

# Contingency in the philosophy of G.W. Leibniz

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**Abstract** The present text is devoted to analyse and specify the notion of contingency in Leibniz's modal metaphysics. The aim of the present paper is to show that although Leibniz was often referred to as a determinist, the notion of contingency and the notion of possible worlds allowed him to step out of this abyss. Despite arguing that everything that happens has a reason why it is this way and not otherwise, contingency in the created world ensures that the connection between things is certain, but never absolutely necessary. Therefore, at the same time, contingency becomes one of the conditions of free will in the philosophy of Leibniz.

**Key words:** contingency, Leibniz, necessary truth, contingent truth,

*inest subjecto*. This formulation of the individual substance was put forward in his Discours on Metaphysics in 1686 and subsequent correspondence with Arnauld, in which the thesis that the notion of the individual substance contains in advance everything that happens to it gave a strong impression of absolute necessity. Hence a passionate correspondence grew up between Leibniz and Arnauld, which lasted intermittently for several years.

The domain to which Leibniz applies the notion of contingency or contingent is created reality, that is, what actually exists in this world. Wherever we refer to the world, to existence, to created individual substances, we must also bear in mind a fundamental attribute of the created reality, namely contingency. Moreover, on the basis of Leibniz's interpretation that God is an absolutely necessary and eternal being existing *per se*, we can characterize that a thing is contingent when it is not necessary or does not conceal the cause of its existence in itself. It is a thing existing *per accidens*. „Therefore it is necessary to seek the reason for the existence of the World, which is the totality of contingent things, and it is necessary to seek it in the substance, which carries the reason for its existence in itself, and is therefore inevitable and eternal“. (Leibniz, 1978, p. 106)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

That the notion of contingency or its adjective contingent constitutes one of the important pillars of Leibniz's doctrine is beyond doubt. Therefore, a correct grasp of this concept, i.e. in the way the thinker himself formulated and intended it, will also ensure a correct understanding of Leibniz's key metaphysical and theological arguments. Contingency, or what is contingent, can be found in several of Leibniz's works or correspondences, and it is used in two dimensions. First, on a metaphysical level, he uses the term in relation to creation, that is, existence and created things as God-actualized possible entities existing in the actual created world. Since we move in the created realm, everything that exists and everything that happens, i.e. every event and action, will be, according to Leibniz, contingent or let's say not necessary. And consequently, at the level of logic, he introduces the notion of contingent truths, or he also speaks of them as truths of fact, which are supposed to represent the opposition to the truths of reason, which are absolutely necessary in their nature. In such a case, contingent propositions, in the validity of the principle of *inesse*, refer to predicates of a particular subject what in Leibniz's philosophical teaching means events. The condition for the functionality of contingent propositions is that they are not necessary, that is, they can be otherwise. The opposite of contingent truth does not imply a contradiction. *Inesse*, the scholastic rule that Leibniz adopts in his doctrine, is spoken and applied both in logic within the theory of truth and in metaphysics to his new theory of individual substance. The Latin verb *inesse* means „to be in“ according to which Leibniz tells us that the complete concept of individual substance contains in itself once and for all in advance everything that can be truthfully said about it. The notion of subject includes in itself in advance the notion of predicate, *predicatum*

## 2. CONTINGENCY

### 2.1 Contingent truths

To understand contingent truths is a bit more complicated due to the fact that they are not necessary truths. They are also propositions made by a subject-predicate relation, but unlike necessary truths, their essential attribute is their relation to real existence, to the actualized world. In Leibniz's doctrine, when we refer to contingent sentences we mean sentences that are in the nature of existential statements. By existence is meant an event which, in a contingent sentence, has the character of an accident, which, on the background of the *inesse*, is pre-contained in the subject of an individual substance, and will have the character of some event or state in which that substance to which it belongs is situated. It is always the existence of an event. Further, contingent theorems, unlike necessary truths, are not provable by finite-step analysis and are not knowable a priori by anyone but the supreme substance, God. Since they are not provable by decomposition, the principle of contradiction will not establish their validity, on the contrary, they rest on another of Leibniz's principles, the principle of sufficient reason.

