

*Quod non omnia possibilia ad existentiam perveniant*  
Leibniz's ontology of possibility, 1668-1678

Mogens Lærke, University of Chicago

*Abstract*

In the *Nouveaux Essais*, Leibniz famously declared that he once had “begun to lean towards” Spinozist necessitarianism. In this article, I argue that this remark refers to his modal philosophy anterior to 1677. Leibniz's mature refutation of Spinoza's necessitarianism relies on the notion that pure possibility has some sort of reality in God's mind, because only this allows for a strong notion of divine choice. But I believe that Leibniz only developed this ontology of possibility after 1677. Before this date, he inclined towards the view that non existing possibilities are mere logical abstractions that God never actually conceives. In order to show this, I analyze a series of early texts written between 1668 and 1676. Next, I consider a series of texts from 1677-1678, where Leibniz developed his ontology of possibility and put it to use against Spinozist necessitarianism for the first time.

**1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

According to the *Essais de théodicée* from 1710, Leibniz's alternative to Spinozistic necessitarianism is “founded on the nature of the possibles, i.e. those things which do not imply any contradiction.”<sup>2</sup> In a text written in 1689, the *De libertate, contingentia et serie causarum, providentia*, Leibniz explains that, at some point, he was moving in the direction of the “precipice” of Spinozism, but that he finally avoided it by considering “those possibles which do not exist, will not exist and never have existed.”<sup>3</sup> In the first chapter of the *Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain*, Leibniz's spokesman Théophile affirms that he had “gone too far elsewhere and begun to lean towards the Spinozists who [...] derive everything from a brute necessity.”<sup>4</sup> If we are to take these texts seriously, Leibniz himself believed that at some point in his philosophical development, he did not stress the importance of the non-actualized possibles sufficiently, and that this exposed him to the accusation of Spinozism.

There has been much discussion about which, if any, period and texts Leibniz is referring to in the *De libertate* and the *Nouveaux essais*.<sup>5</sup> I will argue that there

is indeed a period in Leibniz's philosophical evolution where he endorsed a modal philosophy that he subsequently considered to be too close to Spinozistic necessitarianism. In my view, the two autobiographical remarks correspond to Leibniz's modal philosophy during quite a long period, from the late 1660's until mid-1677. By this claim, I do not in any way intend to suggest that Leibniz's early modal philosophy was inspired by Spinoza. Leibniz first heard about the philosophy contained in Spinoza's *Ethics* from Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus in autumn 1675.<sup>6</sup> The time span that I propose for Leibniz's Spinozistic "penchant" therefore also involves texts, which were written long before he had any clear notion of Spinoza's philosophical position. If Leibniz subsequently deemed his pre-1677 modal philosophy too "Spinozistic," this was an after-the-fact analysis which did not reflect his philosophical self-image during the early period in question. Furthermore, I believe that Leibniz's progressive discovery of Spinoza's necessitarian position, from the time in October 1676 when he read parts of Spinoza's correspondence with Henry Oldenburg until his close reading of the *Ethics* in February 1678, contributed substantially to make him aware of the fact that his own previous modal philosophy was problematic.

If we follow Robert M. Adams' excellent analysis of Leibniz's mature modal philosophy, Leibniz's defense of contingency and divine liberty depends first of all on the concept of "things possible in their own nature" and on the "theological ontology of logic" that this concept gives rise to.<sup>7</sup> Leibniz's mature modal theory (Augustinian on the whole) involves a two-level ontology. All possible (or conceivable) things have some "being" insofar as they are conceived in God's mind and therefore grounded in a necessarily existing subject. This "virtual" or "ideal" being of the possible is ontologically distinct from the existence of "real" or "actual" things, which are grounded in created subjects determined as individual substances. Insofar as he maintains that all possible things are such "beings in God's mind," i.e. that God has ideas of all the possibles, actualized or not, Leibniz can also hold that the act of creation involves both real contingency and divine liberty. For it allows him to affirm, that God conceives of several possibilities of choice, and that creation involves a deliberate act of choosing based on rational self-determination (what Leibniz terms *spontaneitas rationalis*.) The ontology of "possible being" is therefore a crucial element in Leibniz's refutation of necessitarianism.

In the following, I will not discuss whether the interpretation of Leibniz's mature modal philosophy outlined above is correct or not, but take it for granted that it is.<sup>8</sup> It has, of course, been denied by some commentators that there is anything like an

ontology of possibility in Leibniz's mature modal philosophy, first of all by Benson Mates.<sup>9</sup> It has also been argued by Robert Sleight that the defense of contingency based on the concept of "things possible in their own nature" disappears from Leibniz's texts after 1683.<sup>10</sup> I cannot agree with either of these analyses. But I have discussed these questions extensively elsewhere, and I will therefore leave aside any further examination of them here.<sup>11</sup> In this paper, I will attempt to reconstruct an important phase in the development of Leibniz's philosophy and of his conception of non-actualized possibility in particular.

In section 2, I argue that Leibniz had not yet formulated his ontology of non-actualized possibility as late as December 1676. The category of the possible is of course extremely important for Leibniz's philosophy long before that. But I will attempt to show that, during the early period, the concept of possibility had only *logical* or *epistemological* consistency and not any determinate *ontological* status. Even though they were conceivable for Leibniz, possible things as such were not "beings" in God's mind, but mere logical abstractions.<sup>12</sup> For this reason, Leibniz was not yet entitled to a strong notion of divine choice and deliberation in his account of creation. I believe this can explain why he in retrospect thought that his own early modal philosophy was not sufficiently different from Spinoza's necessitarian position. In section 3, I analyze a set of texts from 1677-1678, and suggest that this period constitutes the historical turning point where Leibniz finally formulated the foundations of his mature ontology of possibility. I also point out how he made use of this theory to refute Spinoza's necessitarian position for the first time.

Modal philosophy is of course not the only point where Leibniz compared his own metaphysics to that of the Dutch Jew. It is not the only point either where Spinoza's philosophy had an impact (positive or negative) on the development of Leibniz's philosophy. The German philosopher's reception of Spinoza's philosophy is an extremely complex affair which concerns not only metaphysical problems such as the nature of substance, the mechanism of creation, substance monism and pluralism etc., but also questions of physics, mathematics, revealed theology, political philosophy, biblical exegesis, etc. I have devoted a forthcoming volume to a comprehensive survey of the question.<sup>13</sup> In this context, I only wish to point out the importance of the confrontation with Spinoza for the evolution of Leibniz's modal philosophy in the late 1670s.

## 2. Leibniz's early views on possibility

In this section, I examine a series of texts written before 1677. In the first subsection, I will analyze in some detail the *Confessio philosophi* from 1672-73. I also consider the *De transsubstantiatione* from around 1668 and two letters from 1671, one to Magnus Wedderkopf, another to Johann Friedrich. In the second subsection, I will respond to some possible objections to my analysis of the *Confessio philosophi*. In the third subsection, I move a couple of years forward. I first consider a text from December 1675, the *De mente, de Deo, de universo*, and a text from February 1676, the *De arcanis sublimium vel de summa rerum*. After this, I will turn to Leibniz's reading notes from October 1676 on some of Spinoza's letters to Henry Oldenburg. In this context, I also examine the *Principium meum est, quidquid existere potest, et aliis compatibile est, id existere*, a short text written in December 1676.

### 2.1 The *Confessio philosophi* and other texts from before 1673

The doctrine of creation that Leibniz defends in the *Confessio philosophi* is often presented as an early version of the argument that he develops *in extenso* in the *Essais de théodicée* from 1710. A prominent example is Christia Mercer's analysis of the text in her comprehensive survey of Leibniz's early philosophy, *Leibniz's Metaphysics*. According to Mercer "in this dialogue, [Leibniz] discusses for the first time at length a problem that would engage his attention for the next forty years," namely the problem of evil.<sup>14</sup> Mercer argues that Leibniz's "core metaphysics," i.e. certain assumptions that he allegedly defended throughout his entire life, are present through "clues" in the *Confessio philosophi*.<sup>15</sup> Some of the assumptions from the *Confessio philosophi* will indeed accompany Leibniz throughout his entire career. I will, however, argue that the position he defends in this early text differs from his mature views in crucial respects.

In the *Confessio philosophi*, Leibniz explains that God in his goodness and wisdom creates the most harmonious series of possible things, i.e. the best possible world. At first glance this is a theory close to the mature doctrine of divine choice. We must, however, recall the following. In the mature writings God is quite clearly dissociated from the harmony that he conceives. God is the *subject* of choice, whereas the world is the *object*. The existence of harmony *follows* from God and its nature is *conceived* by God. But harmony *is* not God.

