aquinas 2017, 1a.Q2.A1). Leibniz, on the other hand, puts the accent on the similarity-claim of analogies: just as we can understand substances by analogy with souls, we can understand God's being by analogy with our own being. Curiously, Grua writes, Leibniz never developed the difference between divine and creaturely being as systematically and with as much complacency as he developed the similarity between them (Grua 1954:56). As a result, the feeling of homeliness is warranted everywhere in Leibniz's system – throughout the whole of the universe, all the way to God.

# Chapter 3

## A Bias for Existence

*Chapter abstract: In the first part of this final chapter, I discuss how Leibniz accounts for God's necessary existence with the help of the Doctrine of Striving Possibles, resulting in a final ontological argument. I argue that a metaphysical system in which possible things exist unless they are hindered is one that favours existence over non-existence. The second part of the chapter is a discussion of a proposed 'Leibnizian intuition' that nothingness is easier and simpler than something. I argue that this interpretation of Leibniz conflicts with the results of his ontotheology.*

***

In the two previous chapters, I presented the main traits of Leibniz's work on the ontological argument and the development of the metaphysical doctrine known as the *exigentia*-doctrine – later the Doctrine of Striving Possibles. As I hope to show in this third and final chapter, the Doctrine of Striving Possibles sheds light on a striking fact about Leibniz's system, namely that it fundamentally favours existence over non-existence. Possible things exist unless they are hindered, which makes existence the default status. In part A, I examine how, equipped with his new conception of possibility as a *tendency to exist*, Leibniz returns to work on the ontological argument. Part B builds on part A and is a critique of an article by Brandon C. Look from 2013, in which he cites Leibniz in support of a version of metaphysical nihilism, or the belief that there being nothing is a possible (if not actual) state of affairs. Look bases his reading on §7 of *Principles of Nature and Grace*, in which Leibniz appears to take the PSR to imply that nothingness [le rien] is simpler and easier than something. Look calls this 'a Leibnizian intuition'. In my opinion, Look's reading conflicts with the culmination of Leibniz's ontotheology, namely the necessary existence of God and the resulting metaphysical bias for existence. Before proceeding to either of these discussions, however, an overview of the ground covered up until now is in order.

## PART A

### 3.1 The final ontological argument

In the 1670s, Leibniz sets to work on a version of the ontological argument he attributes to Descartes, in which existence is counted among God's perfections. This argument is

valid, Leibniz often holds, but it has yet to be rendered complete.[55] The reason is that the demonstrandum (the *Ens perfectissimum*, or 'a being possessing all perfections') needs a real definition: it must be demonstrated that this being is at all *possible*. Attempts at providing such a demonstration in 1676 lead Leibniz to the realisation that not only is it unclear whether existence is a perfection, but the concept of *Ens perfectissimum* on which the whole argument rests seems liable to contradiction. So while still attempting to salvage the Cartesian argument, Leibniz develops a second strategy (as an escape route perhaps), namely to prove God's existence from his essence [*ex eius essentia*] (A II, i, N. 164). This entails a definition of God as the only being *from whose essence existence follows*, i.e. a necessary being.

Within a year, a proof from the essence of a necessary being becomes Leibniz's preferred strategy, although this comes at the admitted expense of the logical stringency of the argument. In a letter to Eckhard in 1677, Leibniz acknowledges that a possibility proof of the kind that is needed has not yet been found.[56] According to Michael V. Griffin, it is no coincidence that Leibniz's denial of a possibility proof comes at the same time as the shift from *Ens perfectissimum* to *Ens necessarium*. In fact, the new strategy of proving that God's existence *follows from* his essence "requires a notion of 'follows from,' 'essence' and 'possible' that cannot be characterized in purely logical or conceptual terms" (Griffin 2013:49). The appropriate characterisation, it turns out, is *ontological*: "The possible existence or possibility of any thing, and the essence of that same thing, are inseparable [in the region of ideas]" (Leibniz 2006:183 = A II, i, N. 164 [1678]). This is a conception of possibility that is "connected with reality", Griffin explains, "rather than conceivability or conceptual consistency. […] [P]ossibles are beings or entities […], elements of Leibniz's ontology" (Griffin 2013:49-50). And among these possibilities or essences, there is *one* for whom it suffices to be possible in order to exist. From this results the conditional proposition that has come to be known as Leibniz's main contribution to the canon of work on the ontological argument:

> This proposition: *If a necessary being is possible, it follows that it exists* is the pinnacle of modal theory, and makes the first transition from possibility to being [a posse ad esse], that is

[55] In his *New Essays* from 1703, Leibniz writes: "Quoyque je sois pour les idées innées et particulierement pour l'idée de Dieu, je ne croy point que les demonstrations des Cartesiens, tirées de l'idée de Dieu, soyent parfaites. [Celle] que M. des Cartes a emprunté d'Anselme, Archeveque de Cantorbery, est très belle et très ingenieuse à la verité, mais [...] il y a encor un vuide à remplir" (GP V, 418).
[56] A II, i, N. 143. See chapter 1, section 1.2.

> from essences of things to existences … such a transition is necessary, otherwise nothing would exist (Griffin 2013:47 = A VI, iv, N. 315 [1689/90]).

On Leibniz's view, this 'memorable' conditional is the true heart of the ontological argument. *God* is the only necessary transition into actuality, which makes him the source or principle of all existence.[57] Much is still at stake here, however. Leibniz has yet to give an account of why the transition is necessary.

There is something about the essence of a necessary being that makes existence follow from it, but the nature of this something remains obscure until Leibniz further develops his account of substance. When he does, substance comes to mean a *primitive active force* striving for existence. I shall argue that with this doctrine, with the notion of a soul-like force in the essences or possibilities themselves, Leibniz finds the tools to explain – if not to stringently prove – why God's existence is necessary. At the very centre of this explanation lies the conviction that things exist if nothing prevents them.

### 3.1.1 Unhindered existence: which reasons can prevent existence?

With the introduction of primitive active forces, the concept of essence has been refined a third time, resulting in a whole family of senses: Firstly, essence is possibility in the logical sense of non-contradiction. "Die logische Möglichkeit also bedeutet 'Denklichkeit' [conceivability]", Janke writes, and this is secured through analysis under guidance of the Principle of Contradiction (Janke 1963:281). Secondly, in what we could perhaps regard as a middle stage before the final conception of substance, essence is a reason or 'case' for existence: a juridical demand in the courtroom of God's understanding. And thirdly, with the new conception of substance, the demand is given ontological content: "Ontologische Möglichkeit ist die Möglichkeit zum Existieren im Sinne eines *gegründeten* Ausseins-auf und Strebens-nach Wirklichkeit" – the possibility to exist as a well-founded eagerness and striving for actuality (ibid., my italics). This ontological possibility obeys the Principle of Sufficient Reason: *Nothing is without reason.* In order for a thing to be, it must be founded on reasons (ibid.). With the Doctrine of Striving Possibles, these reasons become inseparable from the concept of primitive active force.

[57] In a paper against the Cartesians from around 1700, Leibniz writes: "Et omettant même toute mention de la perfection, on peut dire: que si l'estre necessaire est possible, il existe, proposition la plus belle sans doute et la plus importante de la doctrine des modales, parce qu'elle fournit un passage de la puissance à l'acte, et c'est uniquement icy qu'*a posse ad esse valet consequentia*. Aussi trouvet-on là dedans le principe des existences" (GP IV, 402).

In *On the Ultimate Origination of Things* from 1697, Leibniz sums up his Doctrine of Striving Possibles:

> [There] is a certain urge for existence or (so to speak) a straining toward existence in possible things or in possibility or essence itself; in a word, essence in and of itself strives for existence. Furthermore, it follows from this that all possibles, that is, everything that expresses essence or possible reality, strive with equal right for existence in proportion to the amount of essence or reality or the degree of perfection they contain, for perfection is nothing but the amount of essence (Leibniz 1989:150).

It is hard to find a passage in which more of Leibniz's central concepts are equated: *possibility* = *essence*; *a possible thing* = *what expresses essence or possible reality*; *amount of essence* = *amount of reality* = *perfection*. And to close the circle, in a text from sometime around 1684, Leibniz writes: "Perfection, or essence, is a demand for existence" (ibid., 20).[58] Although they are not identical in each and every context, these concepts all converge in the particular context of the divine understanding to articulate that "the possibility or essence of a possible thing *is* its striving for existence" (Griffin 2013:51). To the degree that a thing is possible, it strives for its own particular actuality. This means that 'the amount of essence' constitutes the outer reaches of a thing's striving; a thing can never determine itself to more than itself.

Behind this lies Leibniz's conviction that to be is to be *something*: "To be is in some way to think in relation to something. No one is unless he is something" (Leibniz 1969:163 = Paris notes [1676]). Substances are true entities because they act,[59] and to act is to be both spontaneous and ordered: to strive in accordance with the laws of one's essence. Thus, to be is to determine oneself to all that one can be. If there is nothing to determine oneself to, no essence, there is no being either, and consequently no striving for existence.