From the above we may say that contingency contains within itself the presupposition of a preceding and a succeeding state, since what is contingent is at the same time part of a sequence of events or series to which God has breathed a predestined harmony. This series illustrates a succession of interrelated existing things. The fact an event has occurred is shown by the fact that it is the result of another preceding event, which is related to the infinite number of events which have that event as a consequence. And since in creation the succession of things is characterized by harmony, it is important that it be maintained in a state of equilibrium. Leibniz explains the nature of contingent events by various examples. If we want to have the sensation of sea waves crashing against the shore, we must first assume a large number of sea drops which together produce this sound, resulting in the sound of the waves crashing against the shore as a concrete event. And this, according to Leibniz, is precisely what lies behind every concrete event taking place in the created world. It is in this way, and not otherwise, that the nature of contingency or contingent truths, whose being is completed by their association with the notion of individual substance, must be viewed. This is because contingent propositions, unlike necessary truths, do not have the character of universality which is given by the nature of their elements, that is, the subject and the predicate. The content of contingent truths is always some event that belongs to a particular agent. After all, every event is the result of an action, and we cannot attribute an action to a genus or species, which is not affected by the change, but to an individual substance.

## 2.2 Individual substance and the contingency

Although not extensive, but important work *Discours de métaphysique* and the doctrinal formulation of individual substance implicit in it represent an important approach to contingency or contingent truths as well. Many see the *Discourse de Métaphysique* as a text in which Leibniz attempts to introduce a solution to escape the labyrinth of freedom-necessity by employing the mathematical notion of incommensurables, which clarifies the nature of the infinite analysis of contingent sentences. It seems that, thanks in part to the dispute with Arnauld caused by Leibniz's argument that the notion of individual substance contains within itself once and for all everything that happens to it, Leibniz is trying to redefine in detail the concept of contingency, contingent truths, and the conditions in which human freedom is exercised. In a letter of 21/31 May 1686 on the interconnection of event and subject, Leibniz argues that although he considers this connection to be intrinsic it is never necessary because it is, despite appearances, based on free acts. Hence in contingent truths he sees no other connection than this between subject and predicate. And in the subject something is to be conceived which will provide the reason why a certain predicate or event belongs to the subject, i.e. why the thing came to happen rather than not, and why it came to happen in this way and not in another way. An individual predicate, an event, is surely associated with the complete concept of an individual substance, and this complete concept captures the substance in various states, given that it includes them all in itself.

From the above it follows that the individual substance is completely independent of anything else but God, as well as that it hides within itself the traces of everything that has happened, is happening, or will happen to it in the future. Consequently, Leibniz argues that on the basis of the individual substance thus grasped we can understand what the connection of body and soul consists in, as well as the contact of substances. „This interaction does not occur on the basis of the usual hypothesis of mutual physical influence. That is to say, every present state of a substance occurs spontaneously to it. It is only the consequence of its previous state. Nor does this intercourse occur on the hypothesis of occasional

causes, as if God were involved otherwise than by preserving each substance in its succession...“ (Leibniz, 2009, p.323)

This connection is established on the basis of concomitance, i.e., that each substance mirrors the universe and reflects the whole universe according to a certain insight that is inherent in it. This explanation, according to him, goes beyond the level of hypothesis and assumes a demonstrative character. The fact that the individual substance contains everything that happens to it ensures that its next state, which is of a contingent nature, will follow as a consequence of its previous state, and at the same time, against the background of the aforementioned hypothesis of concomitance, this state will be in accordance with the state of other beings. He considers this hypothesis of concomitance sufficient to explain the connection between substances as well as between soul and body, so much so that he refuses to resort to the arguments of physical influence or the action of God defended by the advocates of the occasional causes. The operations of the individual substances, all acts and passions, are spontaneous, and apart from the dependence of the individual created substances on God, no physical influence of one substance on the other can be thought of. But each individual substance represents the same universe in its own measure and according to the laws of its own nature, and behaves in such a way that its changes and states correspond to those of another substance. All these arguments fall under the formulation of Leibniz's hypothesis of concomitance (participation), which he later renamed the principle of predestined harmony. For the states of substances and their phenomena arise spontaneously, according to their inner laws, and for this they do not need any special kind of divine action to arouse thoughts in the soul corresponding to the movements of the body, and vice versa. In view of the inconceivability of mutual interaction between substances or between the mental and the physical, the inner activity of the perceptions of substance must take place autonomously and in parallel with the outer physical world. Therefore, each substance, Leibniz claims, represents the whole universe from its own point of view since everything is interrelated. Perceptions are thereby infinitely ramified representations in the soul and form a certain kind of knowledge, even though this knowledge has its limitations. Each substance has within it, as it were, a trace of divine omniscience and omnipotence, which is limited by their finite perspective and power. Finite substances are diverse representations of the same universe with respect to their various limitations and perspectives inherent in that-substance. (Nachtomý, 2019, p. 53)