In the *Confessio philosophi*, on the contrary, Leibniz identifies God with universal harmony on numerous occasions, using expressions such as “[...] existentiam Dei, seu harmonium rerum [...],” “[...] Existentiae Entis omniscii seu harmoniae rerum [...],” and “[...] Deum, id est Harmoniam universalem [...].”<sup>16</sup> We find similar statements in a letter to Magnus Wedderkopf from 1671, in a passage often considered to be the first formulation of Leibniz’s principle of harmony, and in a letter to Johann Friedrich, also from 1671.<sup>17</sup> Certain remarks in the *De transsubstantiatione* from around 1668 can also be interpreted in this direction, especially a passage where Leibniz affirms that “the divine mind consists of the ideas of all things.”<sup>18</sup> I believe that the identification of God and harmony in the *Confessio philosophi*, and the identification of the series of things with God’s idea of the series of things in these earlier texts, refer to a same theory according to which God’s mind and the harmony of the world coincide.

But an identification of God’s mind with the harmony of the existing world is puzzling, because it seems to imply the following: if God’s mind is nothing but the harmony of the existing world, God’s intellect does not extend beyond the comprehension of the actually chosen world. Consequently, God does not conceive all the possible things that never existed, never exists 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. But if it is indeed the case that non-existing possibles are not conceived by God, they are without foundation in an existing subject. Therefore they have no ontological consistency but are pure logical abstractions. Such an interpretation may find some support in the fact that, from the ontological point of view, Leibniz defines possibility as the simple negation of the impossible, that is to say, as the negation of the necessarily non-existent: “Those [things] are possible whose nonexistence is not necessary.”<sup>19</sup> Leibniz also writes: “Therefore it is not true that whatever never will be, nor was, i.e., what cannot be conceived to be consistent with the harmony of things cannot be conceived *simpliciter*, that is, is impossible.”<sup>20</sup> In this second passage, it is striking that Leibniz provides no positive determination of pure possibility: he 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.) Indeed, Leibniz consistently maintains throughout the *Confessio philosophi* that the conceivable possibles that God does not will *do not exist* in the world, whereas he never maintains that all conceivable possibles *are* in God’s mind.

In other words, Leibniz seems to defend the idea that, from a purely epistemological or logical point of view, God *could conceive* all possible worlds. But from the ontological point of view, which concerns what God's mind actually contains, Leibniz never affirms that God *does conceive* all possible worlds. Quite on the contrary, the identification of God's mind with the harmony of the world not only suggests that God conceives only the best world, but that this conception *coincides* with the actual existence of the world.

In such a doctrine, there is no room for the distinction between actual existence in the world and possible being in God's mind. Hence, Leibniz's ontology in the *Confessio philosophi* appears to contain only "one domain" as Benson Mates would put it,<sup>21</sup> i.e. it allows for only one type of being or existence, namely the one that Leibniz identifies as conception in God's mind. This explains why the identification of God's mind with universal harmony in this early text is not contradictory in relation to the conception of several possible worlds. All these worlds are logically *conceivable*, but they remain mere conceptual abstractions without any foundation in God's mind, for God conceives only the best.

It can be argued with some justification that such a conception of the creation of the best excludes real *choice* in the sense of rational deliberation, because God never has a representation of all the options. Leibniz does speak, however, of God choosing the best in the *Confessio philosophi*. He explains for example that there are sinful actions, which "God finds mingled as a consequence in the best harmonious totality of things chosen [*electa*] by him."<sup>22</sup> In the same passage, he also affirms that God would not have permitted the existence of such sinful actions if "it were possible to do so, that is, to choose another series of things that is better without those evils [*alia melior sine ipsis rerum series eligi posset*]."<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, a little later in the text, he writes:

Indeed, Aristotle defined *spontaneity* as obtaining when the principle of action is in the agent, and freedom as spontaneity with choice [*electione*]. [...] Certainly the freedom of God is the highest kind, even though he cannot err in selecting the best [*delectu optimorum*].<sup>24</sup>

I am not convinced, however, that these passages are sufficient to maintain that Leibniz has a concept of choice as strong as in his mature philosophy. In most instances he prefers to explain simply that God "wills" the harmony that he has created. For example, he very often speaks of God permitting, but not *willing* (rather than not *choosing*) the existence of sin in the world.<sup>25</sup> I am not sure that

the modal conceptual framing of God's act of creation in the *Confessio philosophi* entitles Leibniz to a notion of choice stronger than such a concept of willing. He defines "to will" as follows: "*To will in favor* of something is to be delighted by its existence [*Velle est existentia alicuius delectari*]." <sup>26</sup> It should be noted that this definition only refers to preference or 'delight', not to deliberation or choice, and it can be doubted whether a choice really takes place when God "wills" the best world. The same point can be made concerning the letter to Wedderkopf from 1671, where Leibniz does affirm that "God selects [*selegit*] them [i. e. those things that he perceives to be the best] from the infinite number of all the possibles," but still does not clearly state that God perceives those things which are *not* the best. <sup>27</sup>

Such a theory corresponds to a view of creation where God does not exactly deliberate and compare options, but where he simply wills and produces the best in a somewhat mechanical fashion. In that case, the notion of choice reduces to a sort of metaphor for willing or preference. I am convinced this is the sort of worldview Leibniz endorses in the *Confessio philosophi* and other early texts. I also think that this is the reason why he will later consider his early modal philosophy to be too close to Spinozistic necessitarianism. For without an act of deliberation, i.e. a conscious comparison between options, there is an element of automatism and blindness in God's willing the best.

## **2.2 Response to some possible objections**

I have argued that the principal difference between the *Confessio philosophi* and the mature doctrine resides in the fact that the notion of non-actualized possibles does not yet have any ontological consistency, insofar as such possibles have no foundation in God's mind. On this point, I must take into account a number of possible objections.

According to Christia Mercer, the *Confessio philosophi* does in fact provide examples of possible, non-actualized essences in the sense of the mature philosophy. <sup>28</sup> She refers to the following passage:

Therefore if the essence of a thing can be conceived, provided that it is conceived clearly and distinctly (e.g., *a species of animal with an uneven number of feet, also a species of immortal beast*), then it must already be held to be possible [...]. <sup>29</sup>

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. He does not affirm that God has any idea of immortal animals, for example, or that such immortal animals are “beings in God’s mind.” Thus, the passage only states something about the epistemological status of non-actualized possible essences (i.e. that such essences are conceivable) and nothing about their ontological status (i.e. whether such essences are or not.)

A series of passages concerning the Cartesian theme of eternal truths could appear to pose a more serious problem. First, Leibniz writes that “there is something of which God is the cause not by his *will* but by his *existence*.”<sup>30</sup> Second, he explains that if God wills things, this must be explained from “the nature of the things themselves, contained in ideas themselves of these things, i.e., in the essence of God.”<sup>31</sup> Third, he writes that “the ideas contained in the divine intellect do not depend, by themselves, on an intervention of the divine will. For God does not understand because he wills but rather because he exists.”<sup>32</sup> In the same passage, he states that universal harmony results from “eternal and immutable ideas.”<sup>33</sup> In these three passages, does Leibniz not affirm in so many words that the eternal truths, and all the conceivable or possibles things that follow from these eternal truths, are contained as ideas in God’s mind no matter what he wills? And does this not imply that all possible things have some being in God’s mind insofar as they are conceived by Him?

