

Michael Griffin, *Leibniz, God and Necessity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 195 p.

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Michael Griffin's splendid *Leibniz, God and Necessity* interprets Leibniz's metaphysics of modality—the emblem of Leibniz's philosophy to many readers—in the context of his natural theology and offers the freshest, most provocative and rewarding study of its subject in a long time. Griffin brings new light to nearly every topic he touches, and his account carries with it a guiding thesis that is sure to reawaken dispute on a grand old allegation of Leibniz scholarship. Leibniz is a *necessitarian*. Everything actual is necessary, and everything possible is actual. (Didn't we always know it?) This idea informs every part of the book and Griffin develops it with great clarity and care, arguing for its place among Leibniz's central commitments, working out its implications, and claiming for it an integral role in many features of Leibniz's metaphysics and natural theology.

The point of the book is not to ascribe necessitarianism to Leibniz but rather to paint the most illuminating picture of his modal metaphysics and show how it is engineered to serve Leibniz's ends in natural theology. In Griffin's finely wrought line of argument and interpretation, the necessitarian thesis is only one ingredient, if a key one. Skeptics of this element in his account should check their reactions till they have finished the book; much of the strongest support for the necessitarian thesis is holistic, owing to its various roles in the greater scheme of Leibniz's philosophy as Griffin sees it. Still, Griffin provides direct justifications for interpreting Leibniz as a necessitarian too, and some of these at least can be sketched simply enough for brief review. In what follows we'll first have a look at the direct arguments for Griffin's necessitarian thesis before turning both to consider questions for his account and to sample a few other particular pieces of his interpretation of Leibniz.

1. PSR and Necessitarianism

The most direct line of argument for necessitarianism in Leibniz is the familiar classic, polished to its best. Its premises are the fact that God creates the world and the Principle of Sufficient Reason. Given PSR, God has a sufficient reason for choosing to actualize the best of all possible worlds. Sufficient reasons *entail*

and *completely explain* what they are reasons for, leaving nothing brute either in the ground or in the *explanandum*. They are thus necessitating and wholly self-explaining, i.e. necessary, explanations. So not only it is necessary, by God's perfect nature, that *if* God decides to create a world, he will create the best of all possible worlds, but also God's decision to create a world is itself necessary. It follows that the best of all possible worlds is necessary (cf. 3-4).

And of course there is also a simple argument by contraposition: God is necessary, and if God is necessary, then God creates this world; so, if this world were not to exist, then God would not be necessary. "Therefore it follows that were this series of things, sin included, taken away or changed, God would be taken away or changed" (A 6.3.124; cf. 61-2). Which is impossible. By *modus tollens*, then, this world could not *not* exist, i.e. it is necessary, exactly as it is.

The weight of the argument in both cases is borne by the claim that God's nature *necessitates* the creation of this best of all possible worlds. Why should we think this grounding is an entailment rather than a matter of contingency? Griffin's reasons emerge from his subtle and beautiful readings of Descartes's and Leibniz's arguments for the existence of God. Both philosophers see God's existence as necessary but also as requiring an explanation, and both turn to an "ontological axiom" to the effect that reality at its most fundamental level has a sort of bias toward existence (2-3). For Descartes, there is an intrinsic power for existing. In the case of the immense power of God it is unlimited; that is why God's existence is necessary (29f.). For Leibniz there is a propensity for existing, a striving toward existence that will attain its end if not impeded. This "Striving Doctrine" is the root of Leibniz's answer to the question why anything should exist at all (50f.). In the case of God, nothing could impede his existence; thus God is necessary. In the case of possibles—those things whose existence would imply no self-contradiction—only impossibility among them prevents some from existing. The most perfect ones, by virtue of their greater relative perfection, attain existence. The greater perfection of the best, together with God's wisdom and goodness, sufficiently explains why God, "who cannot fail to act in the most perfect way, and consequently to choose the best" (T 227; see 52-3), admits the most perfect into existence. The divine decision is thus necessary. The runners-up are then closed out of existence by their incompatibility with the most perfect. Given God's necessary wisdom and goodness, it is impossible for them to have existed after all.

