

## LEIBNIZ: ON THE QUESTION OF FREEDOM

Clara Carrillo MA.,Ph.Dc  
Education Practice Director  
Franklin Covey, Colombia

### ABSTRACT

*According to Leibniz, any contingent or infinite truth is subject to God's knowledge and in this sense the principle of infallibility must be understood as the one by virtue of which the notion of the predicated is in some way involved in the notion of the subject (29); actually that is what is called into being by him. God, being unique, universal, perfect (26), is the only one able to see the whole series of things comprehended in the universe. This does not mean that human beings are not free since that would mean that infallibility is the same as necessity. The reasonable soul characterized by its capacity of reflection which enables us to think of the so-called self ought to be considered more than a simple monad. Actually each 'I' which does not merely remain and subsist metaphysically but also remains morally the same and constitutes the same personality. As reasonable souls we are free, although God knows the successions of contingente particulars.*

*Key words: free will, universal harmony, infinity, monad, sufficient reason, contingency*

**One may ask what the true good is. I answer that it is nothing else than that which serves in the perfection of intelligent substance: from where it is clear that order, contentment, joy, wisdom, goodness and virtue are good things essentially and can never be evil; that is power is naturally a good, that is to say in itself, because everything being equal, it is better to have it than not to have it: but it does not become a certain good until it is joined with wisdom and goodness.**

**Leibniz**  
Political Writings (1)

Leibniz' conception of freedom is related to working out our own perfection from the originality of any being and its unfolding. I will refer to authenticity because individuality, departing from Leibniz point of view, is build up not upon one's caprice, but upon the strive towards our own goals and duties, as well as upon the exercise of our freedom within a universal binding way of being.

But let me make some remarks on Leibniz' metaphysics before bringing about the question of freedom, since I consider them a good introduction to this subject.

According to Leibniz, there are two labyrinths of the human mind: one concerns the composition of the continuum, and the other the nature of freedom, and both spring from the same source-the infinite (2). Contrary to what many of his predecessors claimed, he states that any portion of matter, regardless its size, contains in it a world of creatures, infinite in number. Creatures which have impressed on them a certain mark of the divine infinity (3) revealed in the fact that each individual substance contains the whole universe in its complete notion, though this representation is confused. For otherwise every monad would be a deity. It is not in the object of their knowledge, but in the modes of this knowledge that the monads are limited (4).

Thus every portion of matter can be conceived as a garden full of plants or as a pond full of fish. But every branch of the plant, every limb of the animal, every drop of its humors, is again such garden or such a pond (5).

Furthermore, each of them, however imperfect, acts on all others and is acted on by all others (6) since there is a universal harmony due to which every substance exactly expresses all the others through the relations it has with them(7). Hence every monad, although it is totally isolated, knows now about the others substance according to the expression of the world it carries in its own perceptions. Each simple substance, namely monad, is then subject to a continual change produced only by an internal principle since nothing external could affect its interior(8): Monads have no windows through which anything could come in or go out(9). Now, if we take into account that monads are simple substances, which has no parts (10), changes occurred in it must be regarded as a plurality of affections and relations (11).

The passing state which comprehendes and represents a multiplicity in the unity or simple substance is nothing but what is called perception; which must be clearly distinguished from apperception or conciousness (...) the action of the internal principle which produces change, that is, the passage from one perception to another may be called appetition (12).

So, not only matter is actually divided ad infinitum but every part has its own particular moment. Perception and appetitions should then be explained departing from the simple substance without reference to composites and, consequently, not the mechanical process either. The explanation could be enrooted in the relation between the specificity and variety of the simple substance (13) actually, Leibniz argues that besides the principle of change, there must be a particular trait of what is changing (14) which must comprehend a multiplicity in the unity(15). It seems to me that this multiplicity in the unity is intimately related to time not only as a principle of order or succession but as memory:

The present state of a simple substance is the natural result of its precedent state so much so that the present is pregnant with the future (16).