Despite the fact that Leibniz considers every substance in his doctrine to be a living being, he distinguishes between several different kinds of substances, or in later terminology, monads. He hierarchizes individual substances, distinguishing simple substances to which confused perceptions belong. Then animals, which according to Leibniz have souls, and whose perceptions are somewhat more differentiated and are also endowed with memory. And then there are human beings possessed of rational cognition and mind. Thanks to which we can reflect and perceive that we perceive. And this apperception then enables us as rational beings to perceive what we have under the term „I“ and ultimately arrive at an understanding of eternal truths. The supreme substance is God with attributes that have no boundaries. Therefore, He is omniscient and omnipotent being. (Leibniz, 2009, p. 646.) On Leibniz's view, before God made the decision to create this actual world, there were infinitely many possible ways to create this world. And furthermore, in his mind, God, before creation, contemplated an infinite number of possible existences that fill these infinite possible worlds. As for the reality of these possible substances, that is, what God did not and will not create, it is clear that in Leibniz's thought they have a reality of sorts, and one that is entirely dependent on God's intellect where they reside. There is no other reality than that in God's intellect in

the question of possible existents. But still, he turns away from Arnauld's view leaning towards the view that possible existents are mere chimeras. If we were to reject the possible essences altogether, we would be destroying freedom and contingency. For if only what God created into the actual world were possible without having any other options to choose from, his decision of will to create the world would be inevitable, and he could only create that. Returning to the individual substance, we must remember that the connection which occurs in its full concept between subject and predicate is intrinsic and certain, but not absolutely necessary. The substance, although it has a definite journey contained in its concept, has included in it the fact that it undertakes it freely. It can choose to undertake the journey or not. And humans, because they are endowed among substances with the faculty of rational thinking, will not contend with any absolutely necessary truth if they choose not to undertake the journey (Mercer, 2004, p. 43)

On the question of necessity, Leibniz replies to Arnauld that his thesis, which evokes for him a fatal necessity, refers to a connection between the subject and the predicate of contingent things that, though is certain, it is not necessary. This, in other words, is what Leibniz calls moral certainty or hypothetical necessity. The root of contingent things lies not only in God's reason but also in the acts of God's will. And this choice to create is pushed by moral necessity, not absolute necessity. It is clear from Leibniz's arguments that in his doctrine, God's intellect will be the principle of all essences, and that God's will, by virtue of the decrees of God's intellect, will be the principle of all existents. The logical certainty of the union of predicate and subject in the notion of individual substance does not destroy the freedom of the subject. Although God knows a priori with certainty the full concept of Adam, which includes that he will sin, this does not impede the freedom of Adam's action not to sin even though God knows that he will sin. Consequently, he realized that he had not sufficiently distinguished between contingent and necessary truths, so he admits that he almost endorsed the fatalistic conception. In the text *Nouveaux Essais sur l'entendement humain*, he claims that he began to lean towards the Spinozists, who claim that everything comes from absolute necessity. In this way he would assert absolute power against the perfection of God's reason and his infinite goodness. It must be recognized, therefore, that knowledge of the laws of nature is possible by the recognition of final causes, and this against the background of the principle of wisdom and perfection.