The Striving Doctrine has long been suspected of implying necessitarianism.¹ And it is often treated more as a curio of Leibniz's thought than as a truly central

doctrine, something that can be safely ignored for most purposes. Its placement at the center of Griffin's account reflects Griffin's emphasis on recovering the explanatory aspects of Leibniz's metaphysics, taking the rationalism unfiltered. While Griffin's necessitarian thesis is likely to attract the greatest attention from readers of Leibniz, to my mind it is Griffin's focus on what we might call Leibniz's rationalism—in the sense of Leibniz's seeking and constructing explanations even within the domain of necessity—that makes this book most distinctive.

A small example is a facet of Griffin's view of the Striving Doctrine. Scholars are split on whether to take it literally or figuratively. Griffin's analysis sees the Striving Doctrine as identifying something real for Leibniz in the fabric of the world, a literal propensity to exist in the essences of things. But the competition among possibles remains ideal in God's mind, for even this propensity to exist cannot attain its end without God's deliberate assistance. Otherwise the existence of finite substances would be wholly self-explaining and not appropriately dependent upon God's existence, nature and will (53). This line of thought could be extended further. The explanatory demand imposed by Leibniz's theology seems to rule out even a less stringent literal interpretation, one on which God's being and intellect merely support the striving possibles and the rest of the explanation of the existence of finite individuals is given by the propensity of the possibles to exist. On such a picture even though the world would still issue out of God, God's wisdom and goodness would be idle in explaining why the actual series of things exists; the world would thus issue out of God only blindly, as it does for Spinoza. For Leibniz, God's providence must remain an essential factor.

The same ideas are at work in the much larger example of Griffin's interpretation of Leibniz on the plurality of possible worlds. Leibniz, in answering whether his account implies that all things in this world turn out to be necessary, distinguishes between something's being necessary *per se* or 'through itself' and its being necessary only *ex alterius hypothesi* or 'on the hypothesis of something else'. A thing necessary *per se* contains the reason for its own existence, and its non-existence would, independently of any further assumption, imply a contradiction. A thing necessary only *ex alterius hypothesi* does not contain the reason for its own existence, and its non-existence does not by itself imply a contradiction, although its non-existence coupled with some further hypothesis—typically concerning God's decrees—would imply a contradiction. Coordinate definitions of something's being possible, impossible or contingent follow immediately. Now, does Leibniz's view that a perfect God necessarily chooses the best of all possible worlds imply

that all existent things are necessary and that what does not attain existence is not possible?

Leibniz says that not all existent things are necessary *per se* and that there remain other things that, though they never exist, are possible *per se*. Indeed there are infinitely many such non-existent possibles, in this sense, and in fact a plurality of worlds that are possible *per se* despite not being compatible with what does exist and with what God decrees. The things in the series that God has actually created are necessary only *ex alterius hypothesi*. Their non-existence would, by itself, imply no contradiction. It is conceivable that they should not exist and that some other order of individuals should exist in their place, though this would not be compatible with God's choosing the best. All this is in contrast to the non-existence of God, which would be impossible in itself and cannot even be conceived without contradiction.

On Griffin's view Leibniz's embrace of alternative possibilities to what exists is no denial of actual things being necessary in an absolute sense, or *metaphysically* necessary in Griffin's term. Leibniz's labels '*per se*' and '*ex alterius hypothesi*' mark an *explanatory* distinction, not a difference of final modal status. Griffin introduces a distinction between what is *intrinsically necessary* and what is *extrinsically necessary* to make explicit his reading of Leibniz's view (4f., 61f.). For *x* to be intrinsically necessary is for it to be necessary in virtue of its own nature; for *x* to be extrinsically necessary is for it to be intrinsically contingent yet still metaphysically necessary in virtue of its relation to something necessary. On Griffin's reading, the concern Leibniz means to address in drawing the distinction between being necessary *per se* and *ex alterius hypothesi* is not that his account makes all things necessary but that it makes all things necessary *per se*—i.e. into beings whose existence is explained entirely by their own natures and independently of their relations to other things, including in particular relations to God's wisdom and goodness. The form of Spinozism Leibniz aims to avoid here is, again, that of rendering God's moral perfection irrelevant to the existence of created things, making them a blind emanation of God's being rather than the flower of divine choice.