Memory, says Leibniz, grants a kind of consistency expressed in the similarity of reactions animals show in front of conditions or contexts alike (17). Thus perceptions similar to preceding perceptions kept in the memory will probably evoke analogous reactions to those provoked in the past by such resembling perceptions. Interestingly this kind of consistency we were talking imitates reason but must be distinguished from it, and is precisely at this point where I think time begins to show a different shade, for our reasoning is based on a capacity of reflection wherein a game of time-movements is crucial.

Knowledge of necessary and eternal truths, however, distinguishes us from mere animals and grants us reason and the science, elevating us to the knowledge of God. This possession is what is called our reasonable soul or spirit (18)

Certainly the soul having memory and distinctive perceptions ought to be considered more than a simple monad (19). Much more if it is the case of a reasonable soul characterized by its capacity of reflection which enables us to think of the so-called self (20).

From my point of view, the information gathered previously which will be used by the monad is forthcoming occasions could be organized accordingly to a structure of time different from the one involved in the actual state of affairs. Just allow me to play a little bit with the kind of reflection made when one is examining what has already happened. Perhaps this possibility of being in the present and spectator and simultaneously being what objectively belongs to the past, give us the opportunity of moving in a certain variety of configurations concerning time. Variety which probably could be diminished or at least the configuration could be more lineal when one is a spectator of a particular state of affairs. What I am trying to say is that the present has something fixed- in terms of 'now' being just a precise moment-, unless some displacements are to be made towards the future and its openness, or towards the past and its plurality of moments gone. The past in relation not only to what memory can bring about but to what helped the actual state of affairs came into existence.

There is infinity of figures and movements, says Leibniz, past and present, which contribute to the efficient cause of my presently writing. And there is infinity of minute inclinations and dispositions of my soul, which contribute to the final cause of my writing (21).

These configurations and displacements in time, I believe, could play an important role in the constitution of that multiplicity which is a unity, and thus in the constitution of the notion of a self: the intelligent soul, knowing what it is and being able to say this 'I' which says so much, does not merely remain and subsist metaphysically but also remains morally the same and constitutes the same personality. For it is the memory or knowledge of this 'I' which makes it capable of reward and punishment (22).

Now, when we think about the mutual penetration of things, something should appear clear and it is the fact that 'I' can only be aware of part of that infinite connection among the parts of the universe. Thus, as finite beings, immersed in space and time, we cannot see the whole series of infinite reasons preceding a truth of fact or an individual thing. Nevertheless we must be aware that no fact can be true or existing and no statement truthful without a sufficient reason for its being so and not different (23). The question of why there is something rather than nothing lead us to face the fact that there has to be a sufficient reason for the series of things comprehended in the universe, though the resolution into the particular reasons could be continued without limit. The analysis of any contingent stands in need of another analysis, namely, one of the contingents which contribute to this final event and the process can go on and on, so that nothing is gained by means of such analysis. Thus, the ultimate or sufficient reason must exist outside the succession or series of contingent particulars. Furthermore, the ultimate reason of all things must subsist in a necessary substance, in which all particulars changes may exist only virtually as in its source: this substance is what we call God (24).

In God there are his power which is the source of everything, his knowledge which contains the particulars of the ideas, and finally his will is the source of change or production and acts according to the principle of the best possible (25).

The Creator, being unique, universal, perfect (26), is the only one able to see the whole series of things comprehended in the universe. It must not be imagined, however, that since god sees whatever is in the series, we are not free for that would mean to believe that infallibility is the same as necessity.

In the search of determinations to be accounted for an action, it occurs the same as in the case of any particular contingent: one will never arrive at the ultimate reason because the resolution of each event is continued indefinitely; being God the only one who knows the entire series of things and reasons not by a demonstration indeed (for what would imply a contradiction) but by an infallible vision (28). In other words, any contingent or infinite truth is subject to God's knowledge and in this sense the principle of infallibility must be understood as the one by virtue of which the notion of the predicated is in some way involved in the notion of the subject (29); actually that is what is called into being by him.