### 3. CONCLUSION

How is it possible to merge freedom and contingency with causality and providence? Leaving the abyss of fatalism, Leibniz succeeded, first, by considering the mathematical notion of the infinite and the possible, because if there are infinitely many possible existences that do not exist, never have existed, and never will exist, this means that not everything is absolutely necessary and there was another choice possible. In regard to Leibniz's distinction between necessary and contingent truths, we may say that just as necessary truths rest by their nature on the principle of contradiction, so will contingent truths in Leibniz's doctrine rest on one of his architectonic principles. The character of contingent truths refers to an event which is always the result of a previous state, the conjunction of states in this series being certain, not necessary. Therefore, the principle on which the contingent truths in Leibniz's doctrine will depend is the principle of sufficient reason. He holds that the principle of reason is not opposed to freedom and that it can be applied precisely to contingent, i.e. not necessary truths whereby contingency will not be demolished, on the contrary it can be protected. Leibniz knows that the principle of reason establishes no absolute necessity. For freedom is undermined not only by some

constraint, but especially by absolute necessity as well as by complete indifference. For true freedom occurs where there are reasons determining the inclination of the will, and although these determinations are certain, they are never absolutely necessary. All that determines the act of action itself (predispositions, inclinations) is not of the nature of absolute necessity or of some blind chance.

In sum we can say that the soul is never in a state of complete indifference, there must always be a reason which inclines it to the side of choice and this inclination may have come from without or within, from passions, habits, and though it inclines it to choose, it does not compel it. There is a great difference between a necessary cause and a certain concomitant, a certain reaction to an action. From the above analysis, we can say that the notion of contingency serves for Leibniz to defend freedom and at the same time becomes one of the three basic conditions of free will, along with rationality and spontaneity. Contingency as one of the conditions of freedom allows Leibniz to exclude absolute, i.e. metaphysical necessity. Contingency refers to the fact that we are, by certain reasons inclined to make a choice, but even though our will is more inclined to one option, this motivation is not so strong as to make another option impossible. What is contingent hides within itself the contradiction of being otherwise, or the possibility of it not existing at all. Contingent things are not necessary by virtue of the principle of contradiction, but are necessary with respect to principle of sufficient reason. It is an inclinational and in *strictu sensu* non-necessitarian principle. (Rateau, 2019, p. 93) According to Leibniz, substance is on the basis of rational deliberation of reasons inclined to a particular choice, but it is never forced, in the absolute sense of the word, because the inclination does not preclude it from opting for another choice. In the case where, in acting the agent does not feel compulsion or other absolute necessity, it is possible to speak of freedom. Free action is that which results from free will and without being forced to make a decision by some external coercion or internal empirical compulsion. Free will is as if a power that belongs to reason, since free choice always takes place on the background of motives or reasons which incline the will to one side of the choice. Whatever the motives or causes determining the will however intense, they are never, according to Leibniz, absolutely necessary in the sense that other possible choice is still available. But prevailing reasons always exist, since they proceed from the fact that it would be impossible to make a choice without a determining reason. It does not consider the notions of freedom and determinism as contradictory. „In my opinion, there is no free and indifferent to be the same, and free and determined do not stand in opposition to each other. We are never absolutely indifferent in the sense of equilibrium indifference. We are always more inclined, and therefore more determined, to one side than to the other, but we are never forced. I mean here the absolute and metaphysical necessity“ (Leibniz, 1978, p. 228)

The aim of the present work was to concretize and specify the notion of contingency in Leibniz's doctrine. The very notion of contingency or contingent plays a royal role in his philosophy, since it is closely related to one of his architectural principles, on which the thinker himself didn't spare superlatives, the principle of sufficient reason. Leibniz applies the notion of contingent to everything that concerns the realm of the created actualized world and helps to complete the picture that nothing in the world happens by coincidence, but at the same time, with the use of the notion of contingency, Leibniz proceeds from the suspicion that there is an absolute necessity behind everything that happens. In this specific context, he is able to reconcile the principle of sufficient reason, contingency, or the free will of individual substances, whose will, while inclined by certain reasons, is never absolutely forced.

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