2. Contingent Truth?

The textual case Griffin mounts for his reading of Leibniz on those points is powerful and it leans heavily on Leibniz's early writings, especially the documents con-

nected with *A Philosopher's Confession*. The *Confession* was composed in 1671 and revised probably in 1677, making the key modal distinctions more explicit.² Scholars may think this too early to count strongly in favor of necessitarianism as Leibniz's considered position. Everyone likes to recall how in 1689 (or so) Leibniz, evidently with an eye on his early writings on necessity and sufficient reasons, says "I was too close to the view of those who think that everything is absolutely necessary" but that "consideration of possibles which are not, were not and will never be brought me back from this precipice" (A 6.4.1653). The reason he then gives for denying that all things that exist are "absolutely necessary" is that "otherwise it would be impossible for other things to exist in their place, and thus everything that never exists would be impossible" (ibid.). At a glance this may look like a different sort of reason for denying that existing things are necessary: not because they fail to contain the sufficient ground for their own existence, but because alternatives to them remain possible. And this may suggest that the scheme of possible worlds is being deployed to explain the contingency of things in a familiar and "metaphysically" robust sense.

Also in that same 1689 piece—titled *De Libertate, Contingentia et Serie Causarum, Providentia* in the Berlin Academy Edition—Leibniz sketches his celebrated logical account of the distinction between necessary and contingent truth. Necessary truths can be *demonstrated*, i.e. resolved into "basic truths" or "identities" in a finite number of steps in the analysis of terms, whereas contingent truths cannot. By way of introduction, he writes: "[R]ecognizing the contingency in things I further considered what a clear notion of truth might be, for I hoped, not absurdly, for some light in that direction on how necessary and contingent truths might be distinguished" (A 6.4.1654). It is easy to think that Leibniz is promoting a new account of necessity and contingency to replace the older one, an account that would undercut necessitarianism by introducing a category of genuine contingency that contrasts with what is metaphysically necessary.

Before putting too much stock in this easy objection to Griffin's account, however, it is worth recalling the context for those very lines about "contingency in things." They are following up Leibniz's criticism of Descartes's account of the natural world according to which matter "successively takes on all forms of which it is capable" (ibid). The problem with this exhaustion of the possible in the actual is that, *inter alia*, "it would eliminate all beauty from the universe and all choice among things" (ibid.). This looks like the same rationalist concern he had with Spinozism: not that everything comes out necessary, but that it eliminates a place

for God’s wisdom and goodness in the explanation of what exists. When Leibniz goes on in the next sentence to say, “Therefore, recognizing the contingency in things, etc.,” the concept of contingency at stake need only be one that reinstates the full explanatory role of the divine perfections in order to counter the Cartesian view. Thus Leibniz’s *argument*, at any rate, does not demand that the distinction he draws between necessary and contingent truths fall along a boundary between the metaphysically necessary and the metaphysically contingent. To resist the implication of the Cartesian account, it is enough that contingent truths be those that depend for their explanation on facts about God’s wisdom and goodness, that is, on facts about what lies behind God’s decrees in bringing the world into existence. Necessary truths can be explained without such reference; they do not depend for their truth on—they are not *contingent upon*—God’s deploying his wisdom and goodness in decreeing what shall exist.

Perhaps the “infinite analysis” theory of contingent truth was meant to capture an explanatory distinction between those truths that depend in a specific way upon God’s providence and those that are independent of it. If so, such a result would dovetail nicely with recent work on the “infinite analysis” theory that has made it clear in the texts that Leibniz intends a strong link between contingent truth and existence.³ And all of this would be in keeping with Griffin’s necessitarian thesis and his general defense of it. The same broad strategy would show how the idea that for Leibniz everything is metaphysically necessary is in harmony both with his commitment to the plurality of possible worlds and with his commitment to the distinction between necessary and contingent truths.

Is this what Griffin himself intends? With respect to the “infinite analysis” theory in particular, it is hard to say. Griffin expressly confines himself to treating Leibniz’s ontology and not his logic, and touches on the “infinite analysis” theory of contingent truth only in passing to say that he will not pursue it (85). This is a little disappointing, and the distinction between ontology and logic is not so sharp on the topic of contingency as to make the theory of contingent truth the citizen of a separate domain of inquiry. Fortunately, Griffin is more forthcoming on the topic of contingent truth itself, in a later chapter discussing middle knowledge. There he observes that for Leibniz dependency on divine decrees is the source of the contingency of contingent truths and says that, in this context, “Leibniz is simply defining contingency as dependence on divine decrees” (156f.). On the necessitarian reading, God’s decrees are themselves metaphysically necessary, and therefore so too would be their consequences. But of course if dependency on divine decrees

is the relevant notion of contingency at work, then it is “consistent with this sense of contingency that the things on which the truths depend be necessary” (157). Although Griffin stops short of saying this is Leibniz considered general view of contingent truth, the texts he cites in support of it are not limited to the context of middle knowledge. Someone interested in working out the “infinite analysis” theory could certainly make ready use of Griffin’s ideas, and critics of Griffin’s necessitarian thesis who wish to rely on the “infinite analysis” theory as evidence that Leibniz is an anti-necessitarian in his mature thought will have to consider their objection with greater care.