In the case of Adam, for example, God saw what would happen to Adam before he decided to create him, and so there is no obstruction to freedom from this quarter. Again, the notion of a possible Adam also contains the decrees of free will, divine and human, considered as possible. Evidently, Adam did sin but he did it without necessity. What happens is that the individual notion of each person included once for all everything which will ever happen to him and in this sense future is determined. Nevertheless, since God knows how things will be happening, we must fulfill our duty according to the laws he has prescribed. For God has ordered from eternity the whole succession of the universe (30) and therefore every event to be taken place will be the effect of a preceding event which then will have to occur also.

Paraphrasing a German proverb, Leibniz says: 'you will die on that day (let us presume it is so and that God foresees it): yes, without doubt; but it will be because you will do what shall lead you thither (31). From this point of view, the 'Lazy Sophism' about doing nothing since all has already been predestinated and so it will happen even though we should do nothing, appears to be senseless and what turn to be a priority is precisely the permanent awareness of the connection of causes with effects for the sake of mastering our destinies and choosing what is good; in other words, the permanent attempt to accomplish the perfecting of our will to the perfecting of our understanding (32). Thus moral necessity subsist in free actions since they are exempt not only from constraint but also from real necessity (33)

When one thinks in something necessary, one immediately accepts that the opposite of it is impossible. Yet, when one refers to something contingent, one is assuming that the opposite is possible, and that is precisely the case regarding human actions. Indeed there is a reason for every human action, however, the action is not necessary since one can have done another action rather than the one performed. Again, one can only talk about necessity concerning the past in terms of what have done cannot be undone, yet there is neither a moral nor a metaphysical necessity regarding the action but just a physical one.

Every human being is unpredictable and in consequence there can be no law about human choices. Nevertheless, we are determined since, as it has been previously stated, nothing occurs without a reason and everything that happens to each substance is a consequence of its notion (34). We are, so to speak, totally determined but none of our actions occurred necessarily. The reasons for any human action must be regarded as truths of facts which being contingent, cannot be found through analysis, that is, by resolving them into simpler ideas and truths (35); its cause(s) must be identified with moral or self interested determinations or a whole variety of reasons.

The will can then be conceived as precedence taken by the strongest motivation which in the attempt of achieving something that is good, reveals its intimately relation to moral necessitation. Morality, indeed, presupposes a free character of human actions and therefore has to do with truths of fact which are contingent.

The nature of the will requires freedom, which consists in this: that the voluntary action be spontaneous and deliberate...freedom excludes metaphysical necessity, the opposite which is impossible, that is implies contradiction. However, it does not exclude moral necessity, the opposite of which is unfit (36)

It can be said then that free will cannot contradict determination. Even more, rather than freedom depending on determination or not determination, it depends on what does determine the individual person. That is to say that freedom comes from intrinsic motivation and in this sense the person characteristics play a decisive role in the choices to be made by the person. The more intrinsically motivated one is, the freer that person would be and the more responsible too.

Being free and contingent, we ought then to struggle for making the best use of what God has provided us with, among which we must point out our capacity for understanding, for goodness and for choice. Thus the predetermination of our actions is not absolute but it presupposes will (37):

If it is certain that one will do them, it is no less certain that one will to do them...So the predetermination of events by their causes is precisely what contributes to morality instead of destroying it, and the causes incline the will without necessitating it. For this reason the determination we are concerned with is not necessitation (38)

It seems to me that the predetermination we are talking about has to do with the fact that we, human beings are embodied. Individual substance can never be subjected to constrain for there is only intrinsic development in them and the former comes always from outside; however, every person is subjected to the laws of nature insofar as it is also a phenomenon due to his physical body. Constraint is then reduced to be exercised only within the phenomenal world whereas our individual substance is to be considered free. That is to say, the person as a choosing being is not subjected to those laws, yet whatever happens to the body, will happen to the mind.

We have said that everything that happens to the soul, and to each substance, is a consequence of its notion; therefore, the very idea or essence of the soul implies spontaneously (sponte) from its own nature, a precisely is such a way that they correspond to what happens in the body which is assigned to it (39).