Equating essence and striving has several interesting consequences. Firstly, if everything that has some essence strives for existence 'with equal right', as Leibniz takes care to emphasise in the passage above, it would seem that the only way to have absolutely *no reason* for existence is to have no essence at all, i.e. to be *essentially contradictory* (a chimera). Insofar as there is some essence, there is a reason for existence. This entails, secondly, that there is no such thing as one special 'reason for

[58] I am indebted to Griffin 2013:51 for these two references.
[59] "Ce qui n'agit point, ne merite point le nom de substance" (GP VI, 289 = T 291). For similar examples, see Palkoska 2010:159.

existence' that an essence either possesses or not; 'a reason for existence' simply means 'a reason'. All possibles have reasons and strive accordingly; each and every reason is a 'reason for existence' in its own right. We did not end up as existing things because we had some mysterious 'reason for existence' in our essences which other beings lacked. This again entails, thirdly, that nothing in a thing's essence indicates non-existence, but on the contrary that *everything in it indicates existence*, for 'essence strives in and of itself' and with 'equal right'. Taken in isolation, the possible thing is a perfectly good candidate for existence, for since it is free of essential contradiction it strives merrily and unsuspectingly for its own actualisation.

Essentially, all things have possible existence. Yet accidentally, some do not actually exist. Non-existence befalls a possible thing only through the prevalence of *another* possible thing's reasons. In a fragment from 1689 (to which I shall return towards the end of part A), Leibniz writes: "it is evident that every possible tends to existence in itself, but that it is impeded by accident and that there are no other reasons for not existing, unless they arise from connected reasons for existing" (Leibniz 2006:30 = A VI, iv, N. 314). If all reasons for non-existence are reducible to reasons for existence, there is no possible in God's understanding that does not tend with every fibre of its being towards existence. Essence *is* this tendency; it cannot be separated from the ever-active force striving to actualise it.

At this point, a small but important disambiguation is in order. The concept of striving indicates that the possibles encounter some sort of resistance. This resistance we now know to be 'connected reasons for existing' in *another* set of compossibles; what Leibniz sometimes calls a 'contrary striving'. *In* themselves, however, the possibles encounter no resistance whatsoever; nothing in them says 'I shall not exist'. They determine themselves (insofar as they are active) and are determined (insofar as they are passive) to all they can be, namely themselves, and are 'equal[ly] right' in doing so. All reasons are reasons for existence, all essence is striving; so even though most of a substance's force is passive or *heteronomous* (i.e. determined by laws that are in the substance because God accommodated it to another substance), it can still be instrumental in bringing about the maximum of total activity or autonomy. Consequently, the concept of striving can retain its resistance-association, but only with respect to the 'accidental impediment' or 'contrary striving' that comes about as God

compares the possibles.[60] Essentially, the activity of the substance is more akin to an unhindered tending or inclination.

Wolfgang Janke proposes that existence is prevented either by "Widerspruch" or "Widerstand" – either by *essential contradiction* or *resistance* (Janke 1963:281). Initially, essential contradiction was Leibniz's only tool to prevent existence – and it prevented not only existence, but possibility as well, as in the case of a quadrangular circle, a necessary man or a highest speed. However, essential contradiction could not explain how some possibles remain unactualised. To that effect, Leibniz needed an external prevention, which he found in the competing and prevailing reasons of the possibles. According to Janke, this prevalence occurs when another thing challenges (or denies) [streitig macht] the former thing's being through better reasons (ibid.). Thus, a thing could remain possible despite being prevented from existing, for although it did not make the better case for itself, there was no contradiction in its essence.

My only issue with this interpretation is that it makes contradiction and resistance sound too different. Fundamentally, although resistance is external and contradiction internal, what ends up excluding a possible from a set of compossibles is an incompatibility, which can only come about through some sort of contradiction. Something must prevent all possibles from being compossibles. I propose a slightly less logical conception of contradiction within the ontology of *active force*, namely one arising from conflicting 'grammatical voices': in the same way that the same verb cannot combine its active and passive voice, an individual substance cannot be both active and passive with respect to the *same* sequence of events. For example, in the moment when Judas is offered the thirty pieces of silver, he cannot both overcome and succumb to the temptation at the same time. Where the active Judas perceives the bribery *distinctly* and acts autonomously, the passive Judas perceives it *confusedly* and feels the powerlessness of obeying laws that are not his own.[61] These two Judases cannot coexist. It remains the case, however, that resistance is relational (comes about through comparison) and accidental to a possible. In its tending, the possible is unhindered.

[60] For the impediment is a relation *between* possibles, and relations have reality only insofar as there is some mind to connect the *relata* (Adams 1994:182).
[61] Strictly speaking, the laws are his own, but they are put in him by consideration of another law. (In general, I suppose Leibniz would define succumbing to temptation as being governed by a thing instead of yourself, in this particular case to obey the laws of the pieces of silver instead of your own. This is no perfection, of course.)

### 3.1.2 Divine and creaturely existence: linear and asymptotic tending

We are now in a position to assert two important truths: 1) Although all essence in and of itself is a tendency to exist, there is nothing in the individual essences themselves that decides whether or not they end up existing. Despite this, 2) there is a reason for the existence of everything (= the PSR). But if the reason for existence or non-existence is not in the essence of each individual thing, where do we find it?

The answer lies, I believe, in Leibniz's distinction between *cause* and *reason*, of which the following interesting fragment on the PSR, dated to between 1678-79, is an example:

> Nothing is without reason. Or what amounts to the same, nothing exists for which a reason could not be given (at least by an omniscient) why it be rather than not, and why it is as it is and not otherwise. […] But, in truth, some might object, if nothing is without reason, then there could be no first cause, and no ultimate end. To this it must be answered that indeed, nothing is without reason, but this does not mean that nothing is without a cause. For a cause is a reason for the thing that is outside of the thing [ratio rei extra rem], or the reason for the thing's production: but a thing's reason can be within [intra] the thing itself. And it has this position in all those [truths] that are necessary, like mathematical Truths that contain their reason in themselves; also God, who alone among the actual things is himself the reason for his own existence (A VI, iv, N. 256).[62]

Both God and the necessary truths lack causes, but they still have reasons, and this reason is located within them. So that which is not caused (that which does not have a reason for itself outside of itself) must have a reason, and this reason can be within the thing. In such cases, the thing is self-explanatory, i.e. it has the reason for itself in itself. This fragment was written not long after Leibniz read Spinoza's *Ethics* for the first time. In his notes on the *Ethics*, Leibniz agrees with the proposition that "[the] essence of the things produced by God does not involve existence, for otherwise they would be the causes of themselves, by Definition 1 [*causa sui* is that whose essence involves existence], which is contrary to hypothesis. This proposition is obvious on other grounds," Leibniz writes, "but this demonstration is fallacious" (Leibniz 1969:202). For

[62] "Nihil est sine ratione. Sive quod idem est, nihil existit, quin ratio reddi possit (saltem ab omniscio) cur sit potius quam non sit, et cur sic sit potius quam aliter. […] At vero, inquiet aliquis, si nihil sine ratione est, tunc nulla erit prima causa, nullusque ultimus finis. Respondendum est, nihil quidem esse sine ratione, sed non ideo nihil esse sine causa. Nam causa est ratio rei extra rem, seu ratio productionis rei: potest vero ratio rei esse intra rem ipsam. Idque locum habet in illis omnibus quae sunt necessaria, quemadmodum Veritates mathematicae quae rationem in se ipsis continent; item Deus, qui solus rerum actualium sibi ipsi ratio est existendi."

Spinoza has wrongly used the word 'cause' when he should have used 'reason'. In the margin, Leibniz adds: "It follows from this proposition, contrary to Spinoza himself, that not all things are necessary. For if the essence of a thing does not involve its existence, it is not necessary" (ibid., 205). Leibniz agrees with the definition of God as a being from whose essence existence follows, and equates this with being self-*explained* – not self-caused. For an eternal thing can have no cause, only an explanation (of itself in itself). Contingent things, on the other hand, do not have existence involved or contained in their essence; that is, they cannot explain why they exist.[63] With these distinctions in mind, we can return to the question of where a possible's 'reason for existence' is to be found.

In the case of finite creatures, 'reason for existence' simply means *cause* and is something outside of the creature itself. But – crucially – only creatures have causes, that is, only the set of compossibles that settled God's will and was *created* has causes.[64] This makes God the cause of all existing things: "It is certain, of course, that the existence of things is a consequence of God's Nature, which makes it so that nothing but the most perfect can be chosen" (A VI, iii, N. 26 [1676]).[65] The possibles in God's understanding tend towards existence with all their being, they all scream 'possible existence', but nowhere among the reasons they present is there one that confirms or denies their 'actual existence'. Somewhat paradoxically, then, the possibles remain unhindered in themselves, but of their own accord they can never end up actualised. They are possible, but never so possible as to be necessarily actual.

In the case of God, on the other hand, 'reason for existence' means *explanation* and is internal to his essence. As George H. R. Parkinson writes, this "may be taken to

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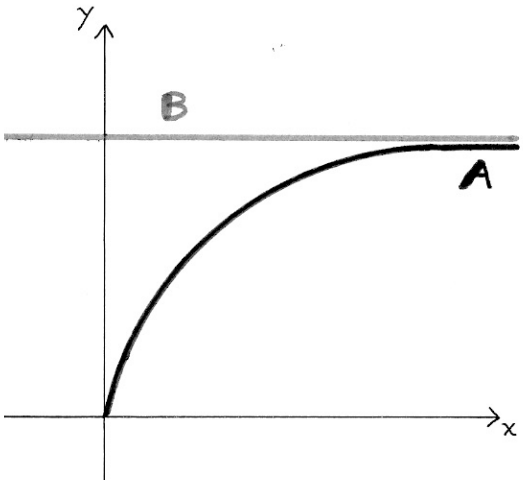
[63] Although neither the mathematical truths nor God have external reasons (causes), there is a crucial difference between them. Strictly speaking, the mathematical truths do not actually exist; they only have reality as possibles in the divine understanding. Their internal reason, then, is a reason for *being*. God's internal reason is a reason for being that is a reason for existing, i.e. a 'reason for existing' that is not a cause, which is unique.