As part of a necessitarian interpretation, there is real power in the tactic of construing Leibniz’s theories of contingency—his account of a plurality of possible worlds and his logical distinction between necessary and contingent truths—as answers to the problem of how to keep God’s wisdom and goodness in the explanation of what exists. The textual evidence for this also turns out to be surprisingly strong even apart from the necessitarian thesis. After a while, though, the strength of the tactic can begin to sow doubt about the necessitarian thesis itself. If Leibniz’s avowals of contingency are truly best understood as serving the explanatory component of a rationalist natural theology, why suppose Leibniz accepts a stronger “metaphysical” conception of the distinction between necessity and contingency according to which all things are metaphysically necessary? Perhaps Leibniz simply has two ways of interpreting claims about necessity, one in terms of a thing’s being necessary *per se*, another in terms of a thing’s being necessary *ex alterius hypothesi*. To call something necessary *ex alterius hypothesi* is consistent with classifying it as contingent: contingent in the only sense that matters, namely, contingent on God’s decrees and not merely on his power or intellect. To say further that this is *really* for it to be necessary—metaphysically necessary—and *not* contingent seems to be invoking a background judgment about what it is for something to be necessary or contingent that, perhaps, doesn’t belong to Leibniz’s philosophy after all.

Griffin’s justification for saying that things necessary *ex alterius hypothesi*, or “extrinsically necessary,” are still metaphysically necessary in the end is philosophically attractive. If *x* is necessary in virtue of its nonexistence being incompatible with a necessary truth, then it seems impossible for it not to exist, even if, say, its existence is not contained within its own essence. That’s a good reason for *our* regarding it as necessary without qualification. We accept an “unqualified” concept of metaphysical necessity and related modal principles that license this inference, namely, necessitated *modus ponens ponendus*—what Griffin follows Jonathan

Bennett in calling “the most fundamental theorem of any modal logic” (60)—and its corollaries. Prior to Griffin’s account one might comfortably have said that Leibniz accepts this unqualified view of necessity, though he is careful to note that the relevant theorem is not valid for the transmission of the special property of being necessary *per se*. The more weight we give to Griffin’s interpretations of Leibniz’s avowed claims about contingency and possibility, however, the less sure I am that there is common ground between us and Leibniz on this topic. And correspondingly I am less sure how apt it is to interpret Leibniz’s philosophy as committed to necessitarianism in the unqualified metaphysical sense.

On Griffin’s account of Leibniz’s positive views of contingency and possibility, we appear to face a dilemma. If we (also) interpret Leibniz as a committed necessitarian, along the lines sketched by Griffin, we then find Leibniz systematically discussing a subject other than metaphysical contingency and metaphysical possibility when he discusses contingent truth and the plurality of possible worlds. His theories going under the banner of ‘contingency’ are, in effect, theories of something else. If instead we interpret him as meaning by his modal terms nothing more than the limited ideas of what is necessary or contingent in virtue of itself or in virtue of its relation to something else, then the question of whether he is a necessitarian in the unqualified sense starts to lose its meaning for his philosophy. For it’s not clear the relevant concept has application within his philosophy as he intends it.

Of course one might escape this dilemma by resisting Griffin’s account of Leibniz’s views of contingency and possibility. But suppose one finds the account attractive. What to do then? Myself I would be more inclined to take the first horn of the dilemma and accept that Leibniz’s philosophy allows for interpretation in terms of a general unqualified concept of metaphysical necessity. And in terms of this concept, Leibniz is a necessitarian. But so what? This may only show how little importance attaches to that purely metaphysical concept for his philosophy. It does so little work, in fact, that he almost never discusses it on its own. If concepts are tools, then the concept of metaphysical necessity taken by itself is a blunt instrument. It cannot carve out the fine details of the issues closest to Leibniz’s interests and is of little explanatory value in answering his most pressing questions. To get philosophical purchase on his main topics, Leibniz turns instead to the relevant concepts of sufficient reason, self-explanation, dependency, internal consistency, incompatibility, provability, etc., that allow him to draw distinctions where they matter, articulating his natural theology to make fullest use of the attributes of God and differentiating his views from those of Spinoza, Descartes, Molina and so on.