Therein everyone there are the marks of the first substance, whose production bear the stamp of a supreme wisdom and make the most perfect of harmonies (40). This harmony connects both the future with the past and the present with the absent. The first kind of connection unites times, and other places (41). In the union between the soul and the body the second connections displayed and through it each of them acts independently and yet they are in mutual harmony. Properly speaking, they meet by virtue of a pre-established harmony prevailing among all substances, since they are all representations of one and the same universe (42). Therefore, any change in a human being must be understood on the ground of this pre-established harmony in the sense that, on one hand, everything that appears in the mind, will appear simultaneously in the body and vice versa; on the other, everything that happens to an individual substance can happen only within it.

Hence, given the pre-established harmony, namely, this mutual coordination between the realm of the phenomena and the realm of the substance, we are predetermined though freedom. Only God, who is not embodied, is not predetermined.

To the perfect harmony between the natural realm of the efficient cause and the other final causes, we must add the harmony between God considered as the architect of the machine of the universe, and God considered as the monarch of the divine city of spirits (43). To put it in another way, the harmony between the physical realm of nature and the moral realm of grace.

One may say that as soon as God has decreed to create something there is a struggle between all the possible, all of them laying claim to existence, and that those which, being united, produce most reality, most perfection, most significance carry the day (44).

God acts freely, and thus, without absolute necessity but he is bound by a moral necessity, to make things in such a manner that there can be nothing better (45). This means that the whole succession of things created by God is the best possible, although what exists all through the universe in each portion of time be not the best (46). So, if we take into account that God is not forced to create this world, that which exist must be the possible and the most perfect one according to his supreme wisdom and goodness. Furthermore, the perfect God is in each creature but only he possesses it in boundless measure whereas we only have some power, some knowledge and some goodness (47). The presence of evil must then be regarded as something that accompanies the original imperfection of creatures for undoubtedly God could easily be prevent sin but, in that case, no one could then have the opportunity to act freely. Within the system proposed by Leibniz, the freedom of man and the cooperation of God with all the actions of the creatures co-exist.

God certainly will only the good and that includes the salvation of all me, but we are free to will evil or good consequently, each of us deserves to be rewarded or condemned, otherwise one could not talk about the morality of an action or the justice of punishments. If it were that case that every person were to save anyway, God probably would have not created us for what was the purpose of our existence? I do believe

that Leibniz conceived freedom not as the result of tearing down any barrier, but the preceding force of that action. What I am trying to say is that probably God is a being full of passion who thinks that life has to do, metaphorically speaking, with the desire which lead the caterpillar to turn into a butterfly. A silent and intimate desire that anticipates oneself and yet is there at every end as if freedom were to be an internal breath from where one springs unceasingly.

When one thinks in the fact that the connection or adaption of all created things with each, and of each with all the rest, means that each simple substance has relations which express all the others, and that consequently it is a perpetual living mirror of the universe (48), any free action reveals itself as gesture whose authenticity gives out the universe in a new perspective.

Throughout the universe one can find the signals to differentiate and prefer the good actions rather than evil ones. Certainly is our choice, but sin entails punishment according to the order of nature (49), what would be the purpose of acting against a universal harmony when is precisely the attempt to act in mutual harmony with the rest of the world what will bring us enjoyment and felicity. For the harmony explained by Leibniz has the result that events lead to grace through the very process of nature (50). All what exist have been called into being the compatibility between those possible which are now real.

It seems to me that a great majority of the generation within I live does not believe in love and yet look for it desperately. Certainly, the process of secularization and the disenchantment which accompanied the rationalization so typical in modern times, has let us to escape from extreme polarities and come up with a curiosity towards diversity in all senses, I would say so. Perhaps in a particular way, we felt something prior to us has deceived us without knowing what exactly was, simply due to the current world circumstances, there is a general sentiment enrooted in a failure as if we had discovered that life has wounds in itself, wounds as the world wars, or the discrimination towards minorities or a torn Iraq or the silent dream of Somalia. A sense of failure which nevertheless is as intense as the faith in new alternatives.

That is why, probably, Leibniz' conception of freedom make a deep impression in me. His system appears as a cross road where one can preserve one's own individuality and yet be the whole; one can believe in God and his preordination and yet assume oneself as a free being with all the responsibilities it implies; one can be conscious of one's own lack of perfection but still has the challenge to work out one's own perfection. And let me say that this last point generates in me a great enthusiasm because thanks to Leibniz, I realized the intimate relation between freedom and authenticity.

