Remarks on *Possibila* in Leibniz, 1672-1676:
Quod non omnia possibilia ad intelligentiam perveniant?

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In a recent article Fabrizio Mondadori studies in detail the scholastic background for Leibniz's view of *possibilia*. Mondadori concludes that, "Leibniz sharply distinguishes between the question of the possibility, and the question of the reality, of *possibilia*, and explicitly suggests that the reality – but not the possibility – of *possibilia* depends on the (actual) existence of God".[1] The expression 'the possibility of *possibilia'* might seem a bit cumbersome for making a simple point, namely that possibility for Leibniz depends on the principle of contradiction alone, so that possibilities are defined by freedom from contradiction (or by self-consistency) and depend on nothing else. In particular, and against Descartes' voluntarist view of the eternal truths, for Leibniz, possibility is independent of God's will. According to Leibniz, God finds all possibilities fully formed in his understanding. This point provides a central premise in Leibniz's early reasoning in the *Confessio philosophi* that God is not to be regarded as the Author of sin. Sins are understood and then permitted existence by God as part of the most harmonious series of things, but they are *found* (among the ideas of all things) in God's understanding and are not willed or made by God. Thus, Leibniz's God cannot make something possible impossible or vice versa. This is governed by purely logical considerations stemming from the law of contradiction.

Even if indeed cumbersome, this terminology (the possibility of *possibilia*) brings out some of the historical context (in its traditional jargon) and highlights the contrast with the question of the reality of *possibilia*.[2] The thesis that the reality of *possibila* depends on God means that, according to Leibniz, possibilities are not free floating or self-sufficient like platonic forms; rather, they are conceived in God's understanding and are among the objects of his understanding.

This gives rise to a difficult question: if God does not think certain possibilities, are they to be considered possible or not? In somewhat different words, does it make sense to claim that God does not conceive certain possibilities, i.e., self-consistent concepts? While possibilities are certainly independent from God's will, and depend on the principle of contradiction, they do not seem to be entirely independent from some thinking agent. As Massimo Mugnai notes, "there are no ideas without the intellectual activity of someone thinking (be it God or man or some other rational

being)."[3] For this reason, I believe that, in a circumscribed sense, the reality and the *possibility* of *possibilia* are intrinsically related for Leibniz. As I see it, Leibniz's very definition of *possibilia* through the principle of contradiction makes an implicit reference to a certain mind thinking such consistent or inconsistent thoughts. After all, contradictions or non-contradictions do not arise among spatio-temporal states or entities but among terms of concepts.[4] For Leibniz, logic precedes reality in the sense that it delineates between what can exist and what cannot exist (what is possible and what is impossible). Likewise, Leibniz views concepts and possibilities not as self-sufficient platonic entities but rather as divine thoughts. Thus Leibniz's view of possibility is most naturally placed within a conceptualist framework as thoughts in God's understanding – a framework whose Augustinian sources Mondadori, Mugnai and others have made familiar to Leibniz's scholars.[5] In this conceptualist tradition, which constitutes a middle ground in the disputes between the realist and the nominalist positions among late scholastics, the definition of possibilities through the principle of contradiction seems to make (at least implicit) reference to a thinking mind.

Furthermore, as I argued at length elsewhere, in his Paris writings Leibniz suggests that possibilities also depend on what he calls the ''elements of thinking'' or the simple forms, which he identifies with God's simple attributes.[6] My own view of the early Leibniz's conceptualization of possibilities (especially during his Paris years) is that they refer to God's thinking and, in particular, his reflections on his own simple forms, so that, in considering the relations among his simple forms, God conceives all possibilities. In my view, the best way to formulate the reality thesis in Leibniz's modal system is that, for him, possibilities presuppose God's understanding: both for thinking all possibilities and for making sense of the basic material required for his thinking them.[7] Following Adams, I called this the *actualist* strand in Leibniz's view of possibility (in addition to the *logical* and *conceptualist* strands of his approach to possibility I briefly mentioned above).

Note that there is nothing remarkable in supposing that possibilities are conceived in God's mind. As Mondadori and other scholars have shown, these suppositions are deeply rooted in the philosophical tradition Leibniz has learned and inherited.[8] Thus, it seems reasonable to expect that the young Leibniz would hold such presuppositions regarding the reality of *possibilia* – viz., that possibilities are conceived in God's mind.

In a provocative contribution to the *Leibniz Review* (Vol. 17 2007) Mogens Laerke has challenged this picture for the young Leibniz. He argues that Leibniz has

developed the reality thesis, viz., that the reality of *possibilia* depends on God, only after 1677. According to Laerke, Leibniz has invented his "ontology of possibility" (p. 14) only after 1677 and used it to confront and refute Spinoza necessiterianism. Until then, Leibniz assumed a one-level ontology in which, strictly speaking, there are no non-existing *possibilia*.

