

## Response to Ohad Nachtomy on *Possibilia* in Leibniz, 1672-1676

Mogens Lærke, University of Chicago

I will begin by thanking Ohad Nachtomy for his careful critical review of the article I published in the previous *Leibniz Review*. My initial inclination was simply to acquiesce. However, as I discovered when returning to the texts and the existing commentaries, I am not alone in thinking that there is a necessitarian penchant in Leibniz's modal philosophy in the 1670es. Robert Sleight, who stresses the importance of the so-called *per se* modalities for Leibniz's refutation of necessitarianism, is "inclined to think that Leibniz may have come close to conflate the *per se* modalities and the ordinary metaphysical modalities in the original draft [of the *Confessio philosophi*]." <sup>1</sup> I am not the only one either who is under the impression that the young Leibniz defended an ontologically weaker notion of possibility in the early 1670es than in the mature philosophy, or even to argue that this contributes to give the primitive version of the *Confessio philosophi* a necessitarian tendency. Paul Rateau has suggested something very similar in his recent book on Leibniz's theodicy. <sup>2</sup> Without being identical to mine, these other readings have given me confidence that my own position is not completely untenable.

Nachtomy's critique consists of one primary objection, formulated in some detail, plus a series of secondary critiques. He does not discuss most of the passages from Leibniz's early texts that I analyze in the original article, but states his point by means of other passages from the same texts, especially the primitive version of the *Confessio philosophi* and some texts from *De summa rerum* (hereafter CP and DSR). <sup>3</sup> I must thus consider whether these new passages do in fact disprove my original interpretation. I will proceed as follows. First, I will address the secondary critiques and clarify a few points concerning my original reading. Next, I will examine the primary and most difficult critique.

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1. In his otherwise concise introductory summary of Leibniz's theory of possibilities, Nachtomy explains that "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 the Author of sin." It should be noted that

these statements are not simple background information, but go to the heart of our controversy. As should be evident for anyone who has read my original contribution (or Nachtomy's review for that matter), I do not believe that the first statement is correct for the young Leibniz. But I also fail to see how the first statement constitutes a necessary premise for the second. Thus, in CP, Leibniz maintains that there are possibilities which *will exist* because God both understands and wills them (since they are good) and possibilities which *will exist* because God understands that they are ineluctable consequences of the good possibilities that He positively wills, and which He therefore permits. Sins, of course, belong in the second category. But surely, this distinction does not in itself imply that God's understanding extends to possibilities that are not willed, nor permitted, and therefore *will not exist*.

2. Nachtomy disapproves of my use of the notion of an 'ontology of possibility', because Leibniz does not use the term 'ontology' in this context. The problem is that other terminological candidates tend to generate conceptual conflicts with Leibniz's technical vocabulary. My concern is here primarily with the notion of 'reality', that Nachtomy prefers. Albeit Leibniz is not always consistent in his use of this vocabulary, it is still the case that, at least from the end of the 1670es onwards, he distinguishes between the being (*ens*), the reality (*realitas*) and the existence (*existentia*) of things. Hence, in the mature philosophy, things have 'being' insofar as they are conceivable and thus conceived in God's intellect as possibilities; things have 'reality' insofar as they have perfection, and this reality/perfection is intrinsically related to the *praetensio ad existentiam* that he attributes to things insofar as they are related to God's will; finally, things have 'existence' insofar as they are actual, i.e. chosen by God as the best and created as such. Now, the interpretation of CP that I have offered does not concern the 'reality' of possibility, but only the 'being' of possibility, since it concerns the ontological status of possibilities insofar as they are contained (or not contained) in God's understanding. This explains why, rather than speaking of the 'reality' of the possible,<sup>4</sup> I have used the term 'ontology' which, ever since Clauberg introduced the term in 1646 in his *Metaphysica*, has designated the science of what Aristotle calls 'being insofar as it is being' (*ens quatenus ens* in Clauberg's Latin.)