I do not think that this is the case. If we study the context of the passages in more detail, we will find nothing that permits us to affirm that the eternal truths (as well as all the ideas of possible things that follow from the eternal truths) have some being in God’s mind *distinct* from actual existence. Leibniz only establishes the distinction between that which exists by virtue God’s will, and that which exists by virtue of his intellect, in order to explain why the existence of sin is not contrary to the harmony of the world. Thus, in the respective contexts of the three passages quoted above, Leibniz explains:

[1] [...] 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. Therefore sins are to be ascribed to the same thing; accordingly, sins follow from the existence of God, not the will of God.<sup>34</sup>

[2] Sins, however, are not among those things that God either wills or produces, because he does not find these things good, considered one by one, or per se. Rather they are among those things that God finds mingled as a consequence in the best harmonious totality of things chosen by him, because in this whole



## QUOD NON OMNIA POSSIBILIA AD EXISTENTIAM PERVENIANT

series characterized by harmony, their existence is compensated by greater goods.<sup>35</sup>

[3] Therefore, since sins are not pleasing because of their own harmony, they are permitted by the divine will solely because of a harmony foreign to them, i.e. the universal harmony, which cannot be realized otherwise.<sup>36</sup>

Leibniz argues that sinning is a necessary consequence of the choice of the best made by God. It is something that God cannot not choose without either choosing a world which is not the best, or violating the eternal truths, that is to say, the principles of logic. As he writes in yet another passage: “I think, therefore, that sins are not due to the divine will but rather to the divine understanding or, what is the same, to the eternal ideas or the nature of things [...]”.<sup>37</sup> For this reason, sinning is not something that God wills, but something that exists simply because He understands it. Leibniz says that God “permits” these things, for “to permit [*permittere*] is neither to will in favor [*velle*] nor to will against [*nolle*], and nevertheless to know [*scire*].”<sup>38</sup>

But, as it is clear from this, both that which is positively willed and that which is merely permitted as necessary consequences of that which is willed, exist in one and the same actual world. So Leibniz only establishes the distinction between that which is, because it is willed, and that which is, because it is understood, in order to separate those things *in the actual existing world* that God positively wills, and those things *in the actual existing world* that he brings into existence because they are unavoidable consequences of his positively willing other things. But he never implies that those things, which exist simply by being understood by God, have some other existence than the actual type. And in these passages, Leibniz certainly does not affirm or imply that non-actualized possibles have “possible being” or that they are actually conceived in the divine mind. In fact, he is not at all addressing the question of the non-actualized possibles, but only that of the existence of sin in the actualized one.<sup>39</sup> The exact same argument applies to the letter to Magnus Wedderkopf. Here as well, Leibniz is much more preoccupied by the existence of sin in the world actually willed by God to exist than by the nature of the non-actualized possible worlds that God does not will. Any consideration of the ontological status of possibility is perfectly absent from Leibniz’s argumentation.

### 2.3 The *De summa rerum* and the annotations to the Oldenburg letters, 1675-1676

We will now move a couple of years forward to December 1675 and consider *De*

*mente, de Deo, de universo*, one of the metaphysical fragments included in the *De summa rerum*. According to this text, “*impossible* is a two-fold concept: that which does not have essence, and that which does not have existence.”<sup>40</sup> Leibniz is here explaining the logical foundations for his distinction between that which involves some logical contradiction, and that which is incompatible with the willed existing world. It is striking that he prefers to take his point of departure in a double determination of *impossibility*. Similarly, Leibniz stresses the importance of showing that “there are essences which lack existence, so that it cannot be said that nothing can be conceived which will not exist at some time in the whole of eternity.”<sup>41</sup> Once again, he prefers to take recourse to a negative determination and stress that certain conceivable things always have, and always will, *lack* actual existence. Both passages suggest that, as in the *Confessio philosophi*, possibility is conceptualized as the simple negation of the necessarily non-existent and not in any positive way. Leibniz merely states that mere possibility is *not* sufficient to exist in the actual sense, and does not seem to confer any other type of being upon possibility. Albert Rivaud already noted the consequences of such a view:

[Leibniz] seems inclined to confound the order of possibles with that of existences completely. Indeed, one cannot speak in a determinate manner about inexistent possibles or about essences that do not pass into complete being. A non-realized possible is, in fact, impossible, even though it is not contradictory, for it is incompatible with the system of essences that passes into existence.<sup>42</sup>

Other aspects of the modal philosophy from the *Confessio philosophi* reappear in Leibniz’s texts from 1675-1676. In the *De arcanis sublimium vel de summa rerum* from February 1676, Leibniz affirms that “to exist is nothing other than to be harmonious [*Existere nihil aliud esse quam Harmonicum esse*].”<sup>43</sup> This point is further developed in the *De existentia* from late 1676: “[...] for things to exist is the same as for them to be understood by God to be the best [*res existere idem est, quod a Deo intelligi optimas*].”<sup>44</sup> As in the *Confessio philosophi*, Leibniz here seems to defend the idea that the actual existence of things is identical to their conception in the divine intellect.

We must also consider in some detail two Leibniz texts directly related to the problem of Spinozism. The first time Leibniz explicitly addresses the question of Spinoza’s necessitarianism is in his annotations to a series of letters from Spinoza to Henry Oldenburg. Leibniz gets hold of these letters during his visit to London in October 1676 (Letters LXXIII, LXXV, and LXXVIII).<sup>45</sup> In Letter LXXV,

*QUOD NON OMNIA POSSIBILIA AD EXISTENTIAM PERVENIANT*

Spinoza explains that he does not submit God to any *fatum*, but that he believes that “everything follows from God with ineluctable necessity, in the same way as everybody conceives that it follows from God’s nature that he understands Himself.”<sup>46</sup> In the following letter, Spinoza explains that there is no divine criterion that allows us to distinguish good from evil or to separate those who should be punished from those who should be rewarded. Indeed, divine law is nothing but the expression of the necessary laws of Nature, albeit expressed in a moral language adapted to the limited understanding of the common man.<sup>47</sup>

Leibniz clearly indicates that he considers Spinoza’s position to be problematic: “If everything emanates from the divine nature with a sort of necessity, and all possibles exist, then good and evil will be treated as equally bad and moral philosophy will be ruined.”<sup>48</sup> When Spinoza maintains that some men can be excusable and still be deprived of salvation, Leibniz comments: “This should not be granted without precautions. It must be believed that the nature of God or the perfection of things requires the happiness of the righteous souls.”<sup>49</sup> In these comments, Leibniz is first of all preoccupied by the dangerous moral consequences of a conception of the world where *everything possible is brought into existence*. It must be maintained that there is some justice in the distribution of happiness and misery. Therefore we cannot affirm the existence of a world where everything is upside down, where the good are systematically punished and the evil rewarded, even though such a world is conceivable and therefore possible. It is important to notice that this reflection only bears upon the rightful distribution of rewards and punishments in the actually existing world. Leibniz’s position only requires that possible things that are not compatible with the nature of God and the perfection of things do not exist. In other words, he is rejecting a modal system where everything possible is brought to existence, not a modal system where possibility has no being.

Keeping this in mind, let us examine more closely how Leibniz reacts to Spinoza’s assertion in Letter LXXV that everything follows with ineluctable necessity from the nature of God:

This should be explained as follows [*hoc ita explicari debet*]: the world could not have been produced in any other way, because God cannot fail to operate in the most perfect way. For since he is supremely wise, he chooses what is best [*optimus eligit*]. Indeed, one should not for a moment think that all things follow from the nature of God without any intervention of the will. The example of the operation through which God understands himself does not

seem appropriate, because this act takes place before the intervention.<sup>50</sup> Leibniz does not exactly refute Spinoza's position, but he makes an effort to formulate an acceptable interpretation of it: *hoc ita explicari debet...* If everything does indeed follow from God with necessity, this necessity results from God's will and intellect. Furthermore, the intellect in some fashion precedes and determines the will. Leibniz affirms the idea of a divine choice. But, as was also the case in relation to the *Confessio philosophi*, I do not think that Leibniz is really entitled to any strong concept of choice yet. For he does not clearly affirm that God's intellect extends beyond the best that it determines the will to create, or that God actually conceives of all the possible worlds and deliberates between options. His "improved" formulation of Spinoza's position only implies that God conceives the best of all conceivable options, not that all conceivable options are indeed conceived by God.

We should also consider Leibniz's reaction to a passage where Spinoza proposes a monistic interpretation of Saint Paul's notion that "we live and move and have our being" in God (Acts 17: 28).<sup>51</sup> Once again, Leibniz prefers to adjust rather than refute Spinoza's position:

We can certainly say this: all things are one; all things are in God in the same way as the effect is contained in its full cause, and the property of some subject in the essence of this subject. It is certain that the existence of things is a consequence of the nature of God, which brought it about that only the most perfect things could be chosen [*eligi possent*].<sup>52</sup>

I need not engage here in any detailed discussion of the last twenty years debate concerning the nature of Leibniz's early "monism" provoked by this and other similar passages in the papers from 1675-1676.<sup>53</sup> For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that Leibniz appears to affirm that his conception of divine choice is compatible with a monist doctrine according to which everything is one in God, not only as the cause is contained in an effect, but also as a property is contained in an essence.<sup>54</sup> Without necessarily corresponding entirely to the doctrine of the *Confessio philosophi* according to which God is the harmony of the world, such a perspective is far from being incompatible with a world view where the actual existence of the world coincides with its conception in the mind of God.