Laerke holds, or this is the best way I can formulate his thesis, that according to Leibniz before 1677, some *possibilia* are possible (i.e., free from contradictions) but not real, in the sense that God does not conceive of them. In particular, the subset of possibilities that are not chosen by God for actualization are logically possible, conceivable, but not actually conceived by God (pp. 5-8). Laerke argues that, according to Leibniz in this period (1668-77), God conceives only the best subset or most harmonious subset of possibilities.

Laerke outlines his argument as follows:

> Leibniz's mature refutation of Spinoza's necessiterianism relies on the notion that pure possibility has some sort of reality in God's mind. But I believe that Leibniz only develops this ontology of possibility after 1677. Before this date, he inclines towards the view that logical possibilities are mere abstractions that God never actually conceives (p. 1).

I have no doubt that Leibniz's notion of pure possibility presupposes some sort of reality in God's mind. As I indicated above, I think that the terminology suggested by Mondadori is more appropriate than the 'ontology of *possibilia*'. But since I have no space to discuss these issues here, I will focus on Laerke's claim that, before 1677, Leibniz subscribed to a view according to which "logical possibilities are mere abstractions that God never actually conceives". I find this claim at odds with some passages in the central texts Laerke considers, viz. the *Confessio philosophi* and the notes from Paris entitled *De Summa Rerum*.

Before attending to these passages, let me point out that Laerke clearly states this point in several places. For example, he writes that, "God does not conceive all the possible things that never existed, never exist and never will exist. According to such a theory, God does indeed conceive the best possible world, but He only conceives the best possible world" (p. 5).[9] Laerke also writes: "All these [possible] worlds are logically *conceivable*, but they remain mere conceptual abstractions without any foundation in God's mind, for God conceives only the best" (p. 6, see also p. 7).

Regarding Leibniz's example of a non existing thing whose essence can be distinctly and clearly conceived (e.g., *a species of animal with an uneven number*

of feet) Laerke remarks: "This passage does indeed concern non-actualized possible things. But it only concerns their conceivability: they are such that they could be conceived by God's mind. But Leibniz says nothing about them being actually conceived by God" (p. 7).

Even if Leibniz does not say that non-actualized possible things are actually conceived by God, does he really need to say this? Is it not odd to claim that God, who is seen as omniscient and most perfect mind would not conceive what is conceivable? As we shall see in a moment, Leibniz defines the possible in these texts in terms of the conceivable.[10] If Leibniz's God is omniscient and all-conceiving mind, does it not go without saying that he would conceive those things that are defined precisely by being conceivable?

Let us take a look at some passages. After highlighting the central role he assigns to definitions for his claim that God is not the Author of sin, Leibniz defines the modal terms in the *Confessio* as follows:

> Necessarium ergo illud vocabo, cuius oppositum implicat contradictionem, *seu intelligi clare non potest* (A VI.iii [=A] 126; Sleigh 52) …
>
> "*Possibilia* sunt, quae non est necessarium non esse. *Impossibilia* sunt, quae possibilia non sunt. *Possibile* est, quod intelligi postest id est (ne vox *potest* in possibilis definitione ponatur) quod clare intelligitur, attendenti. Impossible, quod possibile non est. Necessarium cuius oppositum impossibilie est, Contingens cuius oppositum possibile est» (A 127; Sleigh 54).[11]

Leibniz expresses great confidence in these definitions. He states that they can prevent any abuse of twisted words (which is the original source of the vexing problem of evil and sin) and resolve these difficulties. He writes: «If we assume these definitions, I dare to assert that no instrument of torture, applied to their consequences will yield something insufficient to the honor of divine justice» (A 127; Sleigh 55).

These definitions make it patently clear that Leibniz defines the *possible* as that which can be clearly conceived, that is, conceived without contradiction; and the *necessary* as that which cannot be so conceived, because it implies a contradiction. He is as clear that possibility can be defined as that which is actually conceived by an attentive mind (so that the word 'can' does not figure in the definition of possible). Since, for him, God is omniscient and is seen as "that which perceives perfectly whatever can be perceived**"** (A 520; Pk 81), it seems odd to suppose that such a mind would not conceive some possibilities, actualized or not. That Leibniz held God as an omniscient mind needs no argument. Leibniz never retracts from

the widely accepted assumption that God is omniscient and a most perfect mind. Instead, he applies the omniscience of God to comprehending all ideas, truths, and possibilities. As he writes, for example, "God is necessarily a thinking being… […] a being which is omniscient and omnipotent is most perfect" (A 475; Pk 29).[12]

For this reason, I have a hard time understanding Laerke's point that possibilities are mere abstractions that God never conceives. I see no problem with the claim that possibilities are mere abstractions. But, since God is seen as an all knowing, all conceiving mind, and since Leibniz *defines* possibilities as that which can be conceived, or that which is actually conceived by an attentive mind, how are we to make sense of the claim that there are some logical possibilities "God never actually conceives"?