[64] Jan Palkoska calls this distinction one between 'logical' and 'causal' necessary conditions: "As for the 'logical' one, [Leibniz] often argues that '[a definition is nothing but an enumeration of requirements]' (A VI, III, 133), [or] conceives of essence as an '[aggregate of the sufficient requirements]' (A VI, III, 573) […]. As for the 'causal' meaning, 'requirement' is used in this sense whenever employed in connection with the notion of (bringing into) existence" (Palkoska 2010:36-7). The logical necessary condition is the essence of the finite thing. The causal logical condition is external to the thing, which is precisely what makes the thing metaphysically derived.

[65] "Certum est enim existentiam rerum esse consequentiam Naturae Dei, quae fecit, ut non nisi perfectissima eligi possent." I owe this reference to Adams 1994:125. This fragment is typical of the early years, when Leibniz is less worried about the necessitarian implications of letting everything follow from the nature – not the will – of God. I discuss some problems related to this in section 3.2.

mean that although [what is eternal] may have no cause in the sense that nothing can precede it, it must be possible to explain it, that is, to give a reason for its existence" (Parkinson 1965:66). However, saying that God *has* the reason for his existence in himself is misleading, for it gives the impression that there is one particular such reason in the divine essence. This is wrong, for as Leibniz concludes in the fragment quoted above, 'God […] alone among the actual things *is himself the reason* for his own existence' (my italics). The possibles are never so possible as to actualise themselves necessarily, for their existence depends on the outcome of God's calculation. When God compares the possibles and finds the best set among them, that set exists not in virtue of its individual essence alone, but with the added relation of being the *best*. When a set of compossibles enters into this relation, its existence is a) essentially unhindered and b) caused (through accidental non-hindrance). God, on the other hand, actualises himself necessarily, for since there are no reasons external to him, he does not depend on anything. In this way, there is no 'pure possibility' in God, or no possible existence that is not, in fact, actual existence. Finite essence tends towards existence, whereas God's essence is existence.

This yields what I believe to be a useful geometric visualisation. The difference between God and creaturely existence corresponds to the difference between a perfect equation (a linear function) and an approximation (a function with an asymptote).[66] The outcome of both functions is existence:




[66] I feel encouraged in my use of metaphors of this kind by the fact that asymptotes and infinitesimals play an important role in Leibniz's mathematical work. Vincenzo De Risi writes: "In his groundbreaking studies on the arithmetical quadrature of the circle (which was a source of Leibniz' fame as a mathematician, as well as many of his ideas on the Calculus), for instance, he considers a point of intersection between a straight line and an asymptotic line to be at an infinite distance […]. [These] kinds of suggestions had a lasting presence in the discussion of asymptotic behaviour in the eighteenth century" (De Risi 2016:69).

$$B: \quad f(essence) = existence$$

$$\boldsymbol{A}: \quad lim_{essence->infinity}\, f(essence) = existence$$

In this roughly drawn graph, the domain (the *x* axis) is essence or tending and the range (the *y* axis) is existence. *B* is a function of divine essence, and ***A*** is a function of finite essence. At *B*, the function of essence becomes *actual existence*. All existence beneath the range of *B* is *possible existence*. In *B*, every *x* is *y*; the function of every *essence* equals *actual existence*. For in God, there is no essence that is not actualised. In ***A***, on the other hand, no *x* equals *actual existence*, for actual existence (the function *B*) is ***A***'s asymptote.

In metaphysical terms, this means that the possibles strive without ever reaching the finishing line of actual existence – at least not of their own accord. Without the intervention of the will of God, without being chosen, they cannot actually exist. But neither are they *hindered*: for as is the case in function ***A*** above, there is no sign of the asymptote in the function itself; it does not 'contain' its own limitation. Rather, ***A*** indicates the presence of the asymptote negatively, by *not* touching it, not amounting to it. This gives finite essences the paradoxical quality of being both insufficient for actual existence and unhindered in their striving. It is both the case that they never arrive at actual existence, and that they are unhindered.

The asymptotic model is only a metaphor, of course, and since Leibniz as far as I know never used it himself, it should be taken with a pinch of salt. As an illustration of the paradoxical quality of unhindered *yet* insufficient striving, however, I believe the model can be useful. For this reason, I hope the reader will bear with me as I use it for one further conjecture. The asymptote shapes the entire function ***A***, as the latter's whole essence *is* to tend towards it. *B* is the *reason* why ***A*** behaves like it does. In fact, without the asymptote there could be no function ***A*** – that would be absurd. Similarly, *actual existence* is the asymptote of possible existence: it is that which the possibles will never achieve by themselves, but which defines their whole being. To be a possible is to indicate existence by asymptotically tending towards it: to say, "I possibly exist."

### 3.1.3 The final argument and the resulting bias for existence

Where does this leave the ontological argument? The asymptote of divine existence explains the function of finite essence, but what explains the asymptote itself? Can Leibniz provide a real definition of divine essence, one that demonstrates its possibility

and thereby completes the conditional that is the ontological argument?

To pre-empt slightly, I believe it is safe to say that the younger Leibniz would not be convinced by the mature Leibniz's suggestion. According to Adams, the final version of the ontological argument is "more modest in its pretensions to purely formal rigor than those of 1676. Leibniz articulates here no logical doctrines, and no definitions, that would justify his premises. He does offer a metaphysical doctrine, however […]" (Adams 1994:172): all that is possible strives for existence, originally, and will be actualised *unless something prevents it*. It is this reasoning that lies behind the final version of the ontological argument that we find in §45 of the *Monadology*, to which we now finally return:

> […] God alone (or the necessary being) has this privilege, that he must exist if he is possible. And since nothing can prevent the possibility of what is without limits [n'enferme aucunes bornes], without negation, and consequently without contradiction, this by itself is sufficient for us to know the existence of God *a priori* (Leibniz 2009:279).

*If God is possible, he necessarily exists.* Everything hinges on the demonstrability of the antecedent, and the new strategy of proving it departs from possibility as a *force for actualisation*. Force determines itself to everything of which it is capable, which for every creature means abiding by the laws of its essence. God, of course, whose essence contains *all* reasons – or rather, *is* all reasons – is maximally active and capable of everything (omniscience is never confused or passive; omnipotence is never overpowered).[67] It is this metaphysical assumption, I believe, that should fill in the gaps of the short *Monadology* argument: Leibniz is confident of the truth of the antecedent because God is 'absolutely tending' (i.e. not tending at all) towards existence, which means that there is no pure possibility in him: God secures existence because in his case alone, essence *is* existence.

Because of the perfect equation inherent in the concept of God, the metaphysical system is on solid ground: =. God is the bearer of necessary truths, or the only guarantee of identity. In a letter to John Bernouilli in 1699 (translated and quoted by Adams), Leibniz writes that "the propositions, 'God exists [est]' and 'Two contradictories cannot be true at once' can be held to 'coincide,' on the ground that 'the Divine essence is, so to speak, the region of eternal truths, so that it is through the existence of God that truths

[67] This does not mean that God could in fact will everything. God's will is accidental to his essence, and decided by the ideas in God's understanding. So even though morally, God's will has a fixed outcome and is thus limited, his essential omnipotence and omniscience are not.

about non-existent possibles are made real, and they would otherwise lack a subject or support'" (Adams 1994:177). If God's essence did not equal existence, if "God exists" were not a necessary truth or identity, there could be no divine understanding contemplating the possibles (i.e. determining them to varying degrees of activity and passivity). This identity (God exists) allows for all other truths to obtain, for with the existence of God all truths – contingent or necessary – have reality as ideas in his infinite understanding. Leibniz sums this up beautifully in §43-44 of the *Monadology*:

> It is also true that God is not only the source of existences, but also that of essences insofar as they are real, that is, or the source of that which is real in the possibility. This is because God's understanding is the realm of eternal truths or that of the ideas on which they depend; without him there would be nothing real in possibles, and not only would nothing exist, but also nothing would be possible. [44] For if there is reality in essences or possibles, or indeed, in eternal truths, this reality must be grounded in something existent and actual, and consequently, it must be grounded in the existence of the necessary being, in whom essence involves existence, that is, in whom possible being is sufficient for actual being (Leibniz 2009:279).[68]

What the possibles eventually get is not necessary, but contingent existence: existence contingent upon God's choice. God's existence *grounds* or *explains* the tending of the possibles, and God's choice *causes* them. For a function with an asymptote cannot ever coincide with the asymptote – that would be conflict with its laws and be nothing short of a miracle. Which, coincidently, is precisely what creation is: "creation, incarnation and some other actions of God surpass all the force of creatures, and are truly miracles" (Adams 1994:94 = T 249). This could be the reasoning behind the emanation metaphor of *fulgurations* in the *Monadology*: "Thus God alone is the primitive unity or the first simple substance; all created or derivative monads are products, and are generated, so to speak, by continual fulgurations of the divinity from moment to moment […]" (Leibniz 2009:279). The function of finite essence never intersects with the asymptote, but when God's will is added to the approximation, finite essences are created in small lightning-like miracles. The function $\boldsymbol{A}$ is connected to its asymptote $B$ as in a soldering of two metal rods.