3. Nachtomy argues that "since God is omniscient [...] it seems odd to suppose that such a mind would not conceive some possibilities." Apart from the fact that there is nothing inherently odd about maintaining that God's omniscience is God's

knowledge of all things that exist, and that this does not involve knowledge of things that do not exist, I do not think that affirmations about the alleged oddity of some view are going to be of any particular help in this context. Nachtomy also argues that “the definition of possibilities [...] make (*at least implicit*) reference to a thinking mind,” that “this is *what one should expect*,” and that the reality of possibles should be “*taken for granted*” (underlined by me). I hope I will be allowed to consider such arguments to be inconclusive. We need some basis in the texts. Nachtomy quotes as textual evidence that God’s omniscience does in fact comprehend “all ideas, truths and possibilities” a passage where Leibniz states that “God is necessarily a thinking being [...] a being which is omniscient [...].” I see no mention of God’s knowledge of non-existing things in this quote. In the accompanying footnote Nachtomy refers to an early text where Leibniz maintains that the “All-knowing God wills what he holds to be the best;”<sup>5</sup> and another early text where Leibniz explains that God’s omniscience implies that “there will be no harmony in any conceivable thing that is not known perpetually by him.”<sup>6</sup> Again, these passages say strictly nothing about God conceiving what is *not* the best or what is *not* harmonious, i.e. the non-chosen, non-existing possibilities. Finally, Nachtomy evokes a passage where Leibniz writes that “the *Argentis* of Barclay is possible, i.e., is clearly and distinctly imaginable, even if it is quite certain that she never lived [...].”<sup>7</sup> Seen in context, however, Leibniz does not use this example to prove that God conceives all possibilities, but only to argue that, under all circumstances, the *Argentis* “would not be impossible.” I have no quarrel with this: I have never denied that non existing possibilities are in fact possible. What I have denied is that, according to CP, such ‘not impossible’ fictions are actually conceived in God’s mind. This is only an unreasonable denial on the assumption that, according to the young Leibniz, God’s omniscience necessarily extends to the science of fictions. But this assumption is of course what I have contested in the first place.

4. The last point concerns the recurrent passages in the CP where Leibniz identifies God and the harmony of things. I have taken these as partial confirmation of the fact that, according to the young Leibniz, God’s intellect does not actually extend beyond the realm of created things: God only actually conceives the best world. According to Nachtomy, however, such expressions should not be taken too literally, but rather in the sense that God is “the ground or the *ratio* of harmony”. Nachtomy cites as ‘very clear’ confirmation of this reading a passage where Leibniz writes that “God is the ultimate ground of things, i.e., the sufficient ground of the universe [...]”

and this fact is consistent with [...] universal harmony.”<sup>8</sup> It is far from evident what the adjective *consentaneum*, i. e. ‘consistent with’, is supposed to signify here. But surely, the text does not clearly say that God is the ground of *harmony*, but rather that God is the ground of *things*. This does not disprove my interpretation of CP according to which God or harmony is the ground of things, rather than God is the ground of the harmony of things.

Nachtomy also quotes a passage from CP according to which “the universal harmony is not a result of the will of God but the intellect of God, or of the idea, that is, the nature of things [*Harmoniam autem universalem non a voluntate Dei, sed intellectu seu idea, id est natura rerum esse*].”<sup>9</sup> Does this passage in fact state that God is not universal harmony, but its reason or ground? Such an interpretation relies on the idea that ‘*a ... intellectu ... esse*’ (literally ‘is from the intellect’) can indeed be legitimately translated as ‘a result of the intellect’, but also that such ‘resulting’ necessarily designates a type of grounding relation where God’s understanding is in some way distinct from the harmony it grounds. Whereas I have no particular problems about granting the first point, I find no evidence of the second. Elsewhere in his review, Nachtomy rightly points to Leibniz’s combinatorial conception how God’s mind works. God conceives the variety of things in the world by means of ‘elements of thinking’ or ‘simple forms’ that Leibniz throughout the texts of DSR identifies as the attributes or perfections of God. I do not think that Nachtomy would object to the idea that the relation Leibniz refers to by the expression ‘*a intellectu esse*’ could be something like this combinatorial activity, where simple forms are related to each other in God’s mind. Leibniz formulates this theory in the following manner: “when any attribute is related to all the other [attributes], there result [*resultant*] modifications in that attribute”<sup>10</sup> and “ideas exist in God in so far as the most perfect being arises out of [*ex ... fit*] the conjunction in the same subject of all possible absolute forms of perfections; but from the conjunction of simple possible forms there result [*resultant*] modifications, that is, ideas, as properties result from an essence [*ex essentia*].”<sup>11</sup> Now, in DSR, Leibniz repeatedly speaks not only about ideas, but also about things in the existing world as ‘modifications’ and ‘properties’. He writes for example: “[...] places are extended things that are modified, and shapes in space are modifications in extension, just as sensations are modifications in the mind.”<sup>12</sup> Hence, it could seem that God builds up the existing world by relating one of His simple forms to others among His simple forms in His mind. But what are the implications for Leibniz’s modal philosophy of this theory? We should note that, in the quoted passages, Leibniz only speaks about the