The point that God does not conceive all possibles is far from marginal in Laerke's reasoning; rather, it is a central premise in his argument for the claim that Leibniz has not yet developed a (strong) notion of divine choice. Laerke's writes that such modal conception "excludes real choice in the sense of rational deliberation, because God never has a representation of all the options" (p. 6). Laerke is certainly right here. If God does not perceive other options, He cannot be said to choose or select among them, let alone deliberate or make a rational choice.

The claim that God does not conceive some non-actualized possibles *because* possibila lack reality at the time, is also central in Laerke's attribution of a one-domain or one-level ontology to Leibniz before 1677. According to him, all the possibilities that are actually conceived by God are realized, so that a sharp distinction between possibilities and actualities is still not in place before 1677 (p. 18). Instead, Laerke offers a Spinoza-like, one-level ontology in which all possibles are conceived in God's mind and are realized in the world. As Laerke writes in his conclusion, "Ontologically, possibility is the simple negation of necessary non-existence, and not some other being than actual existence. The actual existence of things coincides with their conception in God's mind" (p. 20).

Let me cite one more example from the *Confessio*. Leibniz writes:

> It is the mark of an elegant poet that he fabricates something that is false but nevertheless possible. The *Argenis* of Barclay is possible, i.e., is clearly and distinctly imaginable, even if it is quite certain that she never lived, nor do I believe that she will ever live, unless one professes the heresy that believes that in the infinite course of time to come all possibles will be produced at some time or other, and that there is no story that can be imagined that will not come about in the world at some time or other, at least in some slight measure

(A 128-29; Sleigh 57-59).

The *Argenis* is a poetic fabrication. It is false because she does not exist but nevertheless possible because she could exist. The *Argenis* is clearly and distinctly imaginable. According to Laerke, however, she is not actually conceived by God's infinite and omniscient mind.

While I think that Laerke has reached an unhappy conclusion, his point of departure is rooted in a fine observation. He writes:

> In the *Confessio philosophi*, on the contrary [to his mature writings], Leibniz identifies God with universal harmony on numerous occasions, using expressions such as "[…] existentiam Dei, seu harmoniam rerum […],"[13] "[…] Existentiae Entis omniscii seu harmoniae rerum […]," and "[…] Deum, id est Harmoniam universalem […] (p. 5).

Laerke holds that these passages imply that, "God's mind is nothing but the harmony of the existing world, [and therefore] God's intellect does not extend beyond the comprehension of the actually chosen world" (p. 5).

It is not easy to clarify these texts and I certainly cannot provide a detailed and convincing account in the limited space I have here. Let me just observe that Laerke's claim that "God's mind is nothing but the harmony of the existing world" (p. 5) does not follow from the above texts. Both *harmoniam* and *rerum* are ambiguous. At some places the ''harmony of things'' might well refer to the harmony of things in God's mind rather than to that in the existing world. In addition, there are other passages in which Leibniz does not identify God with harmony but rather says that God is the ground or the *ratio* of things. For example, he writes:

> …since *God is the ultimate ground of things* i.e., the sufficient ground of the universe, it follows that there is a ground for the universe, indeed the most rational of grounds, and this fact is consistent with supreme beauty, i.e., universal harmony (for all universal harmony is supreme). ... The consequence is that God having been posited, sins exist and the punishments for sins exist. But to say that this is necessary, that God wills it, that this is brought about by God as Author is imprudent, un-called-for, and false, with respect to those who hear, speak and understand (A 126; Sleigh 52).

In another passage, which Laerke cites, Leibniz writes: "the universal harmony is a result not of the will of God but the intellect of God, or of the idea, that is, the nature of things" (A 122; Sleigh 45).[14] In these passages Leibniz does not identify God with the harmony of created things but rather with their source and/or ground.

All I can do here is to offer a brief speculation why Leibniz in the *Confessio* does use the expression "God or the harmony of things" (as in "*existentiam Dei, seu harmoniam rerum*"). The reason might be that Leibniz is anxious to show that sins are grounded in God's understanding (and not in his will) and that he is also anxious to show that the existence of sins is compatible with God's existence and his choice of the best. For this reason, Leibniz might have overstated his case a bit or merely express himself elliptically.