In this manner, Leibniz's definition of essence or possibility as a striving for existence allows for a final ontological argument. But is this a real definition of God's essence? Does it give us God's ontological constitution or demonstrate that he is

[68] Leibniz refers to §184 of the *Theodicy*, which is similar to these two paragraps. Here, he adds that this is the reason why an atheist can be a perfectly capable geometer, but that the truths and the objects of his work would not exist without God.

possible? Or has the mature Leibniz – unlike the younger – simply assumed that the concept of *Ens necessarium* as 'unhindered striving' is free of contradiction? Leibniz certainly does not provide a *formal* demonstration of possibility. For if the reasoning behind this were merely logical, it would be something along these lines: God, being purely positive, can contain no negation or contradiction and is therefore possible. This amounts to the same as simply defining God as positive reality or that which *cannot be impossible*, which is a nominal definition. Leibniz undoubtedly held this to be true of God, as §45 above suggests, but it can hardly be called a demonstration. That God is purely positive, however, is far from all that can be said of him at this point: as a species of being, God too tends towards existence in proportion to his essence or possibility, but since there is nothing to prevent his tending, no reasons for God's non-existence, God tends in an absolute sense – it is identity, not approximation. So the metaphysical picture drawn with the help of primitive forces is, if not a real definition, then at least an *account* of why God exists necessarily. Adams explains this very helpfully:

> God's existence is presented [not as self-caused but] as *self*-explanatory. The existence of God, the reality of the divine essence, and of all other essences as contained in it, and the truth of all necessary truths grounded therein, form in a sense a single indissoluble metaphysical reality, the first of all realities. There is no getting beyond it to anything metaphysically deeper. It must therefore have the reason of its existence within itself, in accordance with Leibniz's version of the [PSR]. […] [This reason] should not be seen as specifying something that *makes* God exist. It is more naturally understood as explaining why there is no alternative possibility to be opposed to the divine existence (Adams 1994:185-6).

Real definitions of God will always be slightly misapplied, for how can one give a *generatio*, a production, of one that was never made? All that can reasonably be demanded is an account of why there could be no other option. Leibniz's answer is that *there are no reasons that could prevent God's existence*. For neither *essential contradiction* nor the *accidental resistance* resulting from incompatibility with something more perfect – the two sole reasons that can prevent existence – are reasons that could be found for God.

There is a case to be made that this argument is no longer strictly speaking ontological. For if (1) the Doctrine of Striving Possibles serves to explain God's existence and (2) the PSR together with 'the observation that something exists' motivate the Doctrine of Striving Possibles ('if there were not some inclination in the nature of essence, nothing would exist'), then (3) this seems to make the final version of the ontological 'argument' *a posteriori*. Many of the conclusions reached in this chapter echo

the cosmological argument we find in §45 of the *Monadology*: "We have also proved [God's existence] a posteriori since there are contingent beings, which can only have their final or sufficient reason in the necessary being, a being that has the reason of its existence in itself" (Leibniz 2009:279). Indeed, it is as the engine of Leibniz's cosmological arguments that the PSR usually figures: as a demand for the world's ultimate or sufficient reasons. In other words, the PSR is a principle that connects God with his *creation*. According to Erhard Holze, this is the reason why the PSR was so close to Leibniz's heart: it guarantees the "Begründungszusammenhang zwischen *Welt* und *Gott*" (Holze 1991:61). Holze writes that the problem with purely rational ontological arguments is that they provide no *Gotteslehre*, no doctrine of God (ibid.). All such doctrines must take into account that God is a creator, and it is through the *creature* that we know the creator. If the PSR is meant for the creation only, for contingent truths only, it does seem to cosmologically 'taint' any argument relying on it.

The modal status of the PSR is hard to determine, however.[69] There is a tradition for taking it to be a necessary truth (Adams 1994:175). Leibniz's attempt to demonstrate the PSR *a priori* in 1670 speaks in favour of this, as does Leibniz's lifelong insistence that any argument of God's existence that does *not* include the PSR will fail to be conclusive. Adams mentions passages dating at the earliest from 1679, but Griffin translates and cites a memorandum from 1677 where Leibniz writes: "I claim that the existence of God cannot be demonstrated without this principle: nothing exists without a reason" (Griffin 2013:34). The date of this memorandum might prove significant, for it shows that Leibniz was aware of the role of the PSR in the earliest phase of his work on the argument, when his attempts were the most rigorously ontological and *a priori*. From the year of his death, in the fifth paper to Clarke from 1716, he writes: "I dare say that without this great principle [the PSR] one cannot prove the existence of God, nor account for many other important truths" (ibid.). Other examples abound.[70] On the question of whether the PSR is needed to prove God's existence, Leibniz does not seem to have changed his mind. According to Griffin, it is in the form of the Doctrine of Striving Possibles that the PSR figures in the ontological arguments: "On the one hand, Leibniz sees this doctrine as closely tied to the PSR. On the other hand, the doctrine provides the metaphysical basis for the claim that God's existence follows from his

[69] See for instance Parkinson 1965:62-69 on this topic.
[70] See Gr 268 [1679]; A VI, vi, N. 2 (360f) [1703-05]; T 44 [1710].

essence. And the claim that God's existence follows from his essence is how Leibniz understands the claim that God is a necessary being, in the sense relevant to the ontological argument" (ibid., 34-35). Depending on how 'closely tied to the PSR' one finds the Doctrine of Striving Possibles to be, and whether one accepts it as a necessary truth, this could be a way of refuting the objection that the final argument is cosmological.

I have not attempted to 'save' Leibniz from inconsistencies here. Perhaps there is a tendency in his philosophy of moving from syllogism to analogy, and as a consequence, from strictly *a priori* ontological to more eclectic arguments. In his later texts, Leibniz does seem more confident of the solidity of his system, and is happier to call 'all hands on deck', as it were, to support his conclusions: intuitions, observations, arguments from the causes and arguments from the effects. In any case, there is no denying that the *Gotteslehre* of the middle and later years affords a richer account of the ontological constitution of God than the logical attempts of the 1670s.

To sum up, we know that the absence of a reason for non-existence is enough to secure existence. Existing things are the best possible things, and therefore there was no reason for their non-existence (no accidental hindrance). This is the case both for God and his creation: "those things will exist that are not impeded" (Leibniz 2006:30 = A VI, iv, N. 314 [1689]). However – and this is the central point – in order for 'no reason for non-existence' to serve as an account of existence, the entire system must favour existence. I believe this can truly be said of the Leibnizian system: at the most fundamental level, things tend to exist, or as Adams says: "existence rather than nonexistence is the default status […] for any possible thing" (Adams 1994:176). God tends absolutely, and in his understanding the possibles tend asymptotically. God makes existence the default status because not only does he necessarily exist (i.e. ground his own existence), but since he exists, he necessarily chooses as well. The result is a plane that is tilted to a degree that the mere removal of an impediment for existence results in a metaphysical avalanche.

Leibniz offers equally dramatic metaphors of his own. In 1694, for instance, he writes: "[the striving] can be illustrated by the example of a heavy hanging body which strains at the rope which holds it or by a bent bow" (Leibniz 1969:433). Existence is so natural as to strain at the rope preventing it. In his *On the Ultimate Origination of Things* from 1697, he uses the analogy of gravity:

> [It is] wonderfully evident how a certain divine mathematics or metaphysical mechanics is employed in the very origination of things […]. For just as all possibles strive with equal right for existence in proportion to their reality, so all heavy things strive with equal right to descend in proportion to their weight, and just as in the latter case a motion arises that consists of the greatest possible descent of heavy things, so in the former case a world arises through which the maximum production of possibles takes place (Leibniz 2006:33-34).

In §10 of *Principles of Nature and Grace* from 1714, we see him uniting the juridical and the mechanical aspect of essences' striving in the neologism of *prétension*:

> It follows from the supreme perfection of God that he has chosen the best possible plan in producing the universe […]. For as all possible things have a claim to existence [prétendant à l'existence] in proportion to their perfections, the result of all these claims [ces prétensions] must be the most perfect actual world which is possible (Leibniz 1969:639).

There is a hardly noticeable etymological shift in the French original from *prétendre à* (to claim or aspire to something) to *prétension*, written with 's' instead of the correct 't'. The French editors kept Leibniz's orthography, assuming that he was alluding to *tension*: a strain of some sort (Leibniz 1996:229). Very subtly, this passage unites the two aspects of essence with which we are now familiar: the juridical character of a 'claim' (the reasons or the actualised possibility) and the corresponding metaphysical 'tension' (the force or original activity). All essences are pre-tensed in proportion to their perfection, analogously to how "*a body is bent before it is propelled*" (Leibniz 1969:447). It is as though in Leibniz's eyes, strained, tense, or heavy objects are *longing* to follow the laws of nature, and in the same way that our surroundings are vivid and bursting with energy on the phenomenal level, all being is quivering with impatience to exist on the metaphysical level.