It would be too quick, however, to say that necessitarianism, if true of Leibniz's philosophy, turns out to be largely an unilluminating element of his thought. For Griffin makes a good case that it is not simply a consequence of Leibniz's general commitments but also a key component in Leibniz's handling of specific topics. Notable here is Leibniz's treatment of God's knowledge of conditional future contingents, and specifically God's knowledge of what free actions an individual would perform should certain possible circumstances arise—that is, the subject at issue in the classic dispute over middle knowledge.

3. Middle Knowledge

Aquinas distinguished between God's *knowledge of simple intelligence* and his *knowledge of vision*, where the former is knowledge of possibles and concerns necessary truths and the latter is knowledge of actual things and concerns contingent truths. Conditional future contingents seem to form a middle category not represented in Aquinas's classification, since they are of possibles and yet contingent. How does God know that if David were to remain in Keilah, Saul would besiege the city? What grounds this knowledge?

Molina had objected to what Griffin calls the "Standard View"—held by Augustine, Aquinas, various neo-Thomists, and, later, Arnauld—that God's knowledge in this case is grounded in knowledge of his own volitions. If God's volitions make it true that Saul would besiege Keilah, God certainly can know what Saul would do; but Saul's actions would then not be free, for they would be sufficiently determined already by God's will. Molina argued instead that God's knowledge must be independent of his volitions, or *prevolitional* in Griffin's use of the term (115). Further Molina held that nothing in the antecedent conditions of such a conditional is sufficient for the consequent; free actions are left undetermined by their prior causal requisites and precisely the same causal background could yet yield opposing results, depending only on the free contribution of the agent's will (and God's permission). God's knowledge of the conditional future contingent is then knowledge not of his own volitions but knowledge of the individual who will act freely. Yet the nature of this knowledge infinitely surpasses, somehow, the nature of the individual itself so that God is able to know determinately in the faculty of choice possessed by the individual what is not yet determinate in the individual's nature (a power other writers soon called "supercomprehension"). So it is, in a way, God's own knowing nature, though not his volition, that closes the gap to make

counterfactuals about the future free actions of an agent knowable (138). In contrast to both Molina and the Standard View, Suarez argued that God's omniscience itself suffices to secure his knowledge of conditional future contingents: given that they are true, God knows them.

Leibniz could not accept Molina's indeterminism, famously criticizing it as "an impossible chimera" and "contrary to the first principle," namely PSR (A 6.4.1380). Nor could he accept Suarez's no-grounds account, which equally violates PSR. Like Molina and the defenders of the Standard View, Leibniz proposes a ground for God's knowledge. But he cuts between those two camps by proposing to base God's knowledge of such counterfactuals in knowledge of God's *possible* free decrees. This makes the knowledge prevolitional, since it is independent of the actual operation of his will. Yet it is not indeterministic as Molina would have it, since the possible free decrees are sufficient for bringing about specific individuals whose own sequence of states will causally deliver their free actions. Knowledge of those free decrees and their consequences thus provides the basis for knowledge of the conditional future contingents. In addition, Griffin reads Leibniz as identifying the relevant possible free decrees—themselves simply variations on the single possible divine free decree to actualize the world in which the given individual would exist—with the individual developmental laws that constitute the natures of the individual substances themselves and determine the series of their states (162).

Griffin adds one more twist to this account, in drawing out the contrast between Leibniz and Arnauld. Leibniz resists Arnauld's suggestion that God makes separate particular decrees for each individual to settle the contingent facts about her. For Leibniz, of course, God's knowledge of the contingent facts about each individual is based on the prevolitional content of her complete individual concept, though that concept itself includes the possible free decree of God that would lead to the creation of that individual. Griffin suggests that Leibniz could not accept the particularist approach to divine decrees favored by Arnauld and others because it would fail to *explain* the truth of the contingent truths that were supposed to arise out of it, in the sense of giving a sufficient reason for those truths. It could not provide grounds that can fully explain God's knowledge of those truths, for even if particular divine decrees would break the indifference Molina imagined to hold in the case of free actions, they would leave unanswered the parallel question why God issued *these* particular decrees rather than others. A flat appeal to divine freedom here makes no real advance on the issue, but just pushes the question of contingent truth back to further unexplained contingency (cf. A 6.4.1599). A final explanation is needed

for God's choice among possible free decrees, but none will be found if one looks at the level of particular free decrees. Thus a proper sufficient reason will instead have to be sought at the level of world-actualizing free decrees. What in the possible world-actualizing decrees explains God's choice among them?