If every creature represents the whole universe, it is also true that it represents it in a distinctly manner and that means, I think, in its own way. Thus the divinity each one of us has in ourselves must be unfolded along our existence being freedom the only way for it to occur, since through it, our authenticity reveals itself as the source of being the plurality of one and the same individual (51). As Leibniz says, it is impossible that there should be two individuals entirely alike so our struggles towards progress must be related to nourish as much as possible that interconnection of things, Leibniz talks about, by means of exploring the different shades one and the things one is surrounded by or involved with could have.

Feelings like envy, egoism or competitiveness have no sense in this project whereas an unceasing desire to enjoy harmony of the universe should prevail. Thus faith and reason (52) have not to be in controversy and doubtless love has to do with knowledge and pleasure (53). Thereby life reveals everywhere as if the infinity had to do with the absolute trust in the divine perfection. No abysses no cages but just pirouettes of freedom coincides with our self-creation.

No doubt freedom not only implies a perfect spontaneity but also intelligence as long as the soul must appear ready to judge according to its own perfection and distinct thoughts; Yet, I would like to add a final remark about the free and contingent character of our actions. Along the readings made in order to approach Leibniz' conception of freedom, the problem of time raised in me great curiosity for it seems to me that the way time is structured is important for the constitution of the self. Probably each person cherish an inner notion of his/her own particular pace of being in everyday life, I mean, of dealing with certainties, doubts, challenges, forgiveness, projects and limits through which s/he is able to come up with an authentic succession of moments unfolded by a truly exercise of freedom.

To conclude I must say that among the infinite number of possible series God has chosen the best, and consequently this best universe is that which exists. Therein all that exist is 'in mutual harmony' and thus, it must be understood that the best course is not always that which avoid the evil, since it may be required for a greater perfection in the whole, as it could be the case of the opportunity, given by God, to exercise or freedom even he foresaw that some of us would turn to evil. Thus, Leibniz follows St. Augustine's opinion when he says that God permitted evil in order to derive from it a greater good, namely, our permanent self-creation by means of a perfect spontaneity.



## NOTES

1. Political Writings p. 50
2. "On Freedom" In Philosophical Writings p. 107
3. "On Freedom" In Philosophical Writings p. 108
4. "Monadology" Y 60
5. "Monadology" Y 67
6. "On Freedom" In Philosophical Writings p. 108
7. "Monadology" Y 59
8. "Monadology" Y 11
9. "Monadology" Y 7
10. "Monadology" Y 1
11. "Monadology" Y 13
12. "Monadology" Y14; Y 15
13. "Monadology" Y 12
14. "Monadology" Y 12
15. "Monadology" Y 13
16. "Monadology" Y 22
17. "Monadology" Y 26
18. "Monadology" Y 29
19. "Monadology" Y 20
20. "Monadology" Y 30
21. "Monadology" Y 36
22. Philosophical Writings p. 44
23. "Monadology" Y32
24. "Monadology" Y 38
25. "Monadology" Y 48
26. "Monadology" Y 40
27. Philosophical Writings p. 111
28. Philosophical Writings p. 107 116

29. Philosophical Writings p. 78
30. Philosophical Writings p. 49
31. Theodicy p. 153
32. Theodicy p. 52
33. Theodicy p. 61
34. Philosophical Writings p.42
35. "Monadology" Y 33
36. "A vindication of God's Justice". In *Monadology*, Y20-21
37. Theodicy p. 381
38. Theodicy p. 382
39. Philosophical Writings p.42
40. Theodicy p.68
41. Theodicy p. 68
42. "Monadology" Y 78
43. "Monadology" Y 87
44. Theodicy p. 253
45. Theodicy p. 253
46. Theodicy p. 253
47. Theodicy p.751
48. Philosophical Writings p. 187
49. "Monadology" Y 89
50. "Monadology" Y 88
51. Philosophical Writings p. 55
52. Theodicy p. 53
53. Theodicy p.51

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