### 3.2 Interlude: is there a tension between the Doctrine of Striving Possibles and divine creation?

Several scholars[71] have noticed a conflict between the Doctrine of Striving Possibles and God's choice of this world as accounts of existence. According to David Blumenfeld in *Studia Leibnitiana* from 1973, "it is difficult to see how Leibniz can maintain both consistently. One explains the transition from possibility to actuality solely in terms of the tendency of the possibles to come into being; the other appeals to an external force

[71] Lovejoy, Couturat, Russell. (For a great overview of this debate, see Blumenfeld 1973.)

[the divine will]. Thus Lovejoy argued […] that since the possibles have an *intrinsic* drive to exist and since this logically results in a maximally perfect world, there cannot also be room for God's free selection of this world" (Blumenfeld 1973:166). If the result was logically decided prior to the choice, how can things be anything but necessary? To avoid conclusions of this kind, Blumenfeld argues for a figurative interpretation of the Striving Doctrine, taking it to be a metaphor for an appeal to the divine understanding. "The real issue", Blumenfeld writes, "is whether or not the possibles compete for existence independently of God's subscribing to the Principle of Perfection" – i.e. choosing the most perfect among the possibles (ibid., 173). If our answer is yes, we have taken the Doctrine of Striving Possibles literally, and must accept the necessitarian conclusion. If our answer is no, we have chosen a figurative interpretation and have more hope of keeping the relevance (and freedom) of God's choice. Answering yes or no means choosing between the following two accounts of how things come to exist:

1) The first account takes the essences to strive among themselves until one of them wins: "the inevitable result of the struggle is that the maximally perfect series realizes itself" (Blumenfeld 1973:164). This would entail that *essence* is the *sufficient reason* for a thing's existence or that essence implies existence.[72] Leibniz's earliest conceptions of existence seem to support this interpretation: if existence is a quantity of essence, there is no need for God's will to enter into the equation. The outcome is already decided by God's ideas, eternally and necessarily. In this picture, it is the reality that the essences receive from God's existence that makes them strive, and one of them will have what Blumenfeld calls "the greatest total thrust" (ibid.). This makes the creation an effect of the essences in the divine understanding.

2) The second account insists that the essences need to be chosen by God in order to actually exist: that there is some sort of 'gap' in the striving of the possibles. In this picture, finite essence is no sufficient but a *necessary* condition for existence, a *sine qua non*. Something exceeding finite essences' powers is needed for the final step, which entails a view of existence as something more mysterious and indefinable than 'a quantity of essence'. This is the account we find in Leibniz's later texts. In §184 of the

[72] See the proof of the PSR from 1670, chapter 2, section 2.1. Leibniz wrote: "A sufficient reason is that which is such that if it is posited the thing is" (Adams 1994:68). This claim supports the first account only if we take 'is' to mean 'exists in actuality'. This is not given, for although Leibniz is not entirely rigorous in his use of 'est', he usually writes 'existit' when actual existence is in question. That essence reciprocally implies (possible) being is obviously true on Leibniz's view. So depending on our interpretation of 'is', this claim could either support the first account or be trivial.

*Theodicy*, for instance, Leibniz says that the divine will is the *cause of existences* and the divine understanding the *reason of the possibles*. The question faced by this second account, of course, is why the possibles strive at all if it is still God's choice that creates them. Why does God need them to strive if creation is a miracle anyway? Where the first account downplayed the role of God's will, then, the second account downplays the role of the essences' independent striving. Leibniz's thought clearly shifted towards the second account.[73] But is it possible to keep elements from both?

I am tempted to answer in the affirmative, for as Margaret D. Wilson says, there is more common ground than there is difference between the two accounts (Wilson 1971:612). Can we not answer both that, *no*, the possibles would not strive if it were not for God's being convinced by them, but *no*, this does not make the doctrine a metaphor either? Leibniz clearly believed in the intrinsic tendency of possibles to exist, which after all allowed for the final account of God's existence. But the tendency is no 'struggle'.[74] It is the primitive active force inextricably linked to all essence, and the more active a possible is (the more it explains itself and others), the more perfect it is, taken in isolation. And this again is the foundation for God's choice of the best, after an infinite calculation of individual *as well as total* perfection. Letting Leibniz keep the striving does not necessarily mean that the essences end up existing entirely of themselves. They still need God. Much of the controversy results, I believe, from a reading that makes the will of God require *freedom of choice.* There are other ways of arguing for God's freedom.

To avoid moral arbitrariness, Leibniz always kept God's will subordinate to the divine understanding, as we saw in chapter 2 section 2.1 (the *exigentia*-discussion). This is why I find Blumenfeld's formulation "God's subscribing to the Principle of Perfection" somewhat unfortunate: it gives the impression that God chooses to do this, that is, that he 'chooses his choice'. Setting aside the possible regress this could engender, I believe it

[73] In the abstract of his Ph.D. thesis from 2016, Thomas D. Feeney writes: "Leibniz abandoned his Paris Period metaphysics, which collapsed the will into intellect and existence into perfection. […] To avoid monism and blind, Spinozistic necessitarianism Leibniz restored the divine will and began to treat existence as undefinable. […] Leibniz seems to have introduced these first notes of ontological complexity only hesitantly, sacrificing the intelligibility of existence itself only to protect the perfection of God's work" (Feeney 2016:10).

[74] The idea of a struggle strikes me as un-Leibnizian for many reasons: Firstly, because it makes God's ideas oddly estranged from him. Secondly, because the only 'interaction' between substances is their *heteronomy* primordially determined by God: that they follow other substances' laws. Leibniz explains this in §51 of the *Monadology*: "in simple substances the influence of one monad over another can only be ideal, and can only produce its effect through God's intervention, when in the ideas of God a monad reasonably asks that God take it into account in regulating the others from the beginning of things" (Leibniz 2009:279).

is founded on a conception of freedom that does not apply to Leibniz. For Leibniz, a choice was not something you could choose to make. This will is decided by reasons prior to it. In other words, it is not the will that decides what to choose (which sounds almost like there is a person within the person of God); the will is passively decided by reasons. Undeniably, then, God's choice is in some sense necessary. But – and this is the vital point – the 'bestness' of this particular world is still contingent. For as with all contingent truths, there is no end to the analysis that decides this world's properties, and 'bestness' is a property of this world. Naturally, God still knows whether our world is the best, for infinite analyses are no match for the divine understanding. Yet it remains a proof-theoretical fact about 'bestness' that it is contingent.[75] In other words, I reject the inference from "follows logically" to "follows necessarily". The existence of finite beings follows logically from the calculation in God's understanding, but precisely because this calculation is of contingent truths and therefore infinite, Leibniz could argue that the freedom of God's choice is preserved through the contingency of his *objects* of choice.

This does not mean letting Leibniz off the hook completely. For there is no denying that if existence "follows logically", even from an *infinite* calculation that only God can undertake, the divine will has been reduced in some sense to *knowing which world is the best*. 'Being willed by God' becomes the name of the accidental property of 'being better than other possibles'. In his letters to Clarke from 1716, Leibniz writes: "A mere will without any motive is a fiction […]. [P]roperly speaking, motives do not act upon the mind as weights do upon a balance, but 'tis rather the mind that acts by virtue of its motives, which are its dispositions to act" (Leibniz 1969:687, 698). For Leibniz, the active principle is not in the will, but in the mind's motives, i.e. the reasons settling the will of God. As we remember from chapter 2, these reasons are inextricably linked to a spontaneous force that actualises them. The possibles are God's 'dispositions to act'.

Therefore, despite the lack of a 'mere will', God is not superfluous, for the relation of 'better than' does not come about without him. It is only in his understanding that the possibles are compared. So at the cost of a reduced divine will, Leibniz can let the possibles strive and appeal to God accordingly, but still need God's infinite calculation for the final passage into existence. Thus, a thing's essence is the *necessary condition* of

[75] For a highly convincing argument for this notion of contingency, see chapter I section 1 of Adams 1994. I summarised it briefly in a footnote in chapter 2, section 2.2.

its existence, whereas its *sufficient condition* is itself *plus* its accidental and contingent 'bestness'. In this way, the possibles retain their paradoxical property of being both unhindered and insufficient. It is true both that their whole being is to tend towards existence, and that they are liable to reasons for non-existence (something being better than them), which I believe can be usefully illustrated by an asymptotic function. Taken in isolation, actual existence does not follow logically from a possible, but when God's will is determined by a set of possibles, it does.

Yet if existence follows logically, why does Leibniz call it a *miracle* in the *Theodicy*? According to Adams, none of Leibniz's earliest definitions of existence are consistent with his theory of creation, which could be why he is increasingly inclined to call existence "indefinable" (Adams 1994:170). The problem is as follows: "What is it that God decides to give to creatures when he chooses them? [If] their existence simply *is* being chosen by God, there is nothing left for God's choice to be a decision to do" (ibid.). Existence must be something more than simply being chosen, especially since God himself is not chosen by anyone. In a fragment from 1685, Leibniz writes that "*Existent* cannot be defined, any more than Entity [*Ens*] or the purely positive – that is, in such a way that some clearer notion might be shown to us" (ibid., 171 = Gr 325).[76] That a clearer notion cannot be shown *to us* makes sense given that no finite essence contains the reason for its existence. This reason is outside of us, and therefore we cannot explain or distinctly understand it. What is not in our essence is beyond our capacities. In this sense, existence is miraculous, for it does not enter into the sequence of events in any finite being's essence. Yet God's choice itself is no miracle; it follows with moral necessity from his nature. It is an unavoidable consequence of his knowing the best. To take an example, it is not the command "Let there be light!" that is a miracle, but rather the *fact of the light that follows*, and it is a miracle for the limited creation only.[77] The final reason for finite things' existence is external to them. It is true that *essence* ultimately explains *existence*, but it is the divine essence that does this, not creaturely essence in isolation.