possibility of the absolute, simple forms. There is no mention of possible worlds or possible things in such possible worlds. Furthermore, it should be clear that the 'possible absolute forms' are in fact not only possible, but necessarily existing, since Leibniz consistently maintains that the possibility of such forms or perfections suffices for affirming their existence as divine perfections. Thus, nothing in this theory suggests that the world God 'builds' out of simple forms has the status of a simple possibility, and there is no implication that God's intellectual activity involves any conception of non-existing possibilities. Quite on the contrary, such passages seem to suggest that the world comes into being through the same process through which God conceives this world, and that it is in this sense that universal harmony 'results' from the intellect.<sup>13</sup>

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I will now move to the heart of the matter. According to Nachtomy, it is unreasonable to maintain that there are non-existing possibilities which are not actually conceived by God. The objection can be summarized by means of the following syllogism, whose premises are two quotations taken from CP and DSR, respectively:

$P_1$ : The possible is what [...] is clearly conceived by an attentive mind

$P_2$ : God is that which perceives perfectly whatever can be perceived

$C$ : God conceives everything possible

Since God conceives everything possible, it makes no sense to maintain that there are possibles that are not conceived by God. Thus, the non-actualized *possibilia* also have a real basis in God's mind in these early texts. Nachtomy grants that Leibniz does not explicitly state the conclusion  $C$ , but argues that the doctrine is implied by  $P_1$  when seen in the light of  $P_2$ . At least at first sight, this is a very powerful critique: it is simple, clear and based on definitions stated by Leibniz himself in the relevant texts. The question is of course whether it is possible to draw other conclusions from the premise-quotations if we consider them in their full context.

The first premise-quotation  $P_1$  stems from a key passage in CP, where the philosopher provides his definitions of the modal terms *necessary*, *contingent*, *possible* and *impossible*. He gives two distinct definitions of the possible:

[1] "[...] those things are possible whose nonexistence is not necessary."<sup>14</sup>

[2] "[...] the possible is what can be conceived, that is (in order that the word *can* not occur in the definition of the possible), what is conceived clearly by an attentive mind."<sup>15</sup>

In my reading, I have stressed the first definition, pointing to the fact that Leibniz defines possibility by means of two negations in such a way that no ontological equivocation ever surfaces: it is not the same thing to say that the possible is something which is not necessarily excluded from actual existence, and to say that the possible is something which has some other sort of being than actual existence. Nachtomy stresses the second definition, insisting that Leibniz defines possibility as what is actually conceived clearly by an attentive mind. Thus, if one maintains that God does not conceive of all possibilities, this amounts to saying that God is not an attentive mind, which is, of course, unsustainable.

The problem is whether we should in fact take the expression ‘conceived clearly by an attentive mind’ in such a strong sense as meaning ‘*actually* conceived by an attentive mind’, or whether it can be understood in a weaker sense as meaning simply ‘*conceivable* by an attentive mind’. Nachtomy points to the parenthesis in passage [2]: Leibniz means ‘actual’ conception, as is clear from the fact that he tries to eliminate the verb ‘can’ (*posse*) from the definition, i.e. the term which expresses mere potentiality. Hence, the first strong sense is the correct one. This is an elegant observation, but I am not sure it is correct. If Leibniz wishes to eliminate the term *posse* from his definition of *possibilia*, this is not so much to stress the actuality of the conception of possibilities in the attentive mind as to avoid a circular definition of the possible by the possible, i.e. a definition of *possibilia* by means of the verb *posse*. Nothing prevents to read the expression in the weak sense, and I believe to have provided sufficient textual evidence in my original article to make it at least plausible that we should opt for this weak sense.