In conclusion, let me mention an alternative explanation of Leibniz's autobiographical statements about his early inclination towards necessitarianism. First, let me observe that Leibniz's claim from the *Essais de théodicée* that his alternative to Spinozistic necessitarianism is "founded on the nature of the possibles, i.e. those things which do not imply any contradiction" could be taken literally as stressing the *possibility* of those things that do not imply a contradiction rather than on their *reality*, which, as I see it, was taken for granted by Leibniz during the decade 1667-1677. Leibniz's mature statements to the effect that he saved himself from the precipice of Spinozism thanks to the "those possibles which do not exist, will not exist and never have existed" (A 6.4 p. 1653) can perhaps be explained via a slightly different route. Rather than appealing to a development of an ontology of possibility, as Laerke suggests, we might suggest that what Leibniz develops in 1676-78 is a more explicit notion of moral necessity as an alternative to brute or blind necessity. To the extent that the notion of moral necessity can already be found in Leibniz's reasoning of the *Confessio*, it is certainly implicit and underdeveloped. For both textual and systematic considerations, it seems to me a better explanation for Leibniz's early tendency towards what he might have associated with spinozistic necessity.

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Notes

[1] "'Quid sit Essentia Creaturae, Priusquam A Deo Producatur': Leibniz's View", in *UNITA E MOLTEPLICITA NEL PENSIERO FILOSOFICO E SCIENTIFICO DI*

LEIBNIZ, (eds.) A. Lamara and R. Palaia, Olschki, (2000) pp. 220-21.

² This terminology seems more adequate to capture Leibniz's modal views than the later distinction between epistemology and ontology.

³ *Leibniz Theory of Relations* (1992) p. 25.

⁴ In fact, I believe that this is one of the early and distinct insights of Leibniz's philosophy, namely that possibility or self-consistency is seen as prior and as a necessary condition for existence. This point is clearly articulated in Leibniz's reasoning about Anselm's proof for the existence of God. Leibniz argues that one has to show that the definition of God is consistent as a primary condition for argue that God exists.

⁵ Mugnai, "Leibniz's Nominalism and the Reality of Ideas in the Mind of God," in A. Heinekamp, W. Lenzen and M. Schneider (eds.), *Mathesis Rationis. Festschrift für Heinrich Schepers*, Münster: Nodus Publikationen 1990, p. 153-167.

⁶ Nachtomy O., *Possibility, Agency, and Individuality in Leibniz's Metaphysics*, (Springer, The New Synthese Historical Library, 2007) chapter 1.

⁷ Later in 1763 Kant will explicitly call these the formal and material conditions for possibility but this terminology is found in Leibniz as well.

⁸ In *Theodicy* 185 Leibniz ascribes to his teacher Thomasius the view that, against some scotists, the eternal truths would not subsist without God. And that there is no need to go beyond God because it is the divine understanding which makes the reality of the eternal truths.

⁹ Laerke adds that "he [Leibniz] affirms that all the possibles which do not take part in harmony *are not inconceivable*. But he affirms nowhere that they are *actually conceived* (by God.)" (p. 5).

¹⁰ In the *De Summa Rerum* he also notes that, "everything possible is thinkable" (A 475; Pk 27-9).

¹¹ I will designate that as necessary, the opposite of which implies a contradiction or cannot be clearly conceived... Those things are *contingent* that are not necessary; those are *possible* whose nonexistence is not necessary. Those are *impossible* that are not possible, or more briefly: the *possible* is what can be conceived, that is (in order that the word can not occur in the definition of possible), what is conceived clearly by an attentive mind; the *impossible* what is not possible; the *necessary* that whose opposite is impossible; the *contingent* that whose opposite is possible (A 127; *Confessio* 55).

¹² See also A 6.1 544; Sleigh 21; A 116; Sleigh 29.

¹³ This line is followed by this one: "Therefore, it is not true that whatever never

will be, nor was, i.e., what cannot be conceived to be consistent *simpliciter* with the harmony of things cannot be conceived *simpliciter*, that is, is impossible" (A 6.3 129; Sleigh 59).

[14] As Laerke points out, on page A 141 (Sleigh 88) Leibniz writes: "*Deum, id est harmonium universalem*". However, on the next page (A 142; Sleigh 90), Leibniz speaks of God as the "highest ground of things" (*Deum quem summam omnium rationem esse nescit*), which suggests that Leibniz also sees God as the ground or *ratio* of things and not only as identical with universal harmony of things.