About two months after he annotated the Oldenburg letters, Leibniz returns to Spinoza's necessitarianism in *Principium meum est, quicquid existere potest, et aliis compatibile est, id existere*, written December 12, 1676. Here, Leibniz insists once again on the importance of affirming that not all possibles exist. In order to

eliminate all sorts of “absurdities” from the created world, such as the possibility that all the good should be punished and all the evil rewarded, one must maintain “that not all things which are possible per se can exist together with other things.”<sup>55</sup> On the basis of this purely negative claim (“...*not* all things...”), Leibniz states the following principle:

But my principle is: whatever can exist and is compatible with others, exists. For the sole reason for limiting existence, for all possibles, must be that not all are compatible [...]. If all possibles were to exist, there would be no need of a reason for existing, and mere possibility would be enough. So there would not be a God, except insofar as he is possible. But a God of the kind in whom the pious believe would not be possible, if the opinion of those who believe that all possibles exist were true.<sup>56</sup>

According to the first editor of the text, Louis Couturat, “this fragment [...] is sufficient to destroy the hypothesis of even a passing Spinozism of Leibniz.”<sup>57</sup> This is a somewhat hasty conclusion. It is indeed very probable that Spinoza is one of the impious men that Leibniz alludes to. Since October 1676, he is quite conscious that he must absolutely avoid Spinoza’s position. But I am less certain that he manages to do this efficiently just yet. One must be very attentive to the position that Leibniz is arguing against. He only argues that *not* everything possible *exists*, whereas he does not state that there *is* something possible that *does not exist*, or that we must conceive some “possible being” distinct from “real existence.” Exactly as in the *Confessio philosophi* and the *De mente, de Deo, de universo*, he is only rejecting a conception of the world where *possibility is sufficient for existence*. There is no commitment whatsoever to any ontology of possibility.

## **2.4 Conclusions on this section**

In none of the texts written between 1668 and 1676 we have analyzed do we find any clear evidence that Leibniz endorses an ontological concept of possibility comparable with the concept of “things possible in their own nature” which grounds Leibniz’s refutation of necessitarianism in the mature texts. In fact, we have found at least two strong indications of the contrary. First: the constant definition of possibility as the mere negation of the necessarily non-existent. This suggests that possibility as such does not contain anything positive from an ontological point of view. Second: the constant identification of God with universal harmony suggests that, for the young Leibniz, actual existence and conception in God’s

mind coincide. Such a doctrine leaves no room for anything like a two-level ontology that distinguishes possible being in God's mind from actual existence in the world. Because of this, Leibniz is not yet entitled to a strong concept of divine choice. In that respect, the occurrences of the notion of "choice" that we find in the *Confessio philosophi* and in the annotations to Letter LXXV do not so much reflect Leibniz's true doctrine at this point as they announce the need for a stronger notion of possibility in his account of creation.

### 3. The invention of Leibniz's ontology of possibility

In the preceding section, I have argued that at least until late 1676, Leibniz did not have any positive ontological conception of possibility and therefore no two-level ontology comparable with the one that governs his mature modal philosophy. In this section, I will examine a series of texts from 1677 and early 1678 which, in my view, constitutes the pivot in Leibniz's philosophical development where his mature ontology of possibility makes its appearance.

#### 3.1 Leibniz, Hobbes, and the emergence of the ontology of possibility

Since the publication of the volume VI, iv, of the Academy edition in 1999, which, among other things, contains most of Leibniz's philosophical texts from the first years in Hanover (or all of them, depending on what is meant by a philosophical text), we are in the pleasant situation of being able to determine with great precision when Leibniz's ontology of possibility is first formulated, namely in three fragments from August 1677: *De veritatibus necessariis seu aeternis*, *De veritatis realitate*, and *Dialogus*.<sup>58</sup> These texts have been analyzed by Massimo Mugnai and Robert M. Adams on the basis of the *Vorausedition*. The following analysis owes much to their interpretations.<sup>59</sup>

Leibniz works out his ontology of possibility while struggling with the question of the limits of nominalism and the theory of truth. According to Massimo Mugnai, the theory of possible ideas that Leibniz develops in the fragments from 1677 derives partially from his opposition to Spinoza's doctrine of active ideas.<sup>60</sup> Leibniz does indeed strongly reject Spinoza's doctrine of active ideas in his reading notes to the *Ethics* from February 1678 as well as in other later texts.<sup>61</sup> It should also be mentioned that the "projective" theory of ideas that Leibniz sketches out in the *Quid sit idea?* from 1677 has often been taken as a direct answer to Spinoza's theory of

truth.<sup>62</sup> For simple chronological reasons, however, this is not an unproblematic approach to these texts. The Leibniz texts in question date from several months before he receives Spinoza's *Opera posthuma* in early February 1678. But I have found no evidence that Leibniz had any clear idea of Spinoza's theory of truth or doctrine of active ideas at this time (in particular, I have found no evidence that the Tschirnhaus connection could have been of any help on this point.) This does not prevent, as we shall see, that the subsequent confrontation with Spinoza will provide an excellent context for "testing" the solidity and soundness of his new theory in relation to issues of modal philosophy. But it should be clear that not everything can be explained from the confrontation with Spinoza.

The primary sparring partner in the 1677 fragments on the foundations of truth and of possibility is Thomas Hobbes, the "super-nominalist" as Leibniz calls him in the preface to Nizolius.<sup>63</sup> According to Hobbes, truth is an effect of language: it is produced by the concatenation of purely nominal and arbitrary definitions. Already in March 1676, Leibniz argues against super-nominalism and insists on the independence of our concepts from language.<sup>64</sup> In the 1677 fragments, Leibniz engages once again in the refutation of "some learned men" who maintain that "the truth stems from the free judgment of man, and from words and characters."<sup>65</sup> But he now goes further than in March 1676 and argues that not only do truths have some foundation outside language, but all possible truths have some foundation outside our understanding. In *De veritatis realitate*, Leibniz affirms that truth has some "reality independently from our knowledge [*realitas independens a nostra cogitatione*]."<sup>66</sup> Similarly, in a letter from January 1678, he affirms that "the essences, truths or objective realities do not depend on the existence of subjects, or on our thought."<sup>67</sup> This also leads him to affirm, in *De veritatibus necessariis seu aeternis*, that the foundation of all possible truths must be found in some omniscient being, i.e. in God: "[...] all [possibilities or truths] seem to exist [*existere*] in one Being that contains all ideas."<sup>68</sup> In these texts, possible things have clearly acquired some sort of ontology, and Leibniz's argument for this is Augustinian in inspiration: possible things "exist" because they are contained in God's mind.

### **3.2 Leibniz's discussions with Steno on possibility and divine liberty**

Leibniz very quickly applies these new results to questions of modal philosophy. We should first consider his exchanges with the Danish geologist and anatomist Nicolas Steno. After a dramatic conversion to Catholicism in Italy in 1666, this

brilliant scientist had become the apostolic envoy of the Pope in Hanover. He arrived in Germany less than a year after Leibniz himself, in November 1677.<sup>69</sup> Spinoza is constantly present in the background of their exchanges. Steno was a former personal acquaintance of Spinoza, whom he met during a trip to Holland in 1660-63. After his conversion to the Roman Catholic Church, Steno became an adversary of Spinozism and in 1675 he published a refutation of Spinoza in the form of an open letter in a volume entitled *De vera philosophia, ad novæ philosophiæ reformatorem*. Leibniz had heard about this open letter as early as in 1675 from Tschirnhaus.<sup>70</sup> But he did not read it himself until early 1677, maybe in preparation for Steno's arrival at the Court. In March, Leibniz wrote a letter (without addressee) concerning Steno's refutation that he found far from adequate and much too fideistic for his own taste.<sup>71</sup> Leibniz expressed some regret that this exceptional scientist had abandoned his research only to become a mediocre theologian.<sup>72</sup>

Two important texts can inform us about the nature of the conversations that took place between the two men after Steno's arrival. The first text is the *Conversatio cum Domino Episcopo Stenonio de Libertate*, a transcript of a long discussion on the subject of liberty, dated from 27 November 1677.<sup>73</sup> In this text, Leibniz explains that his conception of divine liberty is not opposed to necessity, but only to a certain type of necessity that excludes rational deliberation (what he later calls "blind" necessity.) God's liberty consists in "rational spontaneity" (*spontaneitas rationalis*).<sup>74</sup> If God chooses the best possible world deliberately and spontaneously, and therefore freely, this is still a necessary choice because it is contrary to God's perfect nature to choose otherwise.<sup>75</sup> Other texts from the period address this question of God's choice. In *De necessitate eligendi optimum*, also from 1677 (?), Leibniz formulates the following argument: "If the necessity of the wise person to choose the best destroyed freedom, it would follow that God does not act freely when he chooses the best from many alternatives."<sup>76</sup> Generally, Leibniz now accumulates texts where he speaks of divine choice.<sup>77</sup> This is not surprising, for he now seems to have a stronger notion of possibility to back up his position. In the *Conversatio*, he affirms the following concerning the nature of a non-chosen possible series of things: "It is possible in itself [*in se est possibilis*], but carrying it out becomes impossible because it is contrary to God's perfection, and this is what I maintained [...]."<sup>78</sup> In the notion of a series which is "possible in itself" we can already perceive the later notion of "things possible in their own nature." But this point will find stronger confirmation in the second text.