Let us finally take a look at the second premise-quotation  $P_2$ , namely that “God is that which perceives perfectly whatever can be perceived.” It is a fragment of a sentence which appears in the *De origine rerum ex formis* from April 1676. The entire phrase runs as follows: “Just as God is that which perceives perfectly whatever can be perceived [*quod perfecte percipit, quicquid percipi potest*], or, is an intelligence, so God is that which is perfectly somewhere, wherever something can be.”<sup>16</sup> Seen in context, the phrase is part of an analogy Leibniz establishes between God’s omniscience (which he also identifies as the divine intellect) and God’s omnipresence (which he also calls the *immensum*, i.e. ‘the immeasurable’) I have analyzed elsewhere in some detail the parallel implications of such analogies that one will find in great number in Leibniz’s texts written around February-April 1676.<sup>17</sup> But what does the present analogy establish more precisely? Leibniz maintains that, insofar as He is omniscient, God perceives everything in the same

way as He, insofar as He is omnipresent, is everywhere He can be. The analogy thus states that omniscience is, as it were, the omnipresence of thought, reason or intellect. Leibniz also maintains this elsewhere in the DSR: “[...] just as there is something divine in space, namely the immeasurability of God [*immensitas Dei*], so there is something divine in the mind, which Aristotle used to call the active intellect, and this is the same as the omniscience of God [*omniscientia Dei*].”<sup>18</sup> But this point of doctrine has strictly nothing to do with the issue of non existing possibilities, and it does certainly not imply that God’s mind perceives non existing things. Indeed, it seems more reasonable to assume that, in this context, the expression ‘whatever can be perceived’ (*quicquid percipi potest*) refers simply to whatever there is to perceive in the actually existing world. One should not overemphasize the modal undertones of Leibniz’s use of the verb *posse* in this passage.

Mogens Lærke  
University of Chicago  
5845 S. Ellis Avenue  
Gates-Blake Hall, 330  
Chicago IL 60637, U.S.A.  
mlaerke@uchicago.edu

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cf. R. Sleight, “Introduction”, in G. W. Leibniz, *Confessio philosophi*, ed. R. Sleight, New Haven: Yale UP 2005, p. xxvii.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. P. Rateau, *La Question du mal chez Leibniz*, Paris: Honoré Champion 2008, 187-88.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. G. W. Leibniz, *De summa rerum*, ed. G. H. R. Parkinson, New Haven: Yale UP 1992.

<sup>4</sup> Except in the résumé of the article, where I speak of “some sort of reality in God’s mind.” This is, I admit, an error on my part.

<sup>5</sup> A VI, i, 544; Sleight, 21.

<sup>6</sup> A VI, iii, 116; Sleight, 29.

<sup>7</sup> A VI, iii, p. 128; Sleight, p. 59.

<sup>8</sup> A VI, iii, 126; Sleight, 52.

<sup>9</sup> A VI, iii, 122; Sleight, 45.

<sup>10</sup> A VI, iii, 514; DSR, 71; translation modified.

<sup>11</sup> A VI, iii, 521; DSR, 81.

<sup>12</sup> A VI, iii, 518; DSR, 75; See also A VI, iii, 518-19; DSR, 77; A VI, iii, 522-23; DSR, 83.

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed interpretation of this complex process, see M. Lærke, *Leibniz lecteur de Spinoza*, Paris: Honoré Champion 2008, 517-41.

<sup>14</sup> A VI, iii, 127; Sleight, 55.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> A VI, iii, 520-21; DSR, 81.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. M. Lærke, “*De Origine Rerum ex Formis* (April 1676). A quasi-Spinozistic parallelism in *De Summa Rerum*,” in M. Kulstad, M. Lærke and D. Snyder (eds.). *The Philosophy of the Young Leibniz*, *Studia Leibnitiana Supplementa*, [forthcoming]. See also Lærke, *Lebniz lecteur de Spinoza*, 477-500.

<sup>18</sup> A VI, iii, 391; DSR, 43.