It seems clear that Leibniz struggled with the unification of his two accounts of existence, and that the Doctrine of Striving Possibles poses less of a threat to the

[76] In his later papers, Adams writes, Leibniz attempts "to identify […] not what existence consists in, but only how to recognize existence […]" (ibid., 172). This could also serve to explain why Leibniz increasingly focuses on cosmological arguments.
[77] I owe this example to my supervisor Eyjólfur Kjalar Emilsson.

creation account if it is taken as a metaphor for appeal to the divine understanding. But why should Leibniz have developed a whole science of "metaphysical mechanics" if it was only to provide a metaphor for another cosmogony (Leibniz 1969:33)? Is it not precisely in virtue of the possibles' striving that they appeal to God, in virtue of their activity and perfection? At the risk of oversimplifying, could we not say that the striving is an aspect of the divine contemplation? As Margaret D. Wilson writes, "[a]lthough these two conceptions of the origination of things may sound utterly different, it is important to notice how much they have in common. Both reflect the fundamental Leibnizian tenet that for everything that happens or exists, there must be a determinate reason why it happens or exists. The reason in either case is that the existence of the given thing results in more perfection, over all, than the existence of all competitors" (Wilson 1971:612). As a case in point, Wilson points to §10 of *Principles of Nature and Grace*, quoted in the previous section as well, in which Leibniz "smoothly combine[s] the two conceptions in a single paragraph" (ibid.).[78] There are several examples of the same. In an already quoted fragment from 1689, for instance, Leibniz writes:

> [There] must be in reality a source of existence-demanding essences; otherwise there will be nothing in essences except a figment of the mind […]. But this source cannot be anything other than the necessary being, the *foundation* of essences, the *origin* of existences, i.e. God, acting most perfectly […]. [The] first cause has such wisdom and power that it gives occasion and strength to the highest reason; it is real and has effect. For essences do not make their way to existence except *in* God and *through* God, so that there is in God the *reality* of essences, or of eternal truths, and the *production* of existents, or contingent truths (Leibniz 2006:30-31, my italics).

It is noteworthy that Leibniz distinguishes between 'foundation of essences' and 'origin of existences', as he does between reasons and causes. He also says that essences 'make their way to existence' only 'in God and through God'. *In* God is where the striving takes place; *through* God is the lack of accidental impediment that comes about when God chooses. Both are needed on the way towards existence.

However we interpret the Doctrine of Striving Possibles – literally or figuratively – it remains the case that only a reason for non-existence can prevent existence. Even if the doctrine is a metaphor (which it seems to be when there is talk of a *struggle* or

[78] "It follows from the supreme perfection of God that he has chosen the best possible plan in producing the universe […]. For as all possible things have a claim to existence in God's understanding in proportion to their perfections, the result of all these claims must be the most perfect actual world which is possible" (Leibniz 1969:639). Note that Leibniz says 'the result of *all these claims*': one set of compossibles alone does not settle God's choice, but all of them together. This means that the comparing is needed too, in addition to individual essence.

*competition*) it expresses a partiality towards existence on the side of all possibles. For either the essences strive and gain existence when not prevented, or God necessarily exists and chooses to create the most actively striving possibles out of moral necessity. Unless something prevents it, then, both models culminate in existence.

# PART B

## 3.3 A presumption towards nothingness?

### Brandon C. Look on *The Fundamental Question*

As we have seen, almost forty years of work on the ontological argument convinced Leibniz that every possible strives for existence and therefore exists unless it is hindered. The result is a system in which existence appears fundamentally favoured. With this in mind, we now turn to a different interpretation.

In his article "The Fundamental Question of Metaphysics and the Question of Fundamentality in Metaphysics" from 2013, Brandon C. Look argues against the possibility of nothingness, or the view called "metaphysical nihilism" (Look 2013b:96). According to Look, the assumption that nothingness is in fact *possible* motivates what "is often considered the fundamental question of metaphysics", namely: *Why is there something rather than nothing?* (ibid.). "For it is only when nothingness is possible that we need to address the question why there is something rather than nothing" (ibid., 101). This seems plausible: if nothingness were demonstrably impossible, the only interest would be in explaining the nature of this particular 'something'. The fundamental question would then go: *Nothingness is impossible, so why is there something?* This sounds like a tautology; the necessity of 'there being something' is implied by the impossibility of nothingness. (The necessity of this particular something is another matter.) So for the moment, let us agree with Look that the fundamental question presupposes the possibility of nothingness.

Look's argument is twofold: Firstly, he identifies two main strategies of justifying the possibility of nothingness and concludes that they both fall short. Secondly, and as a consequence of this, the fundamental question "ought no longer to be a question for us" (ibid., 102). I shall leave aside the refutation of the second strategy (the so-called

subtraction arguments for the possibility of nothingness[79]) which I find convincing, but which has little to do with Leibniz. What I take issue with, however, is Look's claim that Leibniz represents the first strategy of justifying the possibility of nothingness, which is more of an article of faith: "[holding] that nothingness is, as it were, the default state of the universe that only an act of creation can overcome" (ibid., 96). Drawing on the two previous chapters, I shall argue that this rendering of Leibniz's view is mistaken.

In support of his interpretation, Look cites §7 of *Principles of Nature and Grace* from 1714, where Leibniz writes:

> [Now] we must rise to *metaphysics* and make use of the great, but not commonly used, *principle* that *nothing takes place* [rien ne se fait] *without a sufficient reason*; in other words, that nothing occurs for which it would be impossible for someone who has enough knowledge of things to give a reason adequate to determine why the thing is as it is and not otherwise. This principle having been stated [posé], the first question which we have the right to ask will be, 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' For nothing is simpler and easier than something [le rien est plus simple et plus facile que quelque chose] (Leibniz 1969:638-39).

In light of this particular passage, Look seems to be on solid ground in attributing some form of metaphysical nihilism to Leibniz. The passage does indeed imply that in order for there to be something rather than nothing, more accommodation is required. And, somewhat curiously, Leibniz sees this as a consequence of the PSR: *given this principle*, he writes, the fundamental question is legitimate. What is it about the PSR that legitimises the fundamental question? To answer this, Look gives an interpretation of the PSR that makes an exception for nothingness: "[For] Leibniz, given the Principle of Sufficient Reason, *being* requires a ground, or a reason, or a justification; *nothingness* does not require metaphysical grounding" (Look 2013b:97). He attributes two versions of the PSR to Leibniz:

> The PSR, as Leibniz usually states it, is this: [1] **Nihil est sine ratione** […] There is nothing for which there is not a reason why it is (and why it is so and not otherwise). Of course, the PSR, with its double-negation, can also be reformulated thus (a reformulation that Leibniz himself also uses): [2] **Omne ens habet rationem** […] For every being, there is a reason (or ground) for its being (and being so and not otherwise) (ibid., 100).

The reasoning behind making an exception for nothingness seems to be that the PSR is a *principle of existing things only*, as the second version more clearly entails ('Omne ens').

[79] Argued by Thomas Baldwin (1996), Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra (1997; 2000; 2002; 2004), among others (ibid., 97).

But for the two versions to be strictly equivalent, this also means reading the first version literally, affirmatively: *Nihil est sine ratione*; *nothingness* is without a reason – or 'does not need ground or justification', as Look phrases it. However, this strikes me as untypically (and anachronistically) dialectical for Leibniz. In the same §7, he formulates the PSR as '*rien ne* se fait sans raison', which in French is unambiguous: it means "nothing", not "nothingness" [le rien]. So I do not see what prevents the first version of the PSR from meaning: "Nothing is without reason, not even nothing". Hypothetically, if nothing existed, it would be *true* that nothing existed, and this again – being true – would need grounding of some sort.[80] Although I doubt that Leibniz saw this nothingness-scenario as particularly relevant (in fact I suspect he would consider it to be impossible, as I shall argue shortly) – which presumably is why he switched between the two formulations of the PSR – there is no proof that he saw the two formulations as perfectly equivalent. The second version seems to have a smaller scope because of the "being"-qualification: if there is nothing without reason, all being has a reason, as a species of the 'everything' implied by the 'nothing without'. And if the presumption of equivalence is the motivation for arguing that Leibniz makes an exception for nothingness, I find the case somewhat weak. As I hope to have shown in part A of this chapter, Leibniz's PSR explicitly demands reasons for why things do not exist.

Still, Leibniz himself says that *given the PSR*, we have the right to ask why something at all exists. He then adds: 'For [Car] nothing [le rien] is easier and simpler than something', as a further legitimisation of the question. So together, both the PSR and the claim that nothing is simpler and easier motivate the question. It might still be unclear exactly how the PSR motivates it (there is no *explicit* exception for nothingness), but this claim quite clearly does. If nothing is metaphysically simpler and easier, the 'something' that we observe warrants an explanation. How is this 'simpler and easier'-claim to be understood?