The second text is the marginal notes to the *Confessio philosophi*. Leibniz's



manuscript contains a large number of objections written in another hand, along with Leibniz's answers to these objections. Since Otto Saame's edition from 1967, we know that the objections are Nicolas Steno's. If we recall that Steno arrived in Hanover in November 1677, and if we accept Yvon Belaval's reasonable conjecture that Leibniz handed over the manuscript to Steno after their conversations in the end of November, the marginal notes to the *Confessio philosophi* can be dated to approximately December 1677 or January 1678.<sup>79</sup>

In these notes, we first notice that, contrary to the *Confessio philosophi* and the *De mente, de Deo, de universo*, Leibniz is now making an effort to move away from the "negative" point of departure. Thus, in the context of the distinction between absolute and hypothetical necessity, he attempts to clarify the notion of two types of impossibility in the following manner:

It should be said more clearly. Something is impossible whose essence is incompatible with itself, that is, incongruous, or rejected [*incongruum sive rejectum*] (such as those things that were not, are not, and will not be) whose essence is incompatible with existence [...].<sup>80</sup>

Leibniz tries out notions such as "rejected" (*rejectum*) and "incongruous" (*incongruum*, which also has the connotation of something "unsuitable") in order to conceptualize the precise status of conceivable things that never exist. On my reading, the introduction of these new terms constitutes an attempt to find alternatives to the term "impossible" when speaking of things which never exist, but still have an essence. Leibniz wishes to clarify that the conception of such non-actualized things is not absolutely impossible for a God whose nature includes perfections such as "goodness" and "justice," even if He finally "rejects" some of them for his creation scheme and therefore excludes them from "actual existence" (*existentia actualis*).<sup>81</sup> This corresponds to an effort to give the non-actualized possibles a positive ontological status distinct from actual existence.

There are other marginal notes liable to confirm this point. Among the answers that Leibniz provides to Steno's various interrogations, he makes the following statement concerning the nature of universal harmony: "The harmony of things is something ideal [*ideale quiddam*], i.e., it is already to be seen in the possibles [*in possibilibus spectatur*], because one series of possibles is more harmonious than others."<sup>82</sup> In our view, this indicates quite clearly a change of opinion since the primitive version of the *Confessio philosophi* from 1672-1673. The primitive version affirms consistently that God is identical to the harmony of the existing world. Leibniz now seems to adjust his position and affirm that divine harmony

should be considered to be “something ideal” (*ideale quiddam*) situated “in the possibles” (*in possibilibus*.) Such self-correction is by no means an uncommon practice in Leibniz whose manuscripts often contain several “layers” of self-critical comments written at different periods of his life. Here, he introduces the notion of the “ideality” of God’s conceptions into the argumentative structure of the *Confessio philosophi* in order to distinguish the harmony conceived in God’s mind from that of the actual, created world (which, then, is not in God’s mind.) It is important to be clear about the fact that “ideal” cannot signify “not real” in this context. Leibniz *always* maintains that God’s conception of things involves some sort of ontology, both before and after 1677. The question is whether this ontology is different or not from the ontology of actual existence. This, we have seen, is not the case in the earlier writings where conception in God’s mind and actual existence coincides. But in this later marginal note, Leibniz seems to affirm that there is such a difference. A two-level ontology makes its appearance: on the one hand there is the harmony of the actual world; on the other hand, there is the “ideal” harmony that we observe “in the possibles.”

In yet another comment, Leibniz now affirms very clearly that *all* possibles, and not only the best combination of possibles, are actually conceived in God’s mind: “All possible series are in the idea of God, but only one under the aspect of the best [*sub ratione optimiae*].”<sup>83</sup> This point is further confirmed in the *Demonstratio quod Deus omnia possibilita intelligit*, also from 1677, where Leibniz states that: “It can be shown in the following rather remarkable manner that God understands not only everything that is and everything that will be but even all possibles.”<sup>84</sup> These passages, once again, testify to Leibniz’s newly adopted ontological distinction between the possible and the existent. The worlds that are not the most harmonious now have the same type of “ideal” existence in God’s mind as the most harmonious one. The foundations for a strong conception of divine choice and deliberation are now firmly in place.

### 3.3 The confrontation with Spinoza

Shortly after, Leibniz makes use of this new ontology of possibility to refute Spinoza’s necessitarian position. In a text called *Quod non omnia possibilita ad existentiam perveniant*, dated by the editors of the Academy to approximately 1677 on the basis of content, Leibniz denies that “all possibles attain existence, but certain among them are possibilities that are not, have not been, and never will be.”<sup>85</sup>

*QUOD NON OMNIA POSSIBILIA AD EXISTENTIAM PERVENIANT*

According to this same text, the consideration of all these non-actualized possibles is necessary in order to form a Christian concept of God different from the God conceived “by Descartes and Spinoza.”<sup>86</sup> On condition that the dating is correct, this is probably the first time Leibniz clearly affirms that it is by means of his notion of non-actualized possibles that he aims to escape Spinoza’s necessitarianism.

A few months later, in February 1678, Leibniz receives a copy of the freshly printed volumes containing the *editio princeps* of the *Ethics*. Leibniz immediately reads the text making extensive reading notes and writes down a series of critical comments bearing mainly upon the first part.<sup>87</sup> Some of these comments are quite revealing. In the demonstration to *Ethics*, part I, prop. 30, Spinoza holds that “what is contained objectively in the intellect must necessarily be in Nature.” According to Spinoza, this is clear from *Ethics*, part I, axiom 6, according to which a true idea must agree with its object. In his commentary, Leibniz criticizes Spinoza’s use of the axiom:

This proposition, which is clear enough from the preceding and true if taken in the right sense, our author proves in another obscure, questionable, and devious way, as is his wont. He says, namely, that a true idea must agree with its object; that is, as is self-evident (so he says, though I am unable to understand why it is self-evident or even true) that what is contained in the intellect as its object must necessarily exist in nature.<sup>88</sup>

In order to understand correctly Leibniz’s critique, we must take into account another comment on axiom 6. Leibniz does not exactly deny the validity of this axiom. But he has doubts as to the pertinence of it as a criterion of truth: “The sixth [axiom] hardly seems consistent, for every idea agrees with that of which it is the object, and I do not see what a false idea can be.”<sup>89</sup> The comment is somewhat enigmatic, but I believe Leibniz intends to explain the following: A false idea, if its elements are distinctly conceived, is in a certain sense inconceivable, because it involves some internal contradiction and therefore has no object (a “square circle” for example.) Therefore all ideas, if they are truly conceivable ideas, that is to say, if they are simple ideas or compositions of compatible simple ideas, are always in conformity with their object. But it does not follow from this, according to the commentary to the proposition 30, that there cannot be ideas in God’s intellect which designate things that do not actually exist in nature. For Leibniz, it appears, there can be true ideas in the divine intellect that have no object in nature. What does this mean? I believe the reply must be this: Leibniz implies that there are true ideas the objects of which do not exist in *nature*, but whose objects exist *somewhere*

*else*. In other words: certain true ideas do not correspond to existing things, but to another type of things that we should not make any difficulties in identifying: it is the *possible* things.

This is not the only place where Leibniz has recourse to his new ontology of possibility in the reading notes to the *Ethics*. In his comment to the proposition 33, Leibniz criticizes the Spinozistic idea that things could not have been produced in any other way than they have been produced. For, Leibniz writes, “according to their nature considered in themselves, things could have been produced otherwise.”<sup>90</sup> As has been noticed also by Robert M. Adams, Leibniz here clearly refutes Spinoza’s necessitarian position by considering the concept of non-actualized possible things, exactly in the same way as the *Essais de théodicée* will later affirm that this concept is the most efficient bulwark against Spinozistic necessitarianism.<sup>91</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

According to the mature Leibniz, insufficient attention to “those possibles which do not exist, will not exist and never have existed” in his early philosophy brought him too close to a necessitarian position comparable with Spinozism. In order to explain this confession, I have attempted to reconstruct the evolution of Leibniz’s conception of non-actualized possibles in the 1670’s. To conclude, I will sum up the results.