Griffin's proposal is that for Leibniz each world-actualizing possible free decree is directed at a specific possible *principal plan* or *end* in creation (162f.; cf. A 2.2.73). The particular variants of that decree corresponding to individual developmental laws for individual substances are then seen as subserving this end. God's principal plan in creating a world explains why the corresponding possible free decree includes the creation of, say, a Judas who freely sins rather than one who is pious, and so on for all the other individuals in that possible world. What finally explains why God actually decrees a given world with a specific principal plan or end to exist—the best of all possible worlds, of course—is his wise and good providence, which is self-explaining and necessary. God's knowledge of himself, the principal plan his providence favors, and the consequences of his possible free decrees for individual substances explains his knowledge of conditional future contingents. "Leibniz's necessitarianism," Griffin writes, "provides the only satisfactory solution to the grounding of God's knowledge" (164).

I find that a nice line of argument and one that proposes an attractive philosophical rationale for an interesting aspect of Leibniz's thought that could easily have been overlooked without attending to the necessitarian thesis as Griffin has done. Still, it is a decidedly interpretative line of argument; its justification lies in the promise of the rationale itself and the contrast it provides between Leibniz's view and those of his rivals more than direct textual evidence that Leibniz intends to weave together his commitments in just this way. Also, one may wonder here whether the philosophical work in the rationale isn't really just being done by PSR. Not that this makes it alien to Leibniz's thought, of course. But if PSR predictably implies necessitarianism all by itself, then the sweetness of seeing necessitarianism as required by the solution to the specific problem of grounding God's knowledge may be diminished. Grounding problems concerning contingent matters may inevitably require necessitarianism by the lights of PSR, and so we should expect to find a way to express this in the case of its application to middle knowledge. As a natural elaboration of Leibniz's thought, Griffin's case for a necessitarian answer to the problem of grounding God's knowledge of conditional future contingents is genuinely illuminating. Yet I think it is not unfair to wonder if more might be asked as we consider how closely to tie it to Leibniz's own intentions.

4. Compossibility and Possible Worlds

Down with mere necessitation! Up with grounding! It's the mantra of metaphysical explanation of the moment, and Griffin's account of Leibniz—a grounder if ever there was one—is a very fine example of just how much light can be shed on a system of philosophy once the barrier is broken on thinking that explanation stops with necessity. To close with one last case study from Griffin's book, consider his solution to the puzzle of impossibility. Leibniz says that not all possibles are compossible; the existence of some excludes the existence of others. But why, and in what way?

The puzzle can be stated fairly sharply and generally as the question of how to reconcile three principles concerning possibility and the creation of the world, each of which Leibniz appears to maintain.⁴ First, *independence*: every possible substance is *per se* independent of every other in that each could be created by God separately from the others and for any possibles there is no contradiction in supposing that they should exist together. Next, *alternatives*: there is a plurality of possible worlds some of which are not actualized by God. Finally, *maximization*: God would choose to bring into existence as much being or perfection as he can, to create the “greatest quantity of essence” (T 227). Embracing any two principles yields pressure to abandon the third. *Independence* and *maximization* would seem to imply that God could, and would, choose to create all possible substances, and so leave nothing unactualized, violating *alternatives*. *Independence* and *alternatives* seem to imply that God does not create as much being as he can, leaving uncreated possibilities that could exist together with what has been created, thus violating *maximization*. *Alternatives* and *maximization* seem to imply that God has created all the possibles that can be created together, the others being excluded from creation by virtue of their incompatibility with those that exist, thus violating *independence*. A solution to the puzzle—one that explains why and in what respect some possibles are not compossible with others—thus seems to require compromising on at least one of those principles.