Look offers the following interpretation of what he calls *the Leibnizian intuition* or *prejudice*: "[The] Leibnizian intuition [is] that nothingness is more natural than something and that therefore there must always be a *reason* or *ground* for the existence of something" (ibid., 101). This is the intuition one could take to be expressed by the second version of the PSR ('Omne ens habet rationem'). I see two problems with this

[80] I am indebted to Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra for proposing this objection to me.

particular statement, however. The first relates to the proposed implication ('therefore'): this suggests that in addition to motivating the fundamental question, the 'Leibnizian intuition' about nothingness also motivates the Principle of Sufficient Reason. This is manifestly contrary to what Leibniz says in §7 above: only *after* the PSR has been stated do we have the right to pose the fundamental question, and it is the fundamental question, not the PSR, which presupposes the possibility of nothingness.

The second problem with Look's statement is the claim that nothingness should be 'more natural' for Leibniz. Leibniz uses 'nature' [natura] quite loosely, however usually in the sense of 'essence'. 'Natural', on the other hand, tends to mean *consistent with the harmony of things* (Adams 1992:273). We see this for instance in 1702, in the course of a discussion of the relation between soul and body: "on the one hand, the soul and the body are independent of each other, and on the other hand, […] the one is incomplete without the other since the one is never *naturally* without the other" (ibid., 272, my italics = G IV, 572f). The choice of 'natural' in this context is interesting, for, as Adams points out, "it leaves open the possibility that the soul could exist without the body by the power of God, though that would be […] inconsistent with the harmony of things" (ibid., 273). In other words, 'natural' means contingent upon God's choice of this particular world. A state of nothingness is manifestly not consistent with God's choice, seeing as something exists. In the case of nothingness, then, I fail to see how 'more natural' can be inferred from 'simpler and easier'.

There are other reasons why 'natural' seems unfitting for nothingness. In Leibniz's terminology, 'simple' means uncompounded, so that he should describe nothingness [le rien] as such is perhaps not that surprising. That it is simpler than 'something' is probably a consequence of the fact that for Leibniz, to be is to be something, and even for God the divine attributes are "combined with a subject" (Adams 1994:130 = A VI, iii, No. 75).[81] As for 'easier', this is a methodological term: "Leicht (facile) und schwierig (difficile) sind Methodenkategorien, welche die Nähe und Ferne einer zu entwickelnden Sache zum erklärenden Verstand bezeichnen. Leicht ist solches, das unmittelbar, schwer solches, das erst im Durchgang einer langwierigen Analyse einzusehen ist" (Janke 1963:275). Nothingness, then, is 'simple' and has no analysis (it is 'unmittelbar'), which is why it is also 'easy' – that is, easily brought to mind. In contrast,

[81] *To be is to be something*, see Part A, section 3.1 of this chapter. *Combined with a subject*, see chapter 2, section 2.4.

even the most negligible truth about the created world would require an infinite analysis, which by all accounts should earn it the name of 'difficile'. Yet it remains 'natural'. The same can be said of the whole created world: truths about it are neither simple nor easily brought to mind, but what could be 'more natural'? I do not therefore believe that Leibniz would call nothingness 'more natural' or that this can be inferred from 'simpler and easier'.

Another possible objection to Look's reading is related to Leibniz's notion of possibility, and is almost trivial. Nothingness, we may presume, has no essence, for *to be* is to be something and *not to be*, presumably, is not to be anything. As we saw in chapter 1, Leibniz sometimes defines essence as 'the specific reason for a thing's possibility'. But if nothingness is possible, it is possible without an essence or reason for this possibility, which I believe would conflict with the PSR. The possibility of nothingness would be a brute fact.

All this notwithstanding, it should be granted that the fundamental question ('Why is there something rather than nothing?') makes the possibility of nothingness an *issue*. After all, Leibniz poses this question on several occasions (in the *On the Ultimate Origination of Things* and a related fragment as well as in the discussed §7). "[T]he fundamental question", Look concludes, "derives force from the completely unanalyzed claim that 'nothing is simpler and easier than something.' There is, then, a presumption towards nothingness that underlies the fundamental question of metaphysics that I reject" (Look 2013b:102). In view of the fundamental question, it does indeed seem as though "le rien est plus simple et plus facile que quelque chose" is an important presumption in Leibniz's philosophy. But how *Leibnizian* is the fundamental question?

At this point, a distinction Leibniz made in his criticism of Descartes[82] could use reintroduction, namely the difference between conceivability and mere *Wahrscheinlichkeit* – true-seemingness. Where the former secures possibility, the latter gives only the impression of being possible. The example from Leibniz's letters to Arnauld in 1677 was the concept of *a highest speed*. Such a concept *seems* perfectly possible, but turns out to be contradictory. Yet the fact that it could seem possible, that it could enter into reasonings in the first place, demonstrates more generally that in order to secure a thing's possibility it is not enough simply to *bring it to mind*. It might be that Leibniz is motivating the fundamental question simply by observing, firstly, that

[82] See chapter 1, section 1.1.

nothingness would have no components, and secondly, that it could quite easily be brought to mind or imagined. To introduce a modern distinction: the *epistemic* possibility of nothingness could be enough to motivate the fundamental question (albeit a less interesting version of it), and consequently, there is no need for commitment to a *metaphysical* possibility of nothingness. For our limited minds and for ordinary purposes, the fundamental question *seems* poignant. Metaphysics or natural theology proves, however, that it can be answered by the necessity of God's existence. Something exists because in the sole case of God, his being possible *equals* his being actual or existing. And since God contains no limits or can be hindered in his striving by no other being, he is maximally possible – which has now come to mean that the force striving for his actualisation does not strive at all. God's essence is his existence, his possibility is his actuality; it is a perfect equation. And when God necessarily exists, nothingness is metaphysically impossible. For at no point does God not exist.

Consequently, in light of the result of his natural theology, I see the fundamental question as decidedly less Leibnizian than the question usually asked in connection with it, namely: "why [the world] exists thus rather than otherwise" (Leibniz 1969:34-5).[83] As it happens, this exact question follows the enigmatic claim of nothingness being 'simpler and easier' in §7 of *Principles of Nature and Grace*:

> […] For nothing is simpler and easier than something. Further, assuming that things must exist [des choses doivent exister], it must be possible to give a reason *why they should exist as they do* and not otherwise (ibid., 639).

Things *must* exist. That is the simple answer to a seemingly difficult question. The far more interesting question is the one following it: Why this? What makes us so special? To what do we owe the honour? In an interesting fragment from 1689 (quoted in part A of this chapter) entitled "On the reason why these things exist rather than other things", Leibniz even says that the answer to the 'why *this*'-question answers the fundamental question too, which does seem to reduce the importance of the latter rather significantly:

> The same reason that brings it about that these things exist rather than other things, also brings it about that something exists rather than nothing. For if a reason is given why these things exist, the reason given will also be why anything exists. This reason is the prevalence

[83] Friedrich W. J. Schelling called this the *quid*- or *was*-question, opposed to the *quod*- or *daß*-question. See for instance *Abhandlung über die Quelle der ewigen Wahrheiten* from 1850.

> of reasons for existence, compared with the reasons for non-existence, that is, to say it in a word, in the essences' demanding of existence, so that those things will exist that are not impeded. For indeed, if nothing demands existence, there would be no reason for existing (Leibniz 2006:30).

This 'same reason' is 'the prevalence of reasons for existence', which is the case both for God and his creation. Having tended *the furthest* towards actual existence, 'these things' were not impeded. Perhaps one could say that God's essence (i.e. necessary existence) answers the fundamental question a little trivially, and that God's choice (i.e. the unhindered striving of 'these things') answers the 'why *this*'-question.[84] But the answer to the latter question also serves as an answer to the former: there were no reasons for the non-existence of precisely these things – which is why there is something rather than nothing.

Finally, on the topic of whether a presumption towards nothingness is a 'Leibnizian intuition': could Leibniz have had the *intuition* that nothingness is possible, even though metaphysical inquiry proves it to be wrong? I believe that there is an equally good case for holding that the 'Leibnizian intuition' is that nothingness is *impossible*, for he keeps appealing to precisely such an intuition when arguing for essences' demand for existence. An example is the now familiar text on primary truths from 1680,[85] where Leibniz writes: "Unless in the nature of essence itself there is some inclination to exist, nothing would exist" (Leibniz 2006:29). This argument rests on the consequent ('nothing would exist') being seen as absurd. One could ask why Leibniz would count on this reaction if he did not himself see it as intuitively true.

[84] Leibniz says something along these lines in *On the Ultimate Origination of Things* from 1697: "[N]ot only is that true in general, with regard to reason which we have now explained why the world exists rather than not, and why it exists thus rather than otherwise (which is to be sought in the striving of the possibles for existence) […]" (ibid., 34-35).
[85] See chapter 2 section 2.1.

# Conclusion

"[It is] wonderfully evident how a certain
divine mathematics or metaphysical mechanics
is employed in the very origination of things"
(Leibniz 2006:33).

Either existence is an unintelligible mystery, or there is something accounting for it in what *is* intelligible, namely the essence of existing things. If this exhausts our options, the ontological argument is one of few ways to avoid scepticism about existence. More specifically, it is an attempt to account for existence in terms of the essence of *God*. Convinced that essence can give us nothing but essence, St. Thomas Aquinas held this to be impossible. The concept of 'horse' does not imply actual existence, only that of 'God' does – and the nature of this particular implication is knowable only to God himself. In other words, Aquinas acknowledged the potential of an ontological argument, but put it beyond the reach of human reason. Leibniz was more optimistic on our behalf. It is true that 'horse' implies nothing but possible existence, and that therefore it is not in 'horse' or other finite things that we should look for the ignition to the engine of being. The only existing thing whose essence implies existence is God. Locating this implication means accounting for existence.