I have argued that Leibniz does not state his commitment to an ontology of non-actualized possibles until August 1677. Before this date, he endorses a modal philosophy where non-actualized possibles are pure logical abstractions. 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. This is confirmed by passages where Leibniz identifies God with the harmony of the world, and by passages where he explains that existence is nothing but being perceived by God as harmonious. This has important consequences for Leibniz’s conception of creation. In such a doctrine, God does indeed will the best possible world, but it can be doubted whether there is any conscious deliberation or choice, because only the best option is represented in God’s mind. The mature Leibniz himself thought that such a conception of God’s creation of the best possible world did not separate his position sufficiently from Spinoza’s necessitarianism, but that he needed a stronger ontological foundation for his conception of divine choice and deliberation.

*QUOD NON OMNIA POSSIBILIA AD EXISTENTIAM PERVENIANT*

In mid-1677, while struggling with Hobbes' radical nominalism and his theory of truth, Leibniz developed an Augustinian ontology of non-actualized possibles. According to this new theory, God's mind is the ontological foundation of all conceivable truths, including those that bear upon non-existent things. This theory subsequently brought him to formulate a two-level ontology containing not only actual, created existences, but also possible beings with "ideal" reality in God's mind. In his exchanges with Steno from the winter 1677-78 and in his critical commentaries to Spinoza's *Ethics* from February 1678, Leibniz adapted his modal philosophy to this new two-level ontology and used it to refute Spinozistic necessitarianism for the first time. In these texts, Leibniz held that God's intellect contains representations of all possible worlds and not only of the best one. On this basis, he maintained – now with greater right – that God not only wills the best, but that He deliberately *chooses* the best among an infinity of perceived options. In this way, Leibniz believed he could escape the "blind necessity" which governs Spinoza's modal philosophy and towards which he himself had a "penchant" before August 1677.

*Received 18 September 2007*

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> The Carlsberg Foundation in Denmark has funded research for this paper. The text includes strongly revised passages from my forthcoming book in French, *Leibniz, lecteur de Spinoza. La genèse d'une opposition complexe*, Paris: Ed. Honoré Champion. A draft was presented at a faculty workshop at the University of Chicago in September 2006. I thank Yitzhak Melamed for inviting me and all the participants for their comments. Ohad Nachtomy, Andreas Blank, Abraham Anderson and Daniel Garber have all given me insightful comments on the paper. Finally, I thank the anonymous reviewer of *The Leibniz Review* for some helpful

corrections. I use the following supplementary abbreviations: CP = *Confessio Philosophi and Papers Concerning the Problem of Evil, 1671-78*, Ed. Robert Sleigh, Jr., New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005; DSR = G. W. Leibniz, *De Summa Rerum. Metaphysical Papers, 1675-1676*, Ed. G. H. R. Parkinson, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Leibniz, *Essais de théodicée*, § 173.

<sup>3</sup> A VI-4, p. 1653.

<sup>4</sup> NE, I, i.

<sup>5</sup> The first to take seriously the remark from the *Nouveaux essais* was Johann Eduard Erdmann. According to him, the passage refers to the *De vita beata*, that he believed contained implicit references to Spinoza's *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione* (cf. J. E. Erdmann, "Praefatio," in G. W. Leibniz, *Opera philosophica*, Berlin: Eichler 1840, p. vii-xxx.) Louis Alexandre Foucher de Careil thought that the text refers to a "crisis" in Leibniz's philosophical evolution some time before 1673 (cf. L. A. Foucher de Careil, "Préface," in G. W. Leibniz, *Nouvelles lettres et opuscules inédits*, Auguste Durand: Paris 1857, p. iv.) Ludwig Stein, in his book on Leibniz and Spinoza from 1890, saw the remark as a "Selbstbekenntnis" referring to a "Spinoza-friendly period" during Leibniz's Paris years and the first years in Hanover (cf. L. Stein, *Leibniz und Spinoza*, Berlin: G. Reimer 1890, p. 28, 60 sqq.) More recently, Jonathan Israel takes the remark to indicate that Leibniz for a brief period was drawn into the "radical orbit" (cf. J. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, p. 506.) Robert M. Adams points towards the letter from Leibniz to Wedderkopf from 1671 to explain the remarks from *De libertate* (cf. R. M. Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Idealist, Theist*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994, p. 10-12.) Generally, it has been suggested quite often in the last two decades that the *De summa rerum*, a set of metaphysical fragments written by Leibniz in 1675-1676, contains elements of Spinozism (for references, see note 53 below.) These various affirmative approaches to the young Leibniz's alleged "Spinozistic inclinations" have not gone uncontested. Against Erdmann's analysis, Gottschalk Eduard Guhrauer argued (correctly) that *De Vita Beata* was written at a time when Leibniz could not possibly have known the *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione* (cf. G. E. Guhrauer, *Leibnitii opera philosophica pertinentes*, Breslau: Ferdinand Hirt 1842, p. 3-15.) Stein's hypothesis was violently rejected by Eduard Dillmann in a book from 1891, arguing that it was chronologically impossible and

philosophically implausible that Leibniz ever inclined towards Spinozism (cf. E. Dillmann, *Eine neue Darstellung der Leibnizischen Monadenlehre auf dem Grund der Quellen*, Leipzig: O. R. Reisland 1891, p. 202-23.) Georges Friedmann, in his book on Leibniz and Spinoza from 1946 denies that Leibniz ever inclined towards Spinozism. To explain the remark in the *Nouveaux essais*, he suggests that Leibniz made his spokesman Théophile admit to a previous Spinozistic inclination in order to add drama to his subsequent conversion to Leibnizian philosophy (cf. G. Friedmann, *Leibniz et Spinoza*, Paris: Gallimard 1975.) The explanation is hardly convincing. Other recent commentators have argued that a concession to Spinozism contradicts the “general tendency” of Leibniz’s philosophy or the fundamental presuppositions of his “core metaphysics” (cf. G. H. R. Parkinson, “Leibniz’s Paris Writings in Relation to Spinoza,” in *Leibniz à Paris (1672-76). Studia Leibnitiana Supplementa* 18, Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag 1978, p. 88; C. Mercer, *Leibniz’s Metaphysics*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2001, p. 15-16, 453.)

<sup>6</sup> It should be mentioned, though, that Leibniz reads Spinoza’s *Tractatus theologico-politicus* twice, once around 1670-71, and again in the latter months of 1675. In this treaty, Spinoza affirms that “in reality God acts and governs everything through the sole necessity of His nature and perfection, and His decrees and volitions are eternal truths that always involve necessity” and “it is from this [eternal order of the totality of nature] that all individuals are determined to exist and to act in a determinate manner” (B. de Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, Eds. F. Akkermann, J. Lagrée and P.-F. Moreau, Paris: PUF 1999, IV, p. 198-199; XVI, p. 508-509.) Leibniz does not take any particular notice of these necessitarian statements. Like most of his contemporaries, he was much more interested in Spinoza’s biblical exegesis and critique of miracles. For details concerning Leibniz’s reading of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, see E. Curley, “Homo Audax. Leibniz, Oldenburg and the TTP,” in *Leibniz’ Auseinandersetzung mit Vorgängern und Zeitgenossen. Studia Leibnitiana Supplementa* 27, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag 1990, p. 277-312; U. Goldenbaum, “Die *Commentatiuncula de iudice* als Leibnizens erste philosophische Auseinandersetzung mit Spinoza nebst der Mitteilung über ein neu aufgefundenes Leibnizstück,” in M. Fontius, H. Rudolph et G. Smith (eds.), *Labora Diligenter. Studia Leibnitiana Sonderheft* 29, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag 1999, p. 61-98; M. Lærke, “A la recherche d’un homme égal à Spinoza. G. W. Leibniz et la *Demonstratio evangelica* de Pierre-Daniel Huet,” in *XVIIe siècle* 232 (2006), p. 388-410. I also discuss the question in some length in my *Leibniz lecteur de Spinoza*, Part II.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. A VI-4, p. 1447. See Adams, *Leibniz*, p. 12-22, 187. See also N. Rescher,

“The Ontology of the Possible,” in M. J. Loux (ed.), *The Possible and the Actual. Readings in the Metaphysics of Modality*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1979; E. Yakira, *Contrainte, nécessité, choix. La métaphysique de la liberté chez Spinoza et chez Leibniz*, Zürich: Editions du Grand Midi 1984, p. 44, 53-54, 65-66, 87.