Traditionally, there have been two central approaches to explaining impossibility. (For simplicity I pass over some recently minted rivals.) On the “logical” approach, some possibles are logically incompatible with others, so it is impossible for God to co-create them all. This gives up *independence*, for even if each possible substance could be created apart, its existence turns out not to be independent of the existence of other things after all: it requires that certain other possibles not

exist. On the “lawful” approach, although any possibles are mutually logically compatible, not all combinations of possibles would jointly conform to laws to yield a world if created together. Only lawful combinations of possibles are thus compossible, forming possible worlds to stand as candidates for creation. This gives up *maximization*, for in creating only a world, and a single world at that, God creates less than is it is strictly possible for him to create.

On the logical approach, impossibility among possibles is a matter of necessity and is explained by facts intrinsic to the possibles themselves, for the existence of certain combinations of possibles would by itself imply a contradiction. On the lawful approach, impossibility is only contingent and is grounded in facts extrinsic to the possibles, the contingent laws required of worlds. Relative to those features, Griffin takes something of a middle path, holding that impossibility is both *necessary* and yet grounded in facts *extrinsic* to the possibles, namely facts about God’s essential attributes (105). His account of why and in what respect not all possibles are compossible makes careful use of the differences between those attributes, as follows.

With respect to God’s absolute power, each possible thing could be created separately and all possibles could be created together in a single world and thus they are all compossible. But God’s absolute power is constrained by his wisdom and goodness, yielding his ordained power; and the constraints are themselves necessary. Relative to God’s wisdom only combinations of possibles that form “universal systems”—systems in which the inhabitants “communicate” with each other and thereby belong to a single connected space and time—count as worlds,⁵ and some but not all combinations of possible substances yield universal systems (100-103). God’s goodness requires that only the best universal system be chosen for creation. Given the necessity of God’s wisdom and goodness, then, relative to God’s ordained power only the best universal system is a possible world (106). That is, the actual world is the only possible world, and necessitarianism is the order of the day.

This is an elegant picture. How well does it resolve the puzzle of impossibility? It plausibly respects *independence*, since no possibles are impossible *per se*, so the existence of any given possible is consistent with the existence or nonexistence of any other. Likewise for *alternatives*, since the account allows a plurality of worlds, i.e. universal systems, that are not created. And it will respect *maximization* if it can be explained why God does not simply create all the (otherwise) possible universal systems. But why shouldn’t Leibniz’s God create the greatest quantity of

essence exactly by creating the plurality of all possible worlds? Although Leibniz in places suggests that the existence of multiple mutually non-communicating worlds would be unintelligible (cf. A 6.3.581, 584), Griffin acknowledges this is the weak link in the account. While it may not be intelligible to us to say other things exist than belong to our world, “from a God’s eye point of view, of course, it is possible to say of substances inhabiting other worlds that they exist” (109); and while it may be a good-making property of worlds that their elements have a connection among each other, “it’s not obvious that it’s a consideration that should outweigh considerations of the maximization of essence” (ibid.). In its kinship with lawful accounts, Griffin’s interpretation leaves the puzzle of impossibility still imperfectly solved by Leibniz on the same point.

There is of course much more to find in Griffin’s book, and this review cannot do justice the nuance and craftsmanship of the work. Its supporting chapters on Descartes and Molina alone would have made it worthwhile to any reader of early modern rationalism. For its challenging new rendering of Leibniz’s thought on the metaphysics of modality and natural theology, both in its fine details and in the panoramic view it puts forward, *Leibniz, God and Necessity* is not to be missed.

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Notes

¹ D. Blumenfeld, “Leibniz’s Theory of the Striving Possibles,” *Studia Leibnitiana* 5 (1973): 163-77; for a defense against the charge, see C. Shields, “Leibniz’s Doctrine of the Striving Possibles,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 24 (1986): 343-59.

² See R. Sleigh’s indispensable volume, *G.W. Leibniz: Confessio Philosophi: Papers Concerning the Problem of Evil, 1671-1678*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

³ See G. Merlot, “Complexity, Existence and Infinite Analysis,” *The Leibniz Review* 22 (2013): 9-36.

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⁴ Here I follow J. McDonough, “Leibniz and the Puzzle of Impossibility: The Packing Strategy,” *The Philosophical Review* 11/2 (2010): 135-63.

⁵ Griffin here takes a page from Messina and Rutherford on what constitutes a world for Leibniz; see their “Leibniz on Compossibility,” *Philosophy Compass* 6 (2009): 962-77.