To this effect, Leibniz's bold strategy was to provide a real definition of God: a definition showing that this being has essence or is possible. This was crucial, we remember, for unless God's possibility is established there remains the possibility of him *necessarily not existing*, i.e. being a chimera, or a being in name only. The originality of Leibniz's ontological argument lies in his acknowledgement of this hitherto unexamined liability. If we can demonstrate that God is first *possible*, Leibniz declares, then we can indeed conclude that he exists:

> [If] the necessary being is possible, it exists, which undoubtedly is the most beautiful and important of all propositions in the modal doctrine, for it provides a passage from force to action, and it is only here that the *a posse ad esse valet consequentia* [that the *from possibility to being has logical consequence*]. In this we also find the principle of existing things" (GP IV, 402).[86]

[86] "[…] si l'estre necessaire est possible, il existe, proposition la plus belle sans doute et la plus importante de la doctrine des modales, parce qu'elle fournit un passage de la puissance à l'acte, et c'est uniquement

This remarkable modal proposition, the passage from possibility to actuality, is what Leibniz found upon examining the concept of God. God *is* the being for whom possibility suffices for actuality, and therefore the principle of all existing things.

In chapter 1, I examined Leibniz's first attempts to prove divine possibility and the corresponding shifts in his views on essence and existence. At first, when essence was possibility in the sense of logical non-contradiction, Leibniz treated existence as one of God's unlimited qualities, i.e. perfections. He argued that God has essence or possibility because there is no contradiction in the concept of a being possessing all perfections, and there is no contradiction because perfections are positive and simple and therefore always reciprocally compatible. Leibniz showed this argument to Spinoza in 1676.

A few months later, however, Leibniz entered into an important discussion with the Cartesian Arnold Eckhard, in the course of which he came to believe not only that perfections are mathematically dubious, but also that existence is so elusive that it might well be indefinable. As a result, the concept of God as *Ens perfectissimum* was rendered useless. Leibniz needed a new starting point, and found it in the definition of God as *Ens necessarium*, 'a necessary being', or 'a being from whose essence existence *follows*'. Since existence is no essential content and has no being of its own, it cannot be understood in itself, but in terms of what precedes it, namely essence. Something about the essence of existing things brings about the status of existence; essence is not only the logical possibility but also the *metaphysical grounding* of existence. Existing things have reasons, and they can have them either from themselves and be necessary, or from something else and be contingent. The possibility of them having no reason at all is excluded by the PSR. God is of the necessary category. Still, at the closing of the first chapter, it remained unresolved whether this new *Ens necessarium* was possible. "God is a necessary being" is a nominal, not a real, definition: a name does not demonstrate possibility. The ontological constitution of the 'being from whose essence existence follows' remained unaccounted for, as well as that of the 'follows from' relation.

How does existence 'follow from' God's essence? As Michael V. Griffin writes, this new strategy "requires a notion of 'follows from,' 'essence' and 'possible' that cannot be characterized in purely logical or conceptual terms", but rather in ontological terms

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icy qu'*a posse ad esse valet consequentia*. Aussi trouvet-on là dedans le principe des existences" (GP IV, 402 [ca 1700]).

(Griffin 2013:49). In the second chapter, we saw the first signs of a more *active* conception of essence: 'reasons for existence' became 'reasons for *my* existence' – the essences present a case to exist. This early doctrine, the *exigentia*-doctrine, was no attempt to prove divine possibility directly, but rather a new strategy of accounting for existence. It was the first articulation of Leibniz's intuition that essence somehow tends towards existence. Insofar as they are possible, things have a claim to actuality. I argued that this doctrine could benefit from a juridical interpretation. Since God knows everything and is supremely good (always wills the best), he is also supremely just – for justice is simply "goodness conforming with wisdom" (Leibniz 1969:639). As an account of existence, however, the *exigentia*-doctrine was unsatisfactory, for it presupposed divine existence. The passage from essence to existence in general still lacked: *all essence* is inclined to exist.

In the 1680s, Leibniz came considerably closer to an identification of this mysterious inclination when he developed a conception of substance as a *force* that is both *spontaneous* (non-sequentially active) and *orderly* (determined by the law of its essence). Within this new framework, the inclination of the possibles took the form of an ordered striving, or autonomous self-determination: wherever there is some essence, there is also a force striving for its actualisation. And this force, Leibniz wrote, is "carried into action by itself and needs no help but only the removal of an impediment" (ibid., 433). In other words, all possible things exist unless they are hindered.

This conditional – *if a possible thing is not hindered, it will exist* – offered challenges as well as opportunities. On the one hand, it made Leibniz vulnerable to a threat of necessitarianism, for unless he could account for the hindrance, what came to exist would be *all* possible things. To keep the unactualised possibles (the non-contradictory *loyal* Judas, for instance), an existence-hindering mechanism was necessary. On the other hand, however, the conditional offered the opportunity of a final ontological argument. If the antecedent were established, if God is demonstrably immune to all hindrance, it would follow that he exists.

To deal with both these challenges, Leibniz needed an account of what sort of reasons could hinder existence, which was the subject of my third chapter. Essential contradiction prevents all existence, but since it also prevents *possibility* it is not the required kind of hindrance for the loyal Judas or other unactualised possibles. As I explained in part A, Leibniz came to identify essence with the striving for actualisation,

with the result that nothing in the essence of a possible thing indicates non-existence. *In and of itself*, the possible thing strives unhindered. The required kind of hindrance for possibles, then, is accidental hindrance, which comes about through God's contemplation and choice of the best. The relation of one of them 'being better' comes about only when God compares them. In 1689, Leibniz wrote: "essences do not make their way to existence except *in* God and *through* God, so that there is in God the *reality* of essences, or of eternal truths, and the *production* of existents, or contingent truths" (Leibniz 2006:31). *In* the mind of God, they strive unhindered; but it is only *through* the will of God that one of them comes to be accidentally unhindered, i.e. chosen. It was this ambiguous quality of the possibles that I found aptly illustrated by a function with an asymptote: there is one value of *y* that is necessarily *not* given by the function, and that is the asymptote, yet the whole being of the function is to tend towards this one value of *y*. The function is *defined* as this tending. Similarly, the possibles indicate existence with all their being, but never achieve it of their own accord. Creaturely existence is the function of essentially unhindered striving *and* the accidental non-hindrance of being chosen. This allows for the hindrance of unactualised possibles.

How about divine existence? Is there any way in which God's striving can be hindered? Given that God is purely positive, a fact of which Leibniz was confident in §45 of the *Monadology*, there can be no contradiction in his essence, so the essential kind of hindrance is of no threat to him. But he is not liable to the accidental kind of hindrance either, for there is nothing better than God with which he could be incompatible. Only the possibles that require a reason for existence outside of them, i.e. that require being chosen, are caused and therefore contingent. The being that is the reason for its own existence is self-explanatory and therefore necessary (contingent upon nothing).

In this way, the final ontological argument is more of an explanation than a stringent proof: when all essence tends to exist, the absence of a reason for non-existence suffices for existence, and no such reason can be provided for God. It is probably not an argument that would satisfy the young Leibniz, but if the purpose of ontological arguments is to provide an account of existence through the essence of God, the final argument seems to a large extent successful. If it holds, Leibniz has established the passage from possibility to actuality, as he wrote in 1697: "once it is assumed that *being prevails over non-being*, i.e. that *there is a reason why something should exist rather than nothing*, or that *there is to be a transition from possibility to actuality*, it follows that

even if nothing further is determined, there exists as much as is possible in accordance with the capacity […] of the order of possible existence" (Leibniz 2006:33, my italics). All three of these italicised assumptions are warranted given the 'absolute tending' towards existence of the divine essence. Being prevails over non-being because there are no reasons for God's non-existence.

In view of the prevalence of reasons for existence, the claim of there being a "presumption towards nothingness" in Leibniz's philosophy strikes me as unjustified (Look 2013b:102). I argued this despite the somewhat untypical passage in §7 of *Principles of Nature and Grace*, where Leibniz calls nothingness [le rien] "simpler and easier than something" (Leibniz 1969:639). My main objection to Look's interpretation of this passage was that he took it to imply "that nothingness is more natural than something" (Look 2013b:101). I objected to his inferring 'more natural' from "simpler and easier" on the grounds that the created world is neither simple nor easy, on Leibniz's view, but still the most natural state of affairs. I suggested that in order to motivate the fundamental question, the epistemic – not metaphysical – possibility of nothingness could suffice. For as with God, naming 'nothingness' does not secure its possibility.

To sum up, I have argued that on Leibniz's view, all things exist unless they are hindered, and although finite things are *essentially* unhindered in their striving for actualisation, they remain liable to the *accidental* hindrance of not being chosen by God. God's striving is liable to no such hindrance. Thus, things exist either in virtue of something other than themselves and are contingent (*ab alio*) or in virtue of themselves and are necessary (*a se*), but the explanation for *all existence* – both necessary and contingent – is to be sought in the divine essence.

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