<sup>8</sup> I have argued in more detail for my position on the question of Leibniz’s mature position in M. Lærke, “Contingency, Necessity and the Being of Possibility. Leibniz’s Modal Ontology in Relation to his Refutation of Spinoza,” in *Revue Roumaine de Philosophie* 51 (2007), p. 39-62.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. B. Mates, *The Philosophy of Leibniz. Metaphysics and Language*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press 1986, p. 49, 78, 173, 176-178. A similar reading can be found in O. Nachomy, *Possibility, Agency and Individuality in Leibniz’s Metaphysics*, Springer: Dordrecht 2007, p. 12-16.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. R. Sleigh, Jr., *Leibniz and Arnauld. A Commentary on Their Correspondence*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1990, p. 82.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. M. Lærke, “Contingency, Necessity and the Being of Possibility,” op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> I am not the first to suggest such an interpretation of Leibniz’s early theory of possibility. In an article published in 1914 on occasion of the first (partial and problematic) edition of the *De summa rerum* fragments by Ivan Jagodinsky, Albert Rivaud already wrote the following: “In 1676, Leibniz does not yet address the difficult problem of the reality of the possibles that do not pass into existence” (A. Rivaud, “Textes inédits de Leibniz publiés par M. Ivan Jagodinski,” in *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 22/1 (1914), p. 117.)

<sup>13</sup> See M. Lærke, *Leibniz lecteur de Spinoza. La genèse d’une opposition complexe*, Paris: Ed. Honoré Champion, [forthcoming]. Two recent conferences have been dedicated to the question. The first was held at the Ecole Normale Supérieure – Lettres et Sciences Humaines (ENS-LSH) in Lyon in March 2007, the second at Princeton University in September 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Mercer, *Leibniz’s Metaphysics*, p. 389.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 389-396. Yvon Belaval cautions, rightfully in my view, that the comparison with the mature philosophy should not be exaggerated. See Y. Belaval, “Présentation,” in *Confessio philosophi*, Paris: Vrin 1971, p. 25-26.

<sup>16</sup> A VI, iii, p. 129, 134, 139, 141, trans. CP, p. 59, 71, 83, 89-91. I am far from being the first to point this out. Catherine Wilson compares with Spinoza’s position. See C. Wilson, *Leibniz’s Metaphysics. A Historical and Comparative Study*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1989, p. 69.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. A II, i, p. 117-18, 162. On the letter to Wedderkopf, see W. Kabitz, *Die*



*Philosophie des jungen Leibniz. Untersuchungen zur Entwicklungsgeschichte seines Systems*, Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms Verlag 1974, p. 122; K. Moll, “*Deus sive harmonia universalis est ultima ratio rerum: The Conception of God in Leibniz’s Early Philosophy*,” in S. Brown (ed.), *The Young Leibniz and his Philosophy*, Dordrecht, Boston and London: Kluwer Academic Publishers 1999, p. 68-69. Both Nicolas Rescher and Robert M. Adams consider the position that Leibniz defends in the letter to Wedderkopf to be necessitarian. See N. Rescher, “The Contributions of the Paris Period,” in *Leibniz à Paris (1672-76). Studia Leibnitiana Supplementa* 18 (1978), p. 43-53; Adams, Leibniz, p. 10-12.

<sup>18</sup> A VI, i, p. 511, trans. in G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, Ed. L. E. Loemker, Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company 1970, p. 118. This volume will hereafter be referred to as “Loemker.” See also *Supplement: Notes on the Eucharist*, 1668, in Loemker, p. 118: “[...] the substance of things is an idea [...]”; “the ideas of God and the substances of things are the same in fact, different in relation [...].” From the same period, Konrad Moll also quotes the *Demonstrationum catholicarum conspectus*, A VI, i, p. 499, cit. and trans. in Moll, “*Deus sive harmonia universalis*,” p. 68-69: “The beatific vision or intuition of God face to face is the contemplation of the universal harmony of things since contemplation of the universal mind is nothing else than contemplation of the harmony of things, or the principle of beauty in them.”

<sup>19</sup> A VI, iii, p. 127, trans. CP, p. 55.

<sup>20</sup> A VI, iii, p. 129, trans. CP, p. 58.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Mates, *The Philosophy of Leibniz*, p. 178.

<sup>22</sup> A VI, iii, p. 124, trans. CP, p. 49.

<sup>23</sup> A VI, iii, p. 124, trans. CP, p. 49.

<sup>24</sup> A VI, iii, p. 135, trans. CP, p. 69-73. Leibniz does use the verb “to choose” (*eligere*) on three other occasions in a religious sense in order to distinguish between those (actually existing) persons who are “chosen” or loved by God and those (actually existing) persons who are not (cf. A VI, iii, p. 117, 119, trans. CP, p. 31, 37.) This has nothing to do with Leibniz’s account of possibility, but only with his conception of sin and damnation.

<sup>25</sup> See for example A VI, iii, p. 124, trans. CP, p. 49: “Sins, however, are not among the things that God either *wills* [*vult*] or produces [...]”; A VI, iii, p. 127, trans. CP, 55: “*To permit is neither to will in favor nor to will against* [*nec velle nec nolle*], and nevertheless to know. *To be the author* is by one’s *will* [*voluntate*] to be the ground of something else”; A VI, iii, p. 130, trans. CP, p. 61: “The question remains

whether *wills in favor* of sins or *wills against* them [*Superest quaestio, an Deus peccata velit nolitive*]; A VI, iii, p. 130, trans. CP, p. 63: “PH: [...] it must be said that God permits [sins], i.e., he neither wills in favor of their existence nor wills against it [*nec velle, nec nolle*]. // TH: On the contrary, it seems that he wills in their favor [*velle*] [...]. // PH: This is an illusion of reasoning [...],” etc. (italics mine.)

<sup>26</sup> A VI, iii, p. 127, trans. CP, p. 55.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. A II, i, p. 117, trans. CP, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Mercer, *Leibniz’s Metaphysics*, p. 391.

<sup>29</sup> A VI, iii, p. 128, trans. CP, p. 57.

<sup>30</sup> A VI, iii, p. 122, trans. CP, p. 43.

<sup>31</sup> A VI, iii, p. 124, trans. CP, p. 49.

<sup>32</sup> A VI, iii, p. 131, trans. CP, p. 65.

<sup>33</sup> A VI, iii, p. 131, trans. CP, p. 65.

<sup>34</sup> A VI, iii, p. 122, trans. CP, p. 45.

<sup>35</sup> A VI, iii, p. 124, trans. CP, p. 49.

<sup>36</sup> A VI, iii, p. 131, trans. CP, p. 65.

<sup>37</sup> A VI, iii, p. 121, trans. CP, p. 41.

<sup>38</sup> A VI, iii, p. 127, 130, trans. CP, p. 55, 63.

<sup>39</sup> A text written in French from the same period called “The author of sin” confirms that it is mainly the problem of the existence of evil that preoccupies Leibniz at this time. Here, he explains that God is not the author of sin, because sin contains nothing positive, but is only privation. Therefore God is not morally responsible for sins, even though he is the physical cause of their existence (cf. A VI-3, p. 150-52, trans. CP, p. 110-13.) Leibniz continues to use a similar argument in the later texts. See for example *Essais de théodicée*, § 335: “God is not the author of the essences, insofar as they are only possibilities; but there is nothing actual that he has not issued and given existence; and he has permitted evil, because it is enveloped in the best plan that can be found in the region of possibles and that the supreme wisdom could not fail to choose.” It should be noted, however, that in this late text, Leibniz clearly refers to the ontology of non-actualized possibles, which is not the case in *L’Auteur du péché*.

<sup>40</sup> A VI, iii, p. 463, trans. DSR, p. 7.

<sup>41</sup> A VI, iii, p. 463, trans. DSR, p. 7.

<sup>42</sup> Rivaud, *Textes inédits*, p. 117-18.

<sup>43</sup> A VI, iii, p. 474, trans. DSR, p. 24-25.

<sup>44</sup> A VI, iii, p. 588, trans. DSR, p. 30.

<sup>45</sup> On the historical circumstances of these annotations, see the very helpful article by Noel Malcolm, “Leibniz, Oldenburg, and Spinoza, in the Light of Leibniz’s Letter to Oldenburg of 18/28 November 1676,” in *Studia Leibnitiana* 35/2 (2003), p. 225-243.

<sup>46</sup> Spinoza to Oldenburg, Ep. LXXV, Ed. Gebhardt, IV, p. 311-12.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Spinoza to Oldenburg, Ep. LXXVIII, Ed. Gebhardt, IV, p. 327-28.

<sup>48</sup> A VI, iii, p. 365.

<sup>49</sup> A VI, iii, p. 368.

<sup>50</sup> A VI, iii, p. 364, partly translated in Malcolm, *Leibniz, Oldenburg, and Spinoza*, p. 238.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Spinoza to Oldenburg, Ep. LXXIII, Ed. Gebhardt, IV, p. 307.

<sup>52</sup> A VI, iii, p. 370.

<sup>53</sup> See, among other texts, Adams, *Leibniz*, p. 123-134; M. Kulstad, “Did Leibniz Incline towards Monistic Pantheism in 1676,” in *VI. Internationaler Leibniz-Kongress. Leibniz und Europa*, Hannover 1994, p. 424-28; “Leibniz’s Early Argument that All Things are One in Relation to Descartes’ Notions of Real and Modal Distinction,” in *VII. Internationaler Leibniz-Kongress. Nihil sine Ratione*, Berlin 2001, p. 663-668; “Exploring the Middle Ground: Was Leibniz’s Conception of God ever Spinozistic?” in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 76 (2002), p. 671-90; “The One and the Many, Kinds of Distinctness and Universal Harmony: The Possibility of Monism or Pantheism in the Young Leibniz,” in D. Rutherford and J. A. Cover (eds.), *Leibniz. Nature and Freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005, p. 20-43. It is less well known, that Albert Rivaud already in 1914 detected a Spinozistic inspiration in the *De summa rerum* fragments (cf. Rivaud, “Textes inédits,” p. 96, 109, 118.) Especially G. H. R. Parkinson and Christa Mercer have argued against any serious Spinozistic influence (cf. G. H. R. Parkinson, “Leibniz’s Paris Writings,” p. 88; C. Mercer, “Leibniz and Spinoza on substance and mode,” in D. Pereboom (ed.), *The Rationalists. Critical Essays on Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz*, New York: Rowmann and Littlefield 1999, p. 273-30; C. Mercer, *Leibniz’s Metaphysics*, p. 386-87, 430, 453-55, 459. I discuss the *De summa rerum* papers in length in my *Leibniz lecteur de Spinoza*, Part III.

<sup>54</sup> There has been some disagreement among commentators concerning Leibniz’s commitment to Spinozism in this passage. According to Ludwig Stein, Leibniz endorses Spinozistic pantheism (cf. Stein, *Leibniz und Spinoza*, p. 51.) Robert M. Adams also inclines towards a Spinozistic interpretation (cf. Adams, *Leibniz*, p. 127-28.) Georges Friedmann believes that Leibniz interprets Spinoza’s letter in a

meaning strictly opposed to the intention of the author, and that no Spinozism is implied (cf. G. Friedmann, *Leibniz et Spinoza*, p. 116-17.) Edwin Curley proposes a more cautious analysis. As he points out, the idea of divine choice is incompatible with Spinoza's position. But he stresses that Leibniz seems to agree with Spinoza on some level (cf. E. Curley, "*Homo Audax*," p. 294.) Noel Malcolm holds a similar view (cf. Malcolm, "Leibniz, Oldenburg, and Spinoza," p. 235, 238-39.)

<sup>55</sup> A VI, iii, p. 581, trans. DSR, p. 105.

<sup>56</sup> A VI, iii, p. 581, trans. DSR, p. 105.

<sup>57</sup> L. Couturat, "Préface," in G. W. Leibniz, *Opuscules et fragments inédits*, Ed. L. Couturat, Paris: Félix Alcan 1903, p. ii. See also L. Couturat, *La Logique de Leibniz*, Paris: Félix Alcan 1901, p. 219, note 2.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. A VI, iv, p. 17, 18-20, 20-25.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Adams, *Leibniz*, p. 177-81; M. 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.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. M. Mugnai, "Leibniz's Nominalism," p. 154.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Leibniz, *Randbemerkungen, Unterstreichungen and Excerpte aus der Ethica*, A VI, iv, p. 1713, note 21; "J.-G. Wachteri de recondita Hebraeorum philosophia (1706)," Ed. P. Beeley, in *The Leibniz Review* 12 (2002), p. 7; Leibniz to De Volder, 23 Juin 1699, GP II, p. 184, trans. Loemker, p. 520.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. A VI, iv, p. 1370. See also G. Deleuze, *Spinoza et le problème de l'expression*, Paris: Minuit 1968, p. 305-7; Y. Belaval, *Leibniz. De l'Age classique aux Lumières*, Paris: Beauchesne 1995, p. 114; J.-B. Rauzy, "Introduction," in G. W. Leibniz, *Recherches générales sur l'analyse des notions et des vérités. 24 thèses métaphysiques et autres textes logiques et métaphysiques*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France 1998, p. 441.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. GP IV, p. 158. See also Mugnai, "Leibniz's Nominalism," p. 154.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. A VI, iii, p. 397, trans. DSR, p. 48-49. Leibniz argues in this text that "genuine propositions [...] can be stripped of signs." On this point, see also M. Dascal, *La sémiologie de Leibniz*, Paris: Aubier-Montaigne 1978, p. 181-82; "Signs and thought in Leibniz's Paris notes," in *Leibniz. Language, Signs, and Thought. A collection of Essays*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamin's Publishing Company 1987, p. 49-50; Mugnai, "Leibniz's nominalism," p. 160-61.

<sup>65</sup> A VI, iv, p. 22.

<sup>66</sup> A VI, iv, p. 18.

<sup>67</sup> A II, i, p. 391.

<sup>68</sup> A VI, iv, p. 17.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. A II, i, p. 377, 379. See also J. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, p. 507.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. A VI, iii, p. 379, 381. See also Belaval, “Présentation,” p. 17.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. A VI, iv, p. 2197-2202.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. A VI, iv, p. 2189; A II, i, p. 397; *Essais de théodicée*, § 100. On Steno, Spinoza and Leibniz, see W. Klever, “Steno’s statements on Spinoza and Spinozism,” in *Studia Spinozana* 6 (1990), p. 303-13; Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, p. 43-44, 223-224, 507-10.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. A VI, iv, p. 1375-83.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. A VI, iv, p. 1380, trans. CP, p. 123. See also A VI, iv, p. 1451, 2269; GP VII, p. 109; *Essais de théodicée*, § 288, etc.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. A VI, iv, p. 1378, 1383, trans. CP, p. 119, 129. See also A VI, iv, p. 1389.

<sup>76</sup> A VI, iv, p. 1351-52, trans. CP, p. 139.

<sup>77</sup> See for example A VI, iv, p. 1352, 1389.

<sup>78</sup> A VI-4, p. 1376.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Belaval, “Présentation,” p. 14-16. See also Adams, *Leibniz*, p. 17.

<sup>80</sup> A VI, iii, p. 128, note L16, trans. CP, p. 57. We should mention, however, that Leibniz bars this marginal note.

<sup>81</sup> On this, see the *Conversatio cum Domino Episcopo Stenonio de libertate*, A VI, iv, p. 1378, trans. CP, p. 119: “Certainly this series can be understood or conceived, but its actual existence [*existentia actualis*] is impossible by a hypothetical necessity, not because it implies a contradiction in terms but because it is incompatible with the presupposed existence of God, whose perfection (from which his justice follows) cannot allow such a thing.”

<sup>82</sup> A VI, iii, p. 146, note L30, trans. CP, p. 101.

<sup>83</sup> A VI, iii, p. 123, note L11, trans. CP, p. 47.

<sup>84</sup> A VI, iv, p. 1353, trans. CP, p. 141. The proof that Leibniz proceeds to develop is important for understanding correctly the so-called “theory of striving possibles,” but it need not concern us in this context. I have analyzed the text in some detail in *Leibniz lecteur de Spinoza*, Part IV, Section 9.4.

<sup>85</sup> A VI, iv, p. 1352.

<sup>86</sup> A VI, iv, p. 1352.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. A VI, iv, p. 1705-1777.

<sup>88</sup> A VI, iv, p. 1775, trans. Loemker, p. 204.

<sup>89</sup> A VI, iv, p. 1766, trans. Loemker, p. 197.

<sup>90</sup> A VI, iv, p. 1776, trans. Loemker, p. 204. I have modified the translation slightly. Loemker translates: “[...] but, if the nature of the world is considered in itself, a different world could have been produced.” The original Latin does not refer to “worlds” but to “things”: “[...] secundum ipsam vero rerum naturam per se spectatam, aliter produci res poterant.”

<sup>91</sup> Cf. Adams, *Leibniz*